

Researchers explore role of the black female principal in schools

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The twin events of the COVID-19 pandemic and a heightened awareness of racial inequities in the United States have further cemented the commitment of female Black school principals to their schools,

according to a recent journal article published by three UConn scholars from the Neag School of Education.

"We are clearly in a period of turmoil right now for a variety of reasons, but predominantly because of issues of COVID and racial injustice, and statistically these subjects impact Black and brown communities in deeper ways than others," says Jennie Weiner, an associate professor in educational leadership. She performed the research along with Laura Burton, a professor and the department head of educational leadership, and Daron Cyr, a doctoral candidate.

The trio interviewed 20 Black female principals in three different states on multiple occasions before writing the report. The interviews started in-person before the COVID-19 pandemic and were followed up with virtual meetings. The research also began before the murder of George Floyd and the national outcry that followed.

"Though these [women](#) play a pivotal role in the lives of so many children and families and face tremendous challenges in doing so, there just isn't that much research about their experiences and their day-to-day life," says Weiner. "We just don't know much about their thinking, their doing and their ways of being. As a result, it is hard to support them and provide the best resources for them to thrive."

The team initially did a [pilot study](#) funded through the Initiative on Girls and Women in the administration of President Barack Obama and later gained funding through The Spencer Foundation.

"Many of the woman we spoke to said that no one had ever come to them and asked them about their experiences, which is a travesty," says Weiner. "Many of these women have been serving in education for 20 or 30 years, and have seen and done so much we can and should be learning from."

COVID and the increased awareness of racial injustice changed the dynamics of the research, but did not deter the work.

"We were responsive to what people were facing and instead of pretending it wasn't there, we dug in. The way we approached the research provided us this flexibility," says Weiner. "We had spent two to three hours talking to each person at their school, so by the time we were not able to see them in person, we had built some rapport and trust."

The researchers also took the unusual step in convening the women they interviewed and presenting them with the initial findings in draft form.

"What people are reading is actually co-constructed by the researchers and the participants," says Weiner. "It was powerful for me as a researcher that the women shared in how they were to be represented and to help people understand their experiences in a real and authentic way. I am very proud of this piece and our approach because all the woman signed off on it and the findings are representative of their experiences."

Weiner studies leadership in kindergarten through 12th grade, and is interested in how to make leadership more equitable and inclusive.

"I am interested how to create organizations where people have the means to grow, learn, develop and change over time," says Weiner. "Leadership has not always been that way because there is an elevation of a great man hero orientation toward leadership and that is situated in ideas about men being leaders, and white men specifically. I want to create opportunities for counter-narratives to that and spaces where we can talk about the ways women and women of color experience leadership, their ability to thrive in those spaces, and how [gender discrimination](#) and gendered racism play a role in that."

The researchers found that the female Black principals fought for their schools and students despite the challenges they faced in their personal lives.

"Quite of few of these women were immuno-compromised themselves and a lot of thee are primary caregivers for children or even adults," says Weiner. "They put themselves are great risk to ensure the caretaking of their communities. Sometimes this was despite being situated in districts where they felt like their individual school and its students was not being attended to properly."

Weiner points to examples like principals making sure their school was a food distribution location, even if their school was the only one in the district to require such supports. In addition, principals also spent nights putting together hard-copy paper homework packets together for students that did not have proper access to the internet.

"These women have proved, as they always have, that they care and do whatever is necessary to be beacons to lead others and to support their [school](#) families," says Weiner. "I don't think that a system that is dependent on groups that are marginalized to do more than everyone else is fair or equitable. Is think that question is, how do we lift up these stores while not reinforcing the idea that it is appropriate for certain groups to have to do more than others?"

"We need to provide more opportunities to get these people together and feel supported in meaningful ways. They need to feel a space of safety and connection and we need to attend to institutional racism and discrimination in ways that don't put the burden of the work on those are most affected by the injustice."

More information: Daron Cyr et al, "I Want to Speak to a White Person": Daily Microaggressions and Resilient Leadership, *Journal of*

Cases in Educational Leadership (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1555458921997527](https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458921997527)

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