



Advancing Women in Leadership

JOURNAL

VOLUME 43, 2024
ISSN 1093-7099

EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, NAHED ABDELRAHMAN, BENJAMIN JANKENS, AND JULIA BALLENGER
ASSISTANT EDITORS: JORDAN DONOP & KRISTINA HALL

Full Length Research Paper

Understanding Through Stories: Leadership Experiences of Trinidadian Women of Color

Crystal Washington and Tatiana Gounko

Crystal Washington: Teacher, Toronto District School Board, crystal.washington@tdsb.on.ca

Tatiana Gounko: Associate Professor, Leadership Studies, University of Victoria, tgounko@uvic.ca

Accepted August 7, 2024

This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of four Trinidadian women of color who served as principals in schools across the Caribbean Island. The focus of this research was to gain insight into what motivated these women to assume leadership positions in education, and how their experiences shaped their leadership practices. Research findings revealed three key themes that influenced the participants' leadership practice in Trinidad's educational context. These themes include: (a) ethics of care, an approach to leadership rooted in care and empathy, (b) collaborative leadership, an approach that helped the participants to address unique challenges faced by women-leaders, and (c) gender, class, and racial biases confronted by the participants during their careers. Exploring the narratives of the Trinidadian female leaders provides a nuanced understanding of how women-leaders navigate a complex landscape, offering lessons on resilience and leadership in a unique cultural and historical context.

Keywords: women of color; female principals; Trinidad and Tobago; Caribbean; educational leadership; West Indies; ethics of care.

Despite advanced education and remarkable achievements in many professional fields, women of color are underrepresented in leadership positions. According to Costigan (2024), of the total number of women of color employed in the United States in 2019, only 12 % of those in leadership positions identified as women of color. In Canada, people of color make up more than 60 % of the workforce; however, women hold approximately 35 % of managerial positions, and only 6 % of women in these positions are women of color (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). Such low representation of women in leadership in general and women of color in particular reflects broader gender inequality and stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities (Blackmore, 2013; Cook & Glass, 2014). Most women of color can relate to various forms of oppression including gendered racial discrimination (Burton et al., 2020). Compared to White women, women of color experience racial, ethnic, and class prejudices very differently because they have to deal with a double-outsider status, namely - being a person of color and female (Gaetane et al., 2009; hooks, 1991; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). When women of color attain leadership positions, they have to prove themselves to be worthy of these positions. Due to prejudices, stereotypes and a lack of representation in leadership positions, women of color often doubt their abilities, feeling as an imposter and a fraud (Burton et al., 2020; Corbett, 2022). According to the latest Women in the workplace report, women of color are

more likely to experience disrespectful and othering behavior and microaggressions that question their professionalism and competence (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

In the Caribbean region, as in many other parts of the world, the vast majority of teachers are women (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Mullings, 2005; Superville, 2017). While the number of female school principals has increased at the secondary level (C. Hopson, personal communication, August 25, 2020), traditionally imposed patriarchal practices, gender-based expectations, domestic responsibilities and existing class, religious, and racial biases prevent women from assuming leadership roles (Blank, 2013; Francis, 2017; Gahman & Collins, 2019; Kirton & Healy, 2012; Morris, 1999; Mullings, 2005).

Culture, history, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic relations have shaped gender, race, social class, and power issues in the Caribbean region (Heron & Nicolson, 2006). During slavery, men and women were assigned gender specific tasks, with men holding "elite, skilled positions [and] women working as domestics, petty traders, or unskilled laborers" (Blank, 2013, pp. 1-2). This gender stratification continued after emancipation, resulting in increased gender inequality, with racial and gender ideologies informing and restricting occupational options for women.

Since the early 2000s, several women have been holding top political positions in the Caribbean (Bobb-Smith, 2003; Mullings, 2005). The Honorable Mia Mottley has been the Prime Minister of Barbados since 2018. Across the Caribbean region, five other women held top leadership positions including the former president of Trinidad and Tobago - Ms. Paula-Mae Weekes (International Labour Organization, 2018). In 2020, in government schools (fully owned, funded and managed by the state) and government-assisted primary schools (managed by religious boards, but assisted by the state) (Persad & Antoine, 2023), 286 principals were female and 143 were male. At the secondary school level, 66 principals were female, and 53 principals were male (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2022). Despite these and other notable advances for women in Trinidad and Tobago, experts recognize “structural inequalities related to gender, class, color, and race” (Esnard, 2023, p. 181). These inequalities are identified as contributing factors to persistent gender gaps, gender-based violence, and social norms that disadvantage women and girls (World Bank, 2024).

While most recently, women in the Caribbean region have been challenging hetero-patriarchal ideologies across diverse social contexts (Gahman & Collins, 2019), the matrifocal family continues to be commonplace throughout the Caribbean. According to Francis (2017), Caribbean women often have difficulty identifying themselves as leaders, given the male-dominant leadership narratives pervasive in the region. Women hold fewer positions in the workforce that empower them to affect the overall economy including leadership positions in trade unions and finance (Blank, 2013; Kirton & Healy, 2012; Mullings, 2005). Despite many remarkable accomplishments and top political leadership positions, women in the Caribbean region remain underrepresented in leadership and governing roles in both public and private organizations and are paid significantly less compared to men (Kowlessar-Alonzo, 2019; World Bank, 2019).

Context of the Study

In her historical and contemporary overview of gender and social class relations among Afro-Caribbean people of the British, French, and Spanish Caribbean islands, Blank (2013) explained what it meant to be a modern Caribbean islander. Most Caribbean folks can trace their roots to the ancestors who were brought as enslaved Africans, and, later, after the emancipation from slavery in 1834, to indentured laborers who came from India, China, Portugal, Lebanon, and Syria. As a result, Trinidad and Tobago now has a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious population comprised of approximately 1.4 million people (Blank, 2013; World Bank, 2019). Indigenous peoples, “also known as Amerindians” (Boomert, 2016, p. 1) knowledge and cultural heritage of Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants also contributed to the rich culture of Trinidad and Tobago. A southernmost island of

the Caribbean archipelago, Trinidad and Tobago has changed colonial hands more than any other Caribbean nation, moving between the ruling Spanish, British, French, and Dutch colonizers (Heron & Nicolson, 2006).

Prior to the abolition of slavery, only people belonging to free classes, i.e. those of British, Dutch, Spanish, and French decent, could access education. Towards the end of slavery, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Wesleyan, and other Christian groups established schools for ex-slaves and indentured laborers. This trend continued throughout the 1800s and 1900s, with the government establishing ward schools, while the Presbyterian and other churches continued to establish secondary schools for boys and girls in the country’s two main cities, Port of Spain and San Fernando (Campbell, 1996). Following its independence in 1962, the government of Trinidad and Tobago enacted the Education Act of 1966 (revised 2015) which now guides educational policy and practice.

A contemporary education system of Trinidad and Tobago reflects the island’s colonial roots recognizable in its diverse cultural and ethnic composition and division, gender disparities, and religious practices embedded within its public institutions. According to Abdel-Shehid (2020), the country “is grappling with deconstructing racial hierarchies imposed during the European colonial era” (p. 3). Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians are two largest ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago. Although both groups have a shared history of oppression by European colonial elites, they remain deeply divided in a socio-economic, racial and cultural sense. This racial and socio-economic divide also transfers into the educational system where ethnic and religious groups do not mix (Steinbach, 2012).

Currently, 134 secondary schools operate in Trinidad and Tobago and of that number, 90 schools are considered government-run, and the remaining 44 are government-assisted. In government-run secondary schools, 48 (or 53%) principals are women and 42 (or 47%) are men. In government-assisted schools (or denominational schools) 26 (or 59%) principals are women, and 18 (or 41%) are male principals.

Literature Review

The topic of women in leadership has been extensively researched (Cook & Glass, 2014; Francis, 2017; Moorosi et al., 2018; Oplatka & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006). Most of the existing studies focus primarily on women in general, thus presenting women as a homogeneous marginalized group (Oplatka & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006). While some progress has been made in examining leadership practice of minority women, their experiences are less investigated (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017; Blackmore, 1999, 2013; Crawford & Jackson-Best, 2017).

Much of the literature on women of color in education and leadership addresses themes of class and gender stereotypes,

patriarchy, ‘double jeopardy,’ and emotional labor (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Showunmi & Kaparou, 2017; Steinbach, 2012). These ideas are important in understanding leadership experiences of female principals who are motivated to make a difference and want to engage with all stakeholders in a collaborative, nurturing, and caring manner (Fine 2009; Moorosi et al., 2018; Mullings, 2005). Women lead in distinctively different ways from men, employing nurturing strategies that emphasize communication among all participants (Fine, 2009), demonstrating empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence, serving pupils in socially just ways, trying to develop a holistic child beyond the confines of a curriculum and institution (Moorosi et al., 2018; Noddings, 2012). Female principals often identified with the role of a caring mother and leader or “othermothers” (Newcomb-Sherman & Neimeyer, 2015, p. 787) while practicing culturally responsive leadership, affirming students’ home cultures, increasing parent and community involvement, and exhibiting collaborative, inclusive nature and ethics of care (Blackmore, 1999; Fine, 2009; Noddings, 2010). Researchers observed similar leadership approaches in the Caribbean context, where traditionally a woman’s role was associated with that of a homemaker – a mother and carer for her children and family – synonymous with all things maternal (Gahman & Collins, 2019; Kirton & Healy, 2012; Morris, 1999; Mullings, 2005). Floyd and Fuller (2016) described women-principals in Jamaica, who were caring and motivated by the desire to change social structures in their schools, and who collaboratively worked with their respective communities based on their ideas of the common public good.

Theoretical Perspective

This study draws on an ethics of care framework. In her seminal work, Noddings (2010; 2012) argued for the moral preferability of a care perspective as being both feminine and feminist. According to Noddings, the caring relation is ethically and morally basic and is a state through which the human relation develops, life starts, and the human individual emerges. While this caring relation informs human relationships, there is a deeper meaning to these relationships among female educators. The ethics of care is defined as the mutual caring relationship among female teachers who “regularly establish and maintain caring relations” (p. 7). In her analysis of this framework, Noddings (2010) stated that “a person may be described as “caring” if that person regularly establishes and maintains caring relations” (p. 7). Caring often involves sacrificing personal comfort while pursuing the best interests of those cared for (Bass, 2009). Noddings’ (2010) ethics of care provides an alternative way of understanding the act of leading. It bases educational leadership on moral and ethical positions in developing personal relationships, re-evaluating the experiences of women-leaders in education, and acknowledging that the school is meant to serve individuals’ needs publicly and privately. It does not focus on gender and power within organizations. Instead, it asserts the role of the female principal as being caring, collaborative,

communicative, consultative, communitarian, consensus-oriented, student- and curriculum-focused, and guided by listening and thinking qualities (Blackmore, 1999; Morris, 1999; Noddings, 2012). Women’s success in leadership is their ability to serve students in socially just ways (Moorosi et al., 2018). Women are perceived as demonstrating compassion – a character trait that has become closely associated with their style of leadership (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, Morris (1999) reported that female principals tended to remain at the primary school level because of their caring nature. Similar trends were observed in the United States, where it was harder for women to become principals at a high school level because they are generally expected to remain in lower grades where students need more nurturing (Sawchuk, 2020). According to Kruger (2008), this discourse creates a pseudo-universal truth of the identity and function of the female principal as a leader and uses biological differences to manifest different leadership practices. This can be extremely restrictive and disempowering in its failure to acknowledge multiple dimensions associated with leadership (Blackmore, 1999, 2013) such as professional attributes, national and cultural characteristics, and race (Punnett et al., 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), which influence and inform leadership practices of female principals. However, despite these concerns raised by researchers (e.g., Blackmore, 1999, 2013; Kruger, 2008), ethics of care provides a unique perspective for examining the lived experiences of women-leaders within the context of Trinidad and Tobago, characterized by a complex intersection of race, class, and gender relations (Steinbach, 2012).

Study Design and Methods

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to examine how women of color describe their leadership experience in the Trinidadian education system. A narrative inquiry approach presents “a way to understand people’s experiences across times, situations and places” (Clandinin, 2012, p. 77). This approach also amplifies the voices of women of color that may have otherwise remained silent and offers a deeper understanding of the participants’ point of view (Trahar, 2013), “by empowering [them] to talk about their experiences” (Creswell, 2002, p. 524).

The study was guided by the social constructivist worldview implying that individuals have varied and multiple meanings of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This worldview aligns with the purpose of this research and the chosen narrative inquiry approach. Tanaka (2016) described life as a narrative encompassing a sequence of events and portraying who and what we are, and argued that “we express ourselves through stories, and we listen to the stories of others to find out who they are” (p. 14). Gahman and Collins (2019) pointedly articulated the need to shed light on the reality of the lived experiences of women in private and public spaces “burdened with myths and half-truths” (p. 8). Stories are

partial and contextual and offer new possibilities and insight as they are told and retold, and situated and understood in cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives (Caine et al., 2013). Added to this is the narrative inquirer’s responsibility to participants to authentically maintain the relationship that develops between them. The inquirer must understand that data (stories/narratives) are to be experienced as they are lived and told, as they describe, evoke and represent experience (Andrew et al., 2013).

Participants

Four retired female principals from Trinidad, the main island of the twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago, were invited to participate in the study. Each participant had leadership experience at a primary or secondary level, and one participant was a school supervisor and advisor to the Minister of Education during her career. The participants were between 60 and 70 years of age and stated their ethnicity as African, Mixed, and Black. Participants’ biographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of the Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Position	Location	Degrees	Years of Experience
Denise	60-65	Mixed	Principal, primary	Port of Spain and environs	Diploma in Ed, MEd	7
Helen	65-70	African	Principal secondary, Director	Port of Spain and environs, St. George East	Diploma in Ed, M.A.	20
Nadine	65-70	African	Principal secondary, Vice principal	St. George East	Diploma in Ed, MEd	19
Allison	65-70	Black	Principal secondary, School supervisor III, Advisor to MoE	St. George East, Port of Spain and environs, St. Patrick	Diploma in Ed, MEd	30+

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected during three stages which included meetings and correspondence with the participants. All meetings took place virtually through a Zoom platform. In the beginning, one of the researchers met with each participant to discuss the study and to build rapport. The initial meetings lasted between thirty minutes and ninety minutes and were audio and video recorded. Email exchanges and supporting documents provided by the participants were later carefully examined and included in a research journal. The guiding interview questions were shared and discussed with each of the participants. These questions were designed to help the participants tell their stories and reflect on their leadership experience. The second set of meetings took place several weeks later, at the agreed upon time. These meetings were conducted as conversations rather than question-and-answer exchanges. The participants eagerly shared their stories

expanding on the guiding questions. All meetings were audio recorded, transcribed and reviewed by the researchers, and additional follow up questions were posed in the research journal. Initial interpretations of each participants’ story were documented and shared with each participant prior to the third meeting. This gave the participants an opportunity to reflect and comment on their stories and provide additional feedback. The third meeting was set up during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented considerable difficulties. Two participants were unavailable to meet via Zoom (as both were traveling abroad) and chose to engage in further conversations and provide feedback through email exchanges. One participant opted to have a telephone conversation.

Throughout the data collection process, the participants were invited to review their stories and add to or correct them. One participant shared her concern over the vernacular used in her quoted speech. She was reassured that this was her unique voice and part of her identity, which spoke to the authenticity of her experience. Another participant added more details to her story and provided supplementary documents to support her story.

During data collection and analysis, personal interactions, interviews and communication with the participants, and peer debriefing the researchers kept a research journal to ensure that the study followed Guba’s (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) credibility and trustworthiness model. Participants’ authentic voices and researchers’ reflexivity were important in strengthening the study. All the data collected from conversations, email exchanges, and documents were recorded in the research journal. The researchers reviewed the data and organized the texts in four distinct parts corresponding to each of the participants. Each text included stories of participant’s background, important events, and reflections illustrated by personal quotes as well as researchers’ discussions about connections among participants’ stories. During the coding and theming process, the researchers assigned the meanings to individual sections of participants’ stories, developing initial codes and common themes (Saldaña, 2012). Each code was grouped into either one of two categories: expected codes – text based on what emanated from the literature, and those present in participants’ responses or unexpected codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, the participants spoke about instances of oppositional or disrespectful behavior exhibited by some teachers in their schools. The participants attributed such behavior to their gender and background. During the analysis, these cases were categorized as “lack of respect.”

In addition, the researchers recorded pertinent information about each participant and descriptions of school settings and important events (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) relevant to the participants’ leadership experience. These descriptions provided contexts of the participants’ experience and with the above described codes served as building blocks for developing distinct themes that “intended to represent

essences and essentials of humans' lived experiences" (Saldaña, 2014, p. 597). The three main themes identified during the analysis included (a) ethics of care, (b) approaches to leadership, and (c) challenges encountered by the participants. The themes and drafts of our report were shared with the participants to ensure the accuracy of the analysis and interpretation of their stories.

Participants' Stories

Participants' narratives illustrate rich professional experiences as well as intersecting and compounding biases faced by the participants in the workplace due to various aspects of their identities. The stories presented in the following paragraphs are summarized individual accounts containing participants' quotes.

Denise's Story

Denise was passionate about being an educator. She described herself as a diminutive person and never referred to her role as simply a profession, but a calling. "It was natural to me to get into teaching." While most of her years as an educator were spent as a primary school teacher, her seven years as principal at a primary school located in the North Eastern district of the island were the most defining experience of her life as an educator. According to Denise,

As a principal you have so much autonomy in your school, you can initiate certain things that would leave your school better, your teachers better, your children better, your parents better, and that is why I decided... hear what, you going to be a principal, and you will be the best principal there ever was.

Denise recalled and described her experiences in detail and with profound passion. Her desire to improve her pedagogical knowledge and teaching practice was evident throughout her story. Denise earned exceptional academic qualifications including a Diploma of Education, a first class honors degree in Educational Administration at the University of West Indies, and a Master of Education degree in International Teaching Strategies.

Ethics of Care. Denise was unashamedly proud to assert that her calling to be an educator had motivated her to become a teacher and principal. Throughout her narrative, she continuously returned to her mantra of always caring for her students first, "I really wanted what was best for them, in terms of what I wanted as best for myself and my children." Denise acknowledged that her role was multifaceted; she had to be an educator, mentor, nurse, family social worker, politician, and mediator. In spite of that, Denise kept her students close to herself, either physically or metaphorically: "I was always (emphasis added) with the children." In Denise's opinion, all future female principals should have an innate desire to care for students and to change and improve their lives - "If you really care about children achieving their potential, don't look at the prestige or social climbing, don't

bother. Do it because you care about the children, do it because you care about making them achieve their potential."

Furthermore, Denise advised future principals to be open and willing to learn and grow in their roles. Denise not only modelled best teaching practices, she also tirelessly worked on improving her pedagogical knowledge and leadership practice. Her final piece of advice was that future principals should be aware of the emotional labor that came with the role. Being a principal "is a hard, hard job. 365-24-7" that requires a lot of physical strength, emotional labor and maturity as well as sound comprehension of pedagogy and teaching practices.

Challenges. During her time as a principal, Denise also experienced gender bias, inequality, and oppositional behavior from male and female teachers, which she believed came from their own biases and expectations, compounded by her stature and her "outsider" status in the school and community which was located on the western side of the island, far from her home in the East. "Female teachers challenged my legitimacy in the role. They believed it should have gone to someone else [a senior teacher with large number of years at the school]." Denise recalled an experience with a male teacher who she had to reprimand for improper instructional practice:

I called him into my office. I sat behind my desk and asked him to take a seat, which he did. Once I started opposing what he was doing, he stood up, probably wanting to see if standing up would get me to change my mind. I think he really felt I would be intimidated by his bulk, because of my diminutive stature, but I stood my ground.

In the end, she successfully transferred the male teacher to another school. When asked how she managed these challenges, Denise cited the lessons she had learned as a classroom teacher, where she too had felt and had been treated as an outsider and had endured a lot of criticism, animosity and negativity from the teaching staff. As a principal, Denise never wanted her colleagues and staff members to have similar negative experiences: "I never wanted to put my colleagues through what I experienced."

Approach to Leadership. Denise's leadership approach was collaborative and non-confrontational. She used to tell the teachers, "we are a family unit here; we are a united front." In addition, she included and used all the school and community stakeholders to transform the school collectively. As a teacher and principal, Denise employed a nurturing leadership approach and considered the care and well-being of children and staff paramount. While Denise's leadership story had many actors, students were her main concern. Many students stayed connected with her to this day. Though Denise has since retired from education and is adamant about not returning in any capacity, she still mentors her successors and other teachers from a distance. Even after retirement, Denise continues to demonstrate a caring approach to leadership through her informal mentorship of young teachers.

Helen's Story

Participant "Helen" self-identified as an African woman, raised in an Anglican family, a religion she still practices to this day. She described herself as quiet and reserved, but given the nature of her role as principal had to become comfortable with parts of the position that required her to be assertive. In telling her story, Helen joined the teaching fraternity at the time when the Trinidad and Tobago government was encouraging recent university graduates to become teachers. With a diploma in education and a master's degree, she worked as a Commonwealth exchange teacher in London for two years. Helen referred to this experience as her introduction to education organization and management. Her work in Trinidad began as a secondary school History teacher, then continued on a teacher, a department head, and later as an Acting Principal of her alma mater, an all-girls' Anglican high school in 2000. Following this, she served as Director of two high schools: one all girls' school and the other all boys' school. After leaving this position, Helen returned to work in the capacity of Acting Director and later held positions in the Democratic Citizenship Programme and the CARICOM secretariat. Post retirement, Helen was still actively involved in working with schools in an advisory capacity as well as local museums and other stakeholders, sharing her incredible and in-depth knowledge. She called herself a lifelong learner and was involved with various education communities.

Helen's story is interesting in that she did not follow the traditional trajectory for principals because she had never acted as a vice principal previously. With the support of her colleagues and confidence in her ability, she went from being a teacher and dean of students, to become a principal. As a principal, Helen sought mentorship and information about the position. In telling her story, she mentioned that she even "asked if there was a guide, a book or something [she] should be reading." She soon realized there was nothing available. Helen had to rely on her previous teaching experience and first-hand knowledge about school culture to build a holistic nurturing environment and to lead in a way she felt was appropriate at the time.

Ethics of Care. Helen was motivated by the thought of going "home" to her alma mater and making a difference there as a leader. Her care came authentically and naturally in her descriptions of the relationships she had with "her girls" and her focus to uphold the traditions and ideals of her beloved school. Helen spoke about the emotional work that was tied to her role as principal, "people would say things about the school – its old buildings or the quality of girls we had, and I took that personal." Helen advocated for her girls to their parents and teachers, especially when some teachers "were so unbending" (emphasis added). While managing multiple responsibilities as principal, Helen fondly recalled walking the girls over to various sporting activities in a field nearby to make sure they arrived safely. This was a clear example of how much she cared for her students as a principal. Helen

knew that some of her students had to deal with poverty and worked with them to ensure that their basic needs were met beyond the classroom, to provide them with uniforms, toiletries and funds for any extra tutoring. She was aware that "the girls had lives that were not always visible." As the principal, Helen saw "not just 750 girls in uniforms," she understood their emotions and concerns and was the one "they could confide in." Always ready with a box of "mommy" tissue in her office, Helen believed that it was her responsibility to make school "a happy place," where girls felt they were cared for.

Approach to Leadership. Helen described her leadership approach as collaborative. She actively engaged with teachers and staff, who she called "my peers," students, parents, alumni groups, a management board, and ministry officials. Always busy, Helen revelled in the possibility of transforming her school into one of prestige. Building relationships mattered to Helen, and this was the foundation of her approach as a leader. She purposefully worked on developing relationships with staff members beyond mandatory meetings: "I never went into staff meetings without first touching base one-on-one with each teacher about any issues." She also "engaged with the girls, visiting their classes, met with parents and parent groups about subject choices and even alumni and the management board to make them part [of] infrastructural decision." Helen acknowledged the emotional labor that went into this role - the time advocating for her girls and peers, and being the face of a prestigious high school.

Challenges. Helen experienced a gender bias from male teachers who, according to Helen, were informed by colonial and patriarchal ideas that permeated society. She remained cognizant of "how they took instruction (as opposed to guidance or suggestion)," always paying close attention to how she phrased her directions. Helen's colleagues who were principals of other (less prestigious schools) also experienced such attitudes but more often, perhaps due to the perceived status of their schools. Denominational schools are often reserved for 'upper class' educators and students. As the principal of a denominational school located in one of the more appealing areas of the country, Helen was aware of this: "my headmistress [principal] position at [name of school] would've trumped other issues, such as gender as there was a lot of respect for [name of school]". After retirement, Helen encouraged women to take on leadership positions intentionally and with purpose. Helen advised future women-principals to gain knowledge on a wide range of topics, including education administration and adolescent psychology, to engage in research and conversation with others, and to learn how to respond to situations involving gender biases and inequality. Helen's story is rooted in a strong desire to give back to the school that helped her become an educational leader. Her leadership approach was distinctly collaborative, and she is still fondly remembered as the woman who had transformed the school. She stays in touch

with her past students and acts as a mentor to educators across the country.

Nadine's Story

Participant "Nadine" possessed a Diploma in Education, a Master of Education degree, and a Certificate in School Administration. She also participated in numerous education management courses through local and international institutions. Nadine was passionate about developing and furthering the country's national instrument – steelpan - and was a prominent figure in the "nation's plan in schools" programs. She self-identified as a female of African descent and was a practicing Anglican. In telling her story, Nadine stated that "teaching came naturally" from two generations of educators. Soon after graduating from a university, Nadine started teaching at a non-denominational underperforming government school where she remained for her entire teaching career, becoming vice principal and, later, principal. She spent almost twenty years at this school located in the St. George East school district.

Ethics of Care. While teaching came naturally, Nadine was also motivated to teach because she "wanted to get someone (a student) who did not know anything to learn something." Nadine used to be the youngest teacher on staff, and senior teachers mentored, advised, and protected her. Nadine's leadership approach developed through this experience and she extended the same ethics of care as a principal. She wanted to create a safe and nurturing learning environment for the students she served. Nadine's caring nature was expressed through her focus on ensuring that her teachers truly cared for the students they taught in the school; she wanted her teachers to be caring and passionate about working with students. Nadine advised future female principals to "think about their [children's] future."

Approach to Leadership. Nadine summed up her leadership approach as "it is not a one man show." Nadine's "inner cabinet" included supportive family, peers, and colleagues who helped her make decisions as a principal and gain support of school staff. She relied on her team of individuals in day-to-day operations. Her caring and collaborative nature was the driving force that influenced Nadine's introduction of numerous novel elective programs: "The staff and I sat down and planned how we wanted to use the new space at the school." Nadine's actions motivated the staff and students to implement new programs. She tried to create safe learning and teaching environment. Nadine's caring leadership approach helped facilitate collaboration within her school.

Challenges. Nadine witnessed and experienced gender inequality as vice-principal and principal. On several occasions, she faced an opposition from both men and women when she attempted to make decisions about the future of the school. As an African woman-principal of a non-denominational underperforming school, Nadine was often interrupted, chastised, and ridiculed in front of her peers and

subordinates at school and Ministry of Education meetings. She felt that biases and negative behaviors including demeaning or hurtful language towards her stemmed from a class issue; her school's negative reputation and lack of prestige made her an "outsider." Regardless of this, Nadine was committed to her students, and would openly state her opinions and stand her ground.

Nadine's advice to future female principals of Trinidad was to "be sure of what your intentions are, not doing work unilaterally, but going boldly in doing your work." She wanted future principals to be confident in their knowledge and ability to lead and to learn about leadership: "You need to be trained for what you do." Being diligent, committed and a lifelong learner helped Nadine to become a confident leader. Although Nadine's leadership story was marked by gender, racial, and class biases, she remained resilient and never lost her passion for teaching and leadership. To this day, Nadine is an active member in her community; she is involved in developing programs for young people who one day will become leaders of the country.

Allison's Story

Allison believed in destiny, stating that "God has a plan for you." She earned a Master's degree in Education and a Diploma in Education and had extensive experience in various educational contexts within Trinidad. Although Allison could have stayed in North America, where she had acquired her tertiary education, she decided to return to her home country to "give back" - a decision she never regretted. Having started her career as an English Literature teacher, Allison later moved into the role of principal, then, school supervisor, and, in post-retirement, advisor to the Minister of Education. These multi-layered and varied experiences provided Allison with an opportunity to explore and reflect on her development as a female leader in Trinidad and Tobago.

Ethics of Care. Teaching was a calling for Allison - "I was born to be an educator," and she could not imagine doing anything else. Allison's passion for her students, who were predominately underprivileged and struggled academically, echoed repeatedly throughout her story, and this influenced her path to leadership because she desired "to do more and be more" for the students. Allison was committed to her students and deeply cared about them. She took her role as a teacher very personally and admitted that success or failure of her students was reflective of her work as a teacher - "I put my whole heart and soul into my job, my job was everything to me." Allison devoted significant time to her students, inspiring them and trying to be "more than a teacher." It was because of her commitment to her students that Allison strived to be the best school principal.

Approach to Leadership. Empathy and the ability to relate to her students, parents, and community were fundamental to Allison's leadership approach. "I was able to see them differently. I dealt with the students whose behavior I

understood. I understood their behavior.” Allison set high expectations for her students and teachers. She enthusiastically collaborated with the teachers, staff, and parents. Allison implored the teachers to “meet them [students] where they are at,” and she was proud to live in a community where her students lived, rejecting opportunities to move elsewhere. When making disciplinary decisions about students, especially boys, Allison would empathize with the parents and the student, saying that, “Being a parent of a boy myself...when I saw a child come before me, I would see my own child and would ask myself – ‘if this were my child, how would I deal with it?’ I was very strict but loving...” This empathetic leadership approach was important to Allison in order to connect with her students, staff, and community.

Challenges. Allison experienced gender discrimination and inequality from both male and female teachers and staff. She felt that negative behavior and biases displayed by some teachers and staff stemmed from patriarchal and colonial constructions of class. Despite her exemplary education, experience and knowledge, Allison recalled feeling and being treated as an outsider:

I was not from the area, which was known as the ‘town of the red’ people, as the place of the first peoples. I came from another area, [which had a negative reputation] and was black, I was not one of them, I was an outsider. They were resentful towards me; and male teachers were used to dealing with male principals, so the question was who is this little black woman who coming here, and playing she in charge of this school?

As a first female principal of the school, Allison faced multiple challenges while working to transform the school. Despite this, she achieved remarkable success in raising the academic level of the school, something that since then has never been replicated, and which she regards as the highlight of her leadership experience in that particular school.

Allison experienced classism in all the roles she assumed during her career. She remained vocal about this issue as a teacher and principal. According to Allison, “Trinidad is a very class-conscious society,” in some cases class, not gender, was an important defining factor in her career.

...people regard you differently depending on the school you are the principal for, even within the Ministry of Education, at meetings, leaders experience things differently at the ministry level because of the school that you came from. If you say you are the principal of [name of prestigious school] people regard you in a particular way, and deal with you in a particular way. If you say you are the principal of [names a less prestigious secondary school] people regard you in a different way, even within the Ministry of Education.

When dealing with education officials Allison was acutely aware that she was considered a less important principal. Because of the perceived low status of her school - secondary, non-denominational, and void of any positive reputation - Allison was ignored, and her requests for new teachers or resources were delayed. Yet, Allison firmly believed that altruistic motivations should guide future female principals in Trinidad. She advised future female principals to “be aware of your goals, what you hope to achieve. Do not be motivated by money, no amount of money could never be enough, be prepared to be strong, understand that it is still a man’s world and let any of the hurt you experience in the role motivate you.”

In summary, Allison’s leadership story was very powerful and reflected her passion for education, personal resilience and endless motivation to work for and with marginalised groups of students within her community. Her passion helped her overcome microaggression and other challenges and made her an accomplished leader in multiple education roles. Today, Allison remains committed to her lifelong passion for education as she continues to encourage Trinidad’s future educational leaders.

Discussion

Reflecting on their decision to become principals, the participants reiterated their aspiration to improve the lives of students and communities. Fine (2009) and Moorosi et al. (2018) proposed that all women are generally motivated by the desire to make a difference in the world, and the participants of this study clearly wanted to do so. Responding to the needs of those who required care and accepting the responsibility of a career suggest that our participants were inspired by ethics of care (Noddings, 2010). The participants’ career choices and their decisions were informed by care for others which extended beyond school walls. Each participant acknowledged that her work as principal influenced not only students’ academic achievement but also their future, development, and success.

The participants’ stories indicate that their leadership approaches were collaborative and inclusive, which is consistent with previous research illustrating collaborative, inclusive and creative nature of female leaders (Gaetane et al., 2009; Gahman & Collins, 2019; Kirton & Healy, 2012). The participants discussed the importance of establishing social networks and relationships with teachers, students, and other stakeholders. As leaders, the participants wanted to engage with their followers in socially just ways, balancing maternal and hands-on leadership approaches, which aligns with the findings of Moorosi et al. (2018). Our participants favored relationship-oriented and collaborative approaches described in the previous studies, suggesting that women-leaders tend to exercise their power through cooperation with all stakeholders (Baumgarter & Schneider, 2010; Floyd & Fuller, 2016; Sebastian & Moon, 2018).

In their stories, the participants described instances of microaggression stemming from sexism, racism, and classism. The participants met these challenges with resolve and understanding. For example, Helen shared that “sometimes they [male teachers] themselves [were] not aware of whatever deep, embedded issues they have, being given instructions by a female.” When dealing with instances of overt sexism, Helen adopted a practice of being “quiet but firm.” Allison talked about how racial and gender biases amplified her double outsider status (Blackmore, 1999; Gaetane et al., 2009). She was marginalized because she was the first female principal of a school and an outsider in the community. According to Mullings (2005), in the Caribbean region, class-based differences continue to inform the values about women’s place in society. When the participants described their own and other women’s experiences with class-based differences they also mentioned racism and sexism. For them, these oppressive practices were always interconnected. In Allison’s words “Trinidad is a very class-conscious society.” Despite being a principal, she often felt “othered” because of the perceived lower-class status - “I was not from the area and had a dark skin color.” These experiences resonate with Blank’s (2013) findings that gender roles are class specific in the Caribbean, with one’s class and race being connected to one’s appearance, demeanor and language in public and private spaces. For these women-principals, the socio-economic status of their school informed their approach to leading. Some participants recalled instances where school’s academic reputation and lower socio-economic status of the student body would result in lesser necessary resources from the Ministry of Education. It was clear that class issues profoundly impacted the participants’ experiences, even more so than gender.

Overall, with the exception of Helen, our participants often felt as outsiders due to their gender, class status, and race. Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) described doubly marginalized leaders who are subjected to gender, class, race, and ethnic stereotypes. In Trinidad, school’s reputation and its geographic location also contribute to stereotypes. According to De Lisle et al. (2020), the location of schools is another important element constraining leadership practice. Being a principal of a prestigious school meant that Helen experienced fewer discriminatory incidents in her school and at the Ministry of Education events. In contrast, Allison experienced prejudices because of the perceived lower status of her school and its student body. She empathized with her students’ experiences and wanted to ensure that teachers treated students with care and respect.

Conclusion

We sought to explore leadership experiences of the Trinidadian principals who identify as women of color. Our findings, consistent with Steinbach (2012), highlight a complex intersection of race, class, and gender relations in Trinidad and Tobago and their impact on the education system

and the participants’ leadership experience. The participants’ stories add to the literature written about Caribbean women’s experiences, which, according to Morris (1999), Francis (2017), and Kirton and Healy (2012), are not well documented. Of particular importance is an opportunity to share the stories of Trinidadian women-leaders who have been “resisting, negotiating, disrupting, responding to, and challenging the prevailing heterosexist ideologies” (Gahman & Collins, 2019, p. 6). In this study, we have demonstrated that multiple aspects including history, societal expectations, and personal identity of the participants informed their leadership experience. Gender, class, and race-based biases featured prominently in the stories of our participants who were aware that even today, female leaders in Trinidad have to resist colonial patriarchal discourses, which continue to perpetuate gender inequality and marginalize women based on their social status and skin color (Bobb-Smith, 2003; Gahman & Collins, 2019; Mullings, 2005). Despite these widely recognized gendered racism and blatant class divisions (Bass, 2009; Gahman & Collins, 2019; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Steinbach, 2012) the participants were passionate leaders eager to transform their schools and to advocate for their students. Guided by the ethics of care, our participants used their leadership position to make a difference in the lives of their students and communities and to inspire future generations of educational leaders. These women-leaders responded to the challenges within the Trinidadian education system by demonstrating profound care for their students and passion for education.

References

- Abdel-Shehid, M. (2020). A home in disorder is not a home: Examining race in Trinidad and Tobago. *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, 5, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v5i0.34365>
- Andrew, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (2013). *Doing narrative research* (2nd Eds.). Sage.
- Armstrong, D., & Mitchell, C. (2017). Shifting identities: Negotiating intersections of race and gender in Canadian administrative contexts. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(5), 825-841. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217712721>
- Bass, L. (2009). Fostering an ethic of care in leadership: A conversation with five African American women. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 619-632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309352075>
- Baumgartner, M. S., & Schneider, D. E. (2010). Perceptions of women in management: A thematic analysis of razing the glass ceiling. *Journal of Career Development*, 37(2), 559-576. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845309352242>
- Blackmore, J. (1999). *Troubling women: Feminism, leadership and educational change*. Open University Press.

- Blackmore, J. (2013). A feminist critical perspective on educational leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16(2), 139-154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.754057>
- Blank, S. (2013). An historical and contemporary overview of gendered Caribbean relations. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 2(4), 1-10. <https://theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/view/90/89>
- Bobb-Smith, Y. (2003). *I know who I am: A Caribbean woman's identity in Canada*. Women's Press.
- Boomert, A. (2016). *The indigenous peoples of Trinidad and Tobago from the first settlers until today*. Sidestone Press.
- Burton, L. J., Cyr, D., & Weiner, J. M. (2020). "Unbroken, but bent": Gendered racism in school leadership. *Frontiers in Education*, 5(52), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2020.00052>
- Caine, V., Estefan, A., & Clandinin, J. D. (2013). A return to methodological commitment: Reflections on narrative inquiry. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57(6), 574-586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2013.798833>
- Campbell, C. C. (1996). *The young colonials: A social history of education in Trinidad and Tobago, 1834-1939*. University of the West Indies Press.
- Canadian Women's Foundation. (2022, May 20). *The facts about women and leadership in Canada*. <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/women-and-leadership-in-canada/>
- Costigan, A. (2024, February 16). *The double-bind dilemma for women in leadership (Infographic)*. <https://www.catalyst.org/research/infographic-the-double-bind-dilemma-for-women-in-leadership/>
- Corbett, H. (2022, April 29). How women of color are changing what leadership looks like. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2022/04/29/how-women-of-color-are-changing-what-leadership-looks-like/?sh=46c01860607c>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2012). *Starting with telling stories. Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. Sage.
- Cook, A., & Glass, C. (2014). Women and top leadership positions: Towards an institutional analysis. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21(1), 91-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12018>
- Crawford, C., & Jackson-Best, F. (2017). Feminist pedagogy and social change: The impact of the Caribbean institute in gender and development. *Gender and Education*, 29(6), 709-730. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1149554>
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell J. D. (2018). *Research design* (5th ed.). Sage.
- De Lisle, J., Annette, S., & Bowrin-Williams, C. (2020). Leading high-poverty primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago – what do successful principals do? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(4), 703-723. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219827304>
- Esnard, T. R. (2023). The case of women in Trinidad and Tobago. In T. R. Esnard, *Entrepreneurial women in the Caribbean: Critical insights and policy Implications* (pp. 165-189). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04752-7_8
- Francis, T. (2017). *The lived experience of Caribbean women and their experiences as senior level leaders: A phenomenological study* [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global.
- Fine, M. G. (2009). Women leaders' discursive constructions of leadership. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 32(2), 180-202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2009.10162386>
- Floyd, A., & Fuller, C. (2016). Leadership identity in a small island developing state: The Jamaican context. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 46(2), 251-271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2014.936365>
- Gaetane, J. M., Williams, V. A., & Sherman, S. L. (2009). Black women's leadership experiences: Examining the intersectionality of race and gender. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 562-581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309351836>
- Gahman, L., & Collins, T. (2019). Recognizing and undisciplining feminist geography in the Caribbean. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 26(7-9), 988-1000. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1555519>
- Galsanjigmed, E., & Sekiguchi, T. (2023). Challenges women experience in leadership careers: An integrative review. *Merits*, 3(2), 366-389. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3020021>
- Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. (2022). *2019-2020 education statistics digest*. <https://www.moe.gov.tt/2019-2020-education-statistics-digest-4/>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage.
- Heron, T., & Nicholson, H. (2006). Unraveling gender, development and civil society in the Caribbean. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 52, (2-3) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2006.11829694>
- hooks, b. (1991). Theory as liberatory practice. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 4(1), 1-12. <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/yjfem4&id=7&>
- Jean-Marie, G., Williams, V. A., & Sherman, S. L. (2009). Black women's leadership experiences: Examining the intersectionality of race and gender. *Advances in*

- Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 562–581.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309351836>
- International Labour Organization. (2018). *Women in business and management: Gaining momentum in the Caribbean*.
<https://www.ilo.org/media/414711/download>
- Kirton, G., & Healy, G. (2012). Women’s union leadership in Barbados: Exploring the local within the global. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 33(8), 732–749.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/01437731211280802>
- Kowlessar-Alonzo, G. K. (2019, March 8). Women underrepresented in leadership, governance - House Speaker. *The Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*.
<https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/women-underrepresented-in-leadership-governancehouse-speaker-6.2.797288.a0c9635fe3>
- Kruger, M. L. (2008). School leadership, sex, gender: Welcome to difference. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 11(2), 155–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120701576266>
- Kruse, R. A., & Krumm, B. L. (2016). Becoming a principal: Access factors for females. *The Rural Educator*, 37(2), 28–38.
<https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v37i2.269>
- McKinsey & Company. (2021). *Women in the workplace report*. Author. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>
- Moorosi, P., Fuller, K., & Reilly, E. (2018). Leadership and intersectionality: Constructions of successful leadership among Black women school principals in three different contexts. *Management in Education*, 32(4), 152–159.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618791006>
- Morris, J. (1999). Managing women: Secondary school principals in Trinidad and Tobago. *Gender and Education*, 11(3), 343–355.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540259920627>
- Mullings, B. (2005). Women rule? Globalization and feminization of managerial and professional workspaces in the Caribbean. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 12(1), 1–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690500082745>
- Noddings, N. (2010). Moral education and caring. *Theory and Research in Education*, 8(2), 145–151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878510368617>
- Noddings, N., (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 771–781.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047>
- Newcomb, W. S., & Niemeyer, A. (2015). African American women principals: Heeding the call to serve as conduits for transforming urban school communities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(7), 786–799.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1036948>
- Oplatka, I., & Hertz-Lazarowitz, R. (2006). Women’s leadership in education: A review of the knowledge base. In I. Oplatka & R. Hertz-Lazarowitz (Eds.), *Women principals in a multicultural society: New insights into feminist educational leadership* (pp. 17–32). Brill.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087901141_003
- Persad, D., & Antoine, R. (2023). Investigating value added by secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago using multivariate ordinal hierarchical linear modeling. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 120, 102204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102204>
- Saldaña, J. (2012). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd Ed.). Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2014). Coding and analysis strategies. In P. Leavy (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 581–598). Oxford Library of Psychology.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.001>
- Sanchez-Hucles, J. V., & Davis, D. (2010). Women and women of color in leadership. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 171–181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017459>. PMID: 20350016
- Sawchuk, S. (2020, June 15). *For Black candidates and women, it takes longer to be promoted to principal*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/for-black-candidates-and-women-it-takes-longer-to-be-promoted-to-principal/2020/06>
- Sebastian, J., & Moon, J. M. (2018). Gender differences in participatory leadership: An examination of principals’ time spent working with others. *International Journal of Educational Policy and Leadership*, 12(8), 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.22230/ijep.2017v12n8a792>
- Showunmi, W., & Kaparou, M. (2017). The challenge of leadership: Ethnicity and gender among school leaders in England, Malaysia and Pakistan. In P. Miller (Ed.), *Cultures of educational leadership* (pp. 95–116). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Superville, D. R. (2017, March 8). Few women run the nation’s school districts. Why? Stubborn gender gap in the top job. *Education Week*.
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/16/few-women-run-the-nations-school-districts.html?print=1>
- Trahar, S. (Ed.). (2013). *Contextualizing narrative inquiry: Developing methodological approaches for local contexts*. Routledge.
- World Bank. (2019). *Country: Trinidad and Tobago. Labor force, female (% of total labor force) - Trinidad and Tobago*.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=TT>
- World Bank. (2024). *Trinidad and Tobago gender landscape*. <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/home>