

Black Women Empowering One Another Through Mentorship

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Introduction

Mentorship is often casually undertaken but rarely fully understood. This is particularly relevant to mentoring relationships involving Black women. Black women have a unique ability to uplift one another and help each other perceive, possess, and practice their “Black girl magic.” Thus, while various scholars have considered the characteristics of successful mentoring relationships, examining the characteristics of successful mentoring relationships between Black women requires an explicit focus on mentorship at the intersections of race and gender. Additionally, the nexus between Black women and mentorship in the field of education adds another layer of specificity.

The convergence of the physical characteristics of race and gender (specifically, Black women), the milieu of educational environments, and the action of mentoring occurs in various settings and situations. But how we as African American women take on or shuck off our role as mentors to the African American women and girls needing guidance to navigate the improvised explosive devices, shiny red poisonous apples, and candy-covered houses is critical for the survival of us all.

Unfortunately, shoulders shrug and eyes roll when we talk about mentoring because either we do not really know how to mentor or what it means to mentor someone or we *don't have time for that*. You will notice, however, that each article in this issue relates to mentoring in some way, even though they are not about mentoring, proper. But the need for Black women to lift as we climb (National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 2021) is real.

The articles in this issue shed light on longstanding challenges related to developing and sustaining mentoring relationships to support Black women and girls. At some point, most articles about Black women and girls in education mention the importance of providing “ongoing support and mentorship to navigate toxic environments” (Jason et al., 2022) or “considering the role of teachers...when discussing the structural factors influencing Black girls' engagement in

[school]” (Burnette et al., 2022). Each of these statements taken from the articles in this issue represents the need for someone who has *been there done that* to step up. This editorial asserts the notion that Black women in all roles and levels of education need each other to stand in the gap, at the door, and around the corner as we make our way through the corridors. More directly, we share lessons learned as we, Black women educators, searched for the conditions under which mentoring has the greatest success for Black women.

Culturally Matched

Having served many years as k–12 educators and administrators, we have both mentored countless children and teenagers from various cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the catalyst for this writing is a mentor–protégé relationship developed through the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ (NAESP) National Mentor Training and Certification Program.

The first author, Diana, a university professor, was earning her certification while the second author, Salma, a middle school assistant principal at the time, agreed to be her protégé. Weekly conversations and monthly reflections focused on the NAESP pillars, practices, and priorities for effective principals, but we found that our formal, prescribed mentoring relationship quickly transformed. Because of our shared cultural and gender identities, we were able to talk freely about how some best practices need tweaking to be best for us. We were able to leave the need for code-switching and meaning conjecturing at the door because we possessed a clear understanding of meaning based on cultural awareness and shared cultural references. A form of Black women’s gendered and ethnic literacies (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2015; E. Richardson, 2003), such comfortable connections are a benefit of the distinctive understanding and skill that accompanies culturally matched mentoring (Moore & Toliver, 2010; Noe, 1988).

Additionally, Blake-Beard et al. (2011) note that, on an emotional level, it may be comforting to “have the guidance of someone who has already solved some of the problems confronting one’s own demographic group, and it may be less difficult to trust ‘one’s own’ than to trust someone who seems to resemble ‘the other’” (p. 626). We found this to be true; especially as Salma transitioned from assistant principal at the middle school to assistant professor at the university.

As Black women educators who have spent plenty of time in White educational spaces, we know that the demographic makeup of a mentoring relationship has great influence on the type of support provided by the mentor (Ragins, 1997) and the depth of the relationship experienced. It is essential that we seize opportunities to have each other’s back.

Carefully Managed

We found that while being culturally matched is a key ingredient, being carefully managed, ceaselessly meaningful, authentically caring, and mutually understood are also important components of successful mentoring for Black women.

It is no secret that Black women in all levels of educational leadership are stretched thin. Walkington (2017) states that Black women working in higher education are relegated to “race-specific, lesser paid, overworked, and unappreciated mentoring positions” (p. 54). With so

many demands on our time and attention, we must carefully and intentionally manage and make time for mentoring. The NAESP training required seventy-five logged hours of contact between mentor and protégé. As time passed, we realized that we spent a lot of time talking and texting, but our formal mentoring relationship had taken a back seat to our friendship, so much of our conversations were seemingly irrelevant to the pillars, practices, and priorities that were supposed to be our focus. This can be seen as a challenge, because time spent can seem unproductive, or it can be seen as a shift into a natural mentoring relationship in which informal mentoring occurs (Syed et al., 2012) organically rather than by design.

Ultimately, you are not someone's mentor if you never make time for them and you do not know or understand their mentoring needs. Careful management does not mean meticulous calculations of time or rigid agendas to direct conversation; it simply means giving time and attention to the act of mentoring.

Ceaselessly Meaningful

Sometimes, we shun the idea and avoid the act of mentoring because we do not feel qualified to mentor anyone. Even though our mentoring relationship was comfortable, I, Diana, struggled with imposter syndrome. I struggled with the idea of mentoring someone who already had a confident and strong voice and was highly successful in her own right. When I shared this concern during a casual conversation, Salma said that I had continuously “poured into her growth” by helping her to achieve some of her professional goals; for example, inviting her to be a guest speaker in my graduate course because she mentioned wanting to adjunct at some time in the future; writing a letter of recommendation for her; “talking her up” to my colleagues as she became interested in a university position; and encouraging her through daily affirmations.

While these things are more akin to sponsoring (Chow, 2021; King & Upadhyay, 2021), mentoring acts as an important source of support; and affirming and focusing on her unique needs (Teasdell et al., 2021) provided her with the type of support most helpful to her.

Authentically Caring

Maya Angelou (2007) said,

In order to be a mentor, and an effective one, one must care. You must care. You don't have to know how many square miles are in Idaho, you don't need to know what is the chemical makeup of chemistry, or of blood or water. Know what you know and care about the person, care about what you know and care about the person you're sharing with. So, if you know how to change a tire and that's all, that's good. But teach them by showing, by caring that they know these things. Then that will be of use someday.

I earned my master's degree at a historically Black university in the South. It was in this educational environment that I felt most cared for and cared about as a human being and a scholar, as a woman, and as a Black woman. My advising professor was the epitome of a caring and responsible educator. She set high expectations and gave me the tools to meet them. She shared personal aspects of her life and invited me to reciprocate. I distinctly remember her saying

to me, “When you leave these doors, you are not only representing this historically Black university, but you are representing me, and I intend to be represented well.” Thirteen years later, another phenomenal Black woman scholar took me under her wing as I worked toward my doctoral degree. Under her tutelage, I began to recognize that I was deserving, worthy, and prepared for a seat at the table.

Salma’s higher education experience was a bit different. We shared this text exchange:

Diana: Did you have any mentors black or other during any of your studies that you felt really poured into your life or helped you grow and develop as a black woman and an educator?

Salma: Nope

Salma: Just YOU

Diana: (Crying emoji)

Salma: I had someone that was SUPPOSED to be but didn’t do anything to help me add to my resume in anyway and don’t make me get mad about that

Clearly, Salma felt frustration at the absence of support during her first few rounds in the ivory tower. Interestingly, however, she did recall an African American woman professor who came to her rescue during a time when she was feeling particularly defeated and vulnerable. Salma shared the following memory:

One of the first professors I encountered during my doctoral program was an African American woman. I had been teaching for five years and decided to enroll. It was a difficult adjustment, and I was struggling to make the required shift back to an academic mindset specifically in my writing. After a calendar mistake early in the semester, I had a huge meltdown and considered dropping out. I thought maybe I was not cut out for this level of program after all. Somehow, this professor sensed my frustration level from an email I sent. She asked to speak with me by phone (this was an online course). During that phone call, she assured me that my mistake was not a reason to exit the program. I felt comfortable enough to share other academic frustrations with her and she calmed my fears about the program in general. She also explained that she was a tough grader and that in the end it would be to my benefit. Later in my program, I actively sought her out for another course, because I enjoyed the challenge of her demanding expectations. She and I connected a number of times by phone and continue to stay in touch via email now.

Salma’s professor realized that her student was struggling, and she demonstrated care by reaching out to help. By many definitions, this would be considered mentoring, but, while Salma recognizes the magnitude of her professor’s actions, she does not describe their interactions as a mentoring relationship.

Mutually Understood

The word mentoring has been defined in multiple ways by various entities. Sometimes mentors and mentees have different ideas about what mentoring looks like, and this can create a

disconnect. Thus, even when the mentoring relationship is culturally matched, carefully managed, ceaselessly meaningful, and authentically caring, if it is not mutually understood, either one or both parties will be dissatisfied.

In Salma's case, she believed that while her professor was and is still an occasional sounding board, mentorship is much deeper. She proposes that a mentor is a person who challenges your thinking and either helps you add to your resume or in some other way helps you grow. She goes on to say, "Mentors ask questions that require reflection and often help recenter your professional compass. True mentorship requires effort from both parties and must be nurtured." Similarly, King and Upadhyay (2021) state that "successful mentoring values relational, compassionate, and caring processes of mutually beneficial decision-making and actions that benefit both mentee and mentor" (p. 1162). Mentoring is a learning partnership that goes both ways. Having a clear understanding of what each person expects and desires out of the relationship is important.

Conclusion

Research suggests mentoring relationships are particularly important to women and that "female protégés enjoy same-gender mentoring relationships more than cross-gender ones" (Blake-Beard et al., 2011, p. 626). Studies also show that mentoring is a powerful source of support for African American women in various settings (Bova, 2000). Furthermore, mentoring has proven to be critical to the success of Black faculty in higher education (Butner et al., 2000; Tangier et al., 2022) and k-12 settings (Enomoto et al., 2000); and to university and college students of color (Rasheem et al., 2018; Shavers & Moore, 2014). It is clear that mentoring relationships are not only important but also crucial to the professional and personal growth, development, and general well-being of African American women, especially those in educational settings.

The mentoring experiences of African American women in educational settings greatly affects their mental, spiritual, and intellectual welfare and overall success. We must do more than survive the minefield veiled under the guise of schools, universities, and education set before us; we must thrive. Alone we survive, but together we thrive.

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