Doctoral Perspectives

Standing on Business: Black Women Educators' Struggles and Triumphs in Academic Settings -
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In a powerful and infuriating scene from cinematic history, Black NASA mathematician

Katherine Johnson (portrayed by Taraji P. Henson) displays anger, defiance, resilience, and poise

as she explains to her white male superior, Al Harrison (portrayed by Kevin Costner), why it

takes her so long to use the restroom each day. In this scene, she describes to her white superior

that each day, she has to trek a half-mile, on foot, to the "Colored" women's bathroom because

there are no restrooms for her in the building where she works. This revelation opens up her

floodgates (as she stands soaking wet from her hike through the rain), and she expounds upon the

additional indignities she experiences daily at NASA. From low pay to being overworked to

being ostracized by her colleagues as they refuse to use the same coffee pot as her, she

essentializes her second-class position in one of the most esteemed industries. After this

revelation, her oblivious boss immediately takes it upon himself to relieve her of these

indignities by eradicating the physical barrier of "Colored" and "White" restrooms and

"Colored" and "White" coffee pots. Though fictional, this scene epitomizes the intersections of

blackness and womaness in a world made for whiteness and maleness (Silman, 2017).

However, unlike this poignant scene, Black women in hostile and racist work

environments don't have a fictional white savior like Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) to come

through with his proverbial crowbar and break down the racial and sexist opposition they are

contending with each day. In reality, Black women are instead contorting into mock versions of

themselves and shapeshifting to survive the demands that a racist, sexist, and anti-black society

has placed on them (Gee, 2004). For Black and female educators, this shift in shape has lasted

for centuries and often defines us in conflicting ways in which we are strong yet seen as overly aggressive or resilient yet lacking in self-care (Moody & Lewis, 2019; Williams & Lewis, 2019; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This often mental, physical, and psychological contorting of our authentic selves shape our experiences and well-being in complex and multifaceted manners within various sectors of education.

Black women, who make up only 7% of public school teachers in the United States (Taie & Lewis, 2022), are encouraged to enter various educational settings and institutions where they can succeed and influence students. In higher education, Black women comprise 5% of junior faculty, yet only 2% of tenured professors (Connor, 2022; Williams-June & O'Leary, 2021). Though their numbers are abysmal in these settings of learning, Black women experience heightened levels of exclusion, are targeted, challenged, often stifled, silenced, misunderstood, and exposed to a conglomerate of racial acts, microaggressions, power struggles, and discrimination (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Farinde et al., 2016; Ramdeo, 2023; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020). Despite all of this, Black women are powerful beings, almost superhero-like in their essence, yet at what cost does this power impact their social, emotional, and physical well-being?

Essentially, these experiences lead Black women to contend with overcoming the positive and negative effects of the Superwoman Schema (SWS) (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Knighton et al., 2022). Within this framework, the cultural expectations and societal pressures placed on Black women to be resilient, strong, and self-sacrificing all at once put immense pressure on them to shape themselves into dispositions that can withstand such complexities of the racialization of the spaces, places, and times in which they occupy (Morrison et al., 2017; Neely & Samura, 2011). As educators, these instances also shape Black women's pedagogical experiences through their triumphs, identities, pliability, resourcefulness, and restraints. While

navigating through perplexing school settings on all levels, Black women show and continue to show their multifaceted abilities to endure, withstand, and overcome racial and gender inequities within schools. Even still, they continue standing on business.

In this piece, we highlight the experiences and perspectives of five Black women educators through a series of inquiries. This study explores the experiences of Black women educators from the PK-12 to higher education settings. Utilizing autoethnography as a qualitative method (Butz & Besio, 2009; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton & Jenkins, 2024), this study allowed researchers to work together in centering their voices and prioritizing exploring their lived experiences, expressing how Black women educators faced challenges, advocated for others, overcame oppression, and shared stereotypes and expectations. The researchers employ the Superwoman Schema framework, and our analyses show how Black women educators progress through teaching and educational environments, identifying significant themes of identity, duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, responsibility to assist others and the health issues that arose. Reflected in the experiences of each participant, we as Black women educators, share our stories to inform more inclusive, equitable, and healing practices within P-12 and higher educational settings. We lead this inquiry by asking three predominate research questions:

1. How do Black women educators understand their identity and personal experiences in challenging racial environments within educational spaces?

2. What insights do educational researchers gain about Black women educators through a collaborative autoenthnographic research approach?

3. What thoughts do Black women educators share about their teaching experiences, and what keeps them motivated?

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Black Women Educators

      Although Black teachers are a minority within the teaching profession, research highlights the numerous advantages Black teachers bring to the classroom (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2022). One significant area where Black teachers excel is in their cultural relevance (Gay, 2002; James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) advocates for integrating culture within pedagogy to provide equitable opportunities for students of color. This approach emphasizes the importance of caring for students, drawing on their prior cultural knowledge, and respecting and learning from their cultural backgrounds (Camangian, 2010; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Gay, 2010; Hollins, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Black teachers often have a profound understanding of the cultural contexts and experiences that resonate with Black students, enhancing instruction, student engagement, and classroom climate. This cultural competency enables them to create environments that validate students' identities and contribute to the socio-emotional development of all students (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2014). Additionally, Black teachers serve as powerful role models and influencers for Black students, offering representation and encouragement for both personal and academic success (Cholewa et al., 2014; Decker et al., 2007; Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Egalite et al., 2015; Harrell-Levy et al., 2016). Lastly, Black teachers often have strong connections to the communities in which their students reside, fostering positive relationships between the school and families (Cooper, 2009). For centuries Black women such as Septima Clark, Charlotte Forten Grimke, Mary McLeod Bethune, among others, have played integral roles in shaping positive schooling experiences for not only Black students, but all students

(Dillard, 2021; Love, 2019). Black women's liberatory stances within education are often at the helm of these contexts and stem from their overlapping and intersectional epistemological vantage points as Black women educators (Coles & Stanley, 2021).

Intersectionality is a framework proposed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to conceptualize how individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience discrimination. In proposing what she describes as "compounding discrimination," or "double-discrimination," the individual within a social or political group experiences discrimination that is not based on one characteristic (e.g., race, gender, nationality, religion) (Crenshaw, 1989). Within the field of education, intersectionality helps us to understand how Black female educators' experiences with mistreatment and discrimination are distinctly different from their predominantly white female teaching counterparts and even the experiences of Black male teachers. Black female educators exist in spaces where their identities (e.g., professional, social, political) interact with systems that reinforce gendered norms serving white women, contend with micro and macro aggressions, and diminish their formal training (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). These identities are undervalued and "consistently treated as marginal or invisible" (Harris & Leonardo, 2018), illuminating the complex nature of power in social systems where the individuals experiencing discrimination are viewed as subordinates.

The experiences of Black women educators have been historically unique and complex (Bruce-Golding, 2020; Watson, 2017). In the same education system that has denied Black women–due to their intersectionality of race and gender–access to the fundamental rights of an American education, Black women have been expected to provide a quality education to others (Owens, 2022). Carrying the weight of education for others on their backs–since the Reconstruction era to the present day–Black women have worked tirelessly to hold up an

educational system that literally and metaphorically holds them back (Fenwick, 2022). Despite the oppressive conditions Black women face in educational spaces, they continuously show up and perform what scholar Jacquline Jones (1985) refers to as a labor of love, a labor of sorrow. The experiences of Black women educators are deeply complex. In a system where their identities, lived experiences, and humanity have been overlooked, they continue to show up because they understand that, particularly when it comes to the education of Black children, their presence is essential. There is an exhaustive amount of literature on the experiences of Black women in education that attest to the reality that Black women educators have meaningfully impacted various sectors of education at the expense of themselves (Acosta, 2019; Collier-Thomas, 1982; Fenwick, 2022; Samuels et al., 2021). However, despite the existing scholarship, Black women educators are still forced to show up–mask on and cape flowing–for the greater good of others.

Black women educators experience a mental and psychological toll due to their racialized experiences, which include the ongoing confrontation of negative stereotypes such as the argumentative, the attitudinal, the mammy, and the Jezebel (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; Thomas, 2022). They exist in professional situations where their competence and expertise are challenged, and they are treated as if their cultural identity (e.g., Blackness) must be erased for them to be seen, valued, or recognized. For example, Pizarro and Kohli's (2018) study found that Black women's ability to leverage cultural capital and foster positive relationships with families and students was undervalued in schools, stating that "despite her many strengths and deep connection to the community, the administration never positioned her as a resource or a potential leader in the school" (p. 2). Acosta (2019) builds upon this, citing that highly qualified Black women educators are often relinquished to the margins in schools and are constantly placed in

positions to prove their competence due to racialized and gendered negative stereotypes in schools. Farinde et al. (2016) cited multiple ways Black women educators felt unsupported by their school leaders, such as carrying an increased workload and failing to follow through on school policies.

Similarly, Peters and Nash (2021) discuss the stretching thin of Black women who often balance many roles in schools, advocating for underserved students' needs and being asked to bear additional responsibilities. Through an "intersectionality" lens, these compounded experiences with discrimination can impact their ability to be fairly evaluated and earn promotion (Campbell, 2023; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Viano et al, 2023). For example, Campbell (2023) found that when Black women and white women were "similarly effective" in schools, Black women received lower professional ratings. These studies reveal how race and gender interact with school-based experiences for Black women, which have implications for retention and sustainability in the field. The racialized and gendered contexts in which Black women educators exist within, although not new, are lacking in understanding of the impacts residing in such spaces has on Black women educators mental, physical, and psychological health. Specifically, Black teacher burnout and its nuances need further examination. More research is needed to unpack how these educational contexts are internalized by Black women educators so that healing and redeeming solutions can be brought forth.

Black Teacher Burnout

Black teacher burnout is an increasingly pressing issue within educational settings (Williams et al., 2023). Shaped by a unique set of challenges that disproportionately affect Black educators, these challenges can include but are not limited to: systemic racism, isolation in predominantly white institutions, inequitable workloads, and the emotional toll of advocating for

marginalized learners (Milner, 2020). Additionally, Black women educators are often faced with the burden of being the face of racial equity in schools all while navigating such inequities for themselves. These factors contribute to higher levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and concerning attrition rates for Black educators. Calls for systemic change and greater support are long overdue.

Black women educators often face a dual burden of racism and sexism, which can lead to increased stress and burnout. They navigate complex dynamics in predominantly white institutions, where they may feel isolated or undervalued. Williams et al. (2023) investigation through a phenomenological approach captures the differential expectations Black teachers experience. According to Williams III, Turner, Terry, Fontenot, and Richardson (2023), Black teachers experience unique challenges that can lead to either radical healing or burnout. Milner (2020) highlights the unfair, troubling, unrealistic, and controlling environments Black women educators contend with. He found that Black women educators are expected to be experts on everything, carry extra work loads without compensation, and expected to go along with practices their white counterparts deem suitable even if they do not agree. A refusal to agree with unfair or inequitable practices leads them to be labeled as not a "team player." Mahatmya et al. (2022) reports that climate is a major factor in Black teacher burnout and attrition rates. Schools unwilling to discuss or acknowledge the race-based discrimination factors experienced by Black women educators lead to greater burnout among them.

Addressing Black teacher burnout requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the systemic barriers contributing to this crisis. Prioritizing the overall well-being of Black women educators will not only reduce burnout but also alleviate the accompanying health disparities that often result from chronic stress, added responsibilities, and overwork. This approach should include policy reforms that address inequities in pay, workload, and

professional support, as well as creating culturally affirming school environments that are free of bias. Additionally, providing access to mental health resources, mentorship programs, and spaces for self-care can help Black educators feel valued and supported. Ultimately, investing in the overall well-being of Black teachers is an investment in their health and longevity and the academic success and cultural enrichment of the students they serve.

Superwoman & Mammy

Black women educators bear the heavy load of decades-long discrimination layered with gendered mistreatment (Farinde-Wu et al, 2020). They are often subject to systemic biases, and professional challenges that differ from those experienced by white female teachers or Black males (Farinde-Wu et al, 2020; Milner, 2020; Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). Black women are positioned "in ways that reflect negative stereotypical images" despite their credentials, qualifications, or success with students (Acosta, 2019). Ladson-Billings (2009) discussed limiting stereotypical representations of Black women such as the "Sapphire," a woman who is masculine, aggressive, or overbearing. Others characterizations include the Mammy, a faithful servant with no complaints, caring for others while depleting the needs of herself. In Acosta's (2019) findings, exemplary Black women educators were held to unreasonable expectations and existed within a "paradox" of being a Mammy and a Superhero in schools. In the role of superhero, they were expected to go above and beyond for both colleagues and students while taking on multiple responsibilities without proper compensation. But, as a Mammy, they were expected to be team players, even in midst of mistreatment and discrimination. These characterizations provide lenses from which Black women are perceived in professional spaces, leading to "bias" in evaluations which can ultimately impact career advancement (Acosta, 2019). Furthermore, these unrealistic expectations and negative perceptions lead to extreme exhaustion

and contribute to Black women leaving the field of education (Farinde-Wu et al 2020; Milner, 2020).

Research has found that racial discrimination is linked to negative health outcomes (Williams et al., 2019). For Black women educators experiencing daily racialized stressors, there are harmful effects on their well-being, such as exhaustion (Milner, 2020), stress, and overall burnout (Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). One area of exhaustion for Black women educators is having to wear a "mask" as a form of protection from "psychologically damaging" workplace conditions, creating a shield so as not to be taken advantage of (Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). In Rauscher & Wilson's (2017) study of occupational stressors in the field of education, Black female teachers reported that school administrators did not give them course assignment preferences. This was notably different than White female teachers, who "repeatedly described themselves as "lucky" in terms of the classes they taught, their students, and their jobs overall" (p. 224). Additionally, Black women educators were often overloaded and stretched thin, with larger classes, often with students needing much more intensive support. Both White and Black women educators in this study reported that managing students' behavior and responding to discipline issues were stressors. However, Black women educators viewed these problems as a result of societal issues, while White women viewed undesirable student behaviors as personal assaults against them. White women were also cited as having more opportunities to raise concerns and be heard, while Black women did not have the same receptiveness from school leaders. Similarly, in Edwards's study (2024), Black teachers' work environments were found to be vastly different than their White counterparts; they were often staffed in schools with fewer resources in high-needs, urban schools and earned less compensation, even with substantial teaching expertise and tenure. As a result of their school environments, these findings reveal that

Black women educators are dealing with the "physical and emotional consequences" of being worn down over time in their working environments.

Theoretical Framework

When attempting to understand the similar and unique experiences of Black women educators, the researchers desired a theoretical framework that makes sense of Black women's historical and social experiences in America and how such experiences shape how Black women navigate the world from the inside out. Because the education system forces women–especially Black women–to show up in the same manner they would in the domestic realm–as nurturers and othermothers– it was important for the researchers to understand how Black women are forced to navigate the act of balancing stress and strength and the overall impact this daily balancing act has on the social, emotional, cultural, mental, and physical well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Samuels et al., 2021). Using Woods-Giscombe's (2010) theoretical framework of Superwoman Schema (SWS) as a guide, the researchers could understand how Black women's struggles and triumphs in academic settings impacted their overall health and well-being.

The Superwoman Schema Framework expounds on the research conducted on the "Strong Black Woman" or "Superwoman" role and the impact these forced identities have on Black women's health (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2009; Black, 2008; Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009; Mullings, 2006; Romero, 2000; Thomas et al., 2004). Navigating years of degrading stereotypes such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Strong Black Woman, Black women have been forced to exist in society with an extra dose of resilience and strength needed to defend themselves while saving others. However, even the strongest often struggle to survive. Because saving others while saving themselves has become the second responsibility of Black women, it is common for Black women to normalize or disregard the mental and physical impact of constantly feeling the

need to be strong and the emotional stress that comes with this daily struggle, as a normal part of life for Black women (Nelson et al., 2024).

Woods-Giscombe's (2010) framework is beneficial for identifying characteristics of the Superwoman role that might go overlooked or disregarded. As such, SWS helps understand and identify the characteristics of a Superwoman, the contextual factors surrounding the Superwoman complex, and the perceived benefits and liabilities of this forced identity. Overall, the Superwoman role can be characterized by the obligation to manifest strength and suppress emotions. Moreover, it can also be seen as the resistance to being vulnerable, dependent–or "weak"--in the eyes of others (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Black women have to put their capes on despite limited resources available to them. They are determined to succeed while helping others do the same (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). This need to be the backbone for themselves, their families, and their communities is a direct result of Black women feeling a sense of neglect and abandonment from people and institutions designed to protect them (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004). As Woods-Giscombe (2010) breaks down, the historical forcing of Black women to be the "mules of the world"--even in education–has resulted in this need for Black women to feel as if they have to depend on themselves because they cannot depend on others (Porcher & Austin, 2021). Furthermore, because Black women have likely witnessed the struggling and suppressed emotions of their foremothers, they have inherited these traits with pride and responsibility.

When wearing the cape of Superwoman–in the eyes of Black women– there are some perceived benefits for "having it all together." But, as Newton's third law reminds us, there is an equal and opposite reaction for every action. While Black women can "hold their own" and carry their families and communities on their backs without the assistance or support from others,

there are liabilities that come with this "benefit." Assuming responsibility for everything around you results in having no capacity to care for yourself or the things vital to you. As Woods-Giscombe describes in her SWS study, interpersonal relationships, stress-related health behaviors, and the embodiment of stress are direct results of Black women carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Eventually, something will give, and what goes first is the mental and physical well-being of the Black woman–and likely everything else attached to her existence.

While Woods-Giscombe research–and associated scholarship–seeks to understand the experiences of Black women through a medical lens, the Superwoman Framework can transform the education profession by providing a new vantage point for understanding how Black women educators show up in their respective capacities. Giving name to how Black women exist and survive in educational spaces can benefit future research on this phenomenon as well as inform educational stakeholders interested in responding to the needs of educators from marginalized communities in culturally relevant ways. When the Black woman wins, society wins. Nevertheless, first, we must seek to understand the lived experiences of Black women educators and what they need from others to do more than just survive (Love, 2019).

Methods

This study aims to explore the multifaceted experiences of Black American women in academic settings, particularly focusing on the Superwoman role. This type of inquiry is essential to understanding our unique challenges and strengths, who often navigate multiple responsibilities and societal expectations. Using collaborative autoethnography, we can capture the depth and complexity of our experiences, providing rich, detailed insights. This approach

allows for a nuanced understanding of how we perceive our roles, the contextual factors influencing them, and the advantages and disadvantages they encounter.

The Black Women Educators (Participants)

The survey yielded five responses (n=5). We identify as a Black woman, educator, and life-long learner and range from 27 to 47 years old. We have educational classroom experiences ranging from 4 to 16 years. We also either have a terminal degree or are completing a professional degree. Table 1 lists us by name, age, teaching experience, and level taught by educator

Table 1. Black Women Educators

Participant	*Age*	*Years of K-12 Teaching Experience*	*Level of teaching*
Elissa	47	13 years of classroom teaching	High school, Elementary school
Salandra	42	10 years of classroom teaching	Elementary, Primary
Virginia	40	16 years of classroom teaching	Elementary, Middle school
Alexes	38	10 years of classroom teaching	High school
Maiya	27	4 years of classroom teaching	High school

Elissa

Elissa's advanced academic abilities early on in grade school, which placed her ahead of her peers, subjected her to the complexities of being different among fellow students and teachers. In the public school environment of an urban adjacent suburb, she encountered difficulties as some teachers singled her out for her intelligence. When she was selected to read to other classes, take tests outside of the traditional testing setting, or brought out of the classroom to visit upper-grade

levels, Elissa's teachers would speak to her in a condescending way. These actions told her that she was doing something wrong by simply existing as a high-achieving student. Despite these adversities, she later pursued a career in education, opting to teach in urban schools where she instructed various classes. Once, Elissa began teaching, she encountered a double-standard from her peers who often looked to her for guidance on backwards instructional planning, teaching using differentiated approaches, and using technology in innovative ways. These same teachers who ask for, used, and repurposed her well-developed resources, did not give due credit or recognize her contributions. And when she elevated her concerns, she was told by her administration to work on "getting along" with her colleagues, which ignored her peers' extractive behavior.

Salandra

Salandra has accumulated ten years of teaching experience, beginning her career in a suburban school distant from her hometown. Returning to the same district after some time abroad, she encountered a hostile work environment in an affluent school setting. Reflecting on her experiences, Salandra believes her strong commitment to equity and an equitable mindset are valuable assets to any educational institution. However, she faced microaggressions and various challenges at this affluent school, often being unfairly labeled as an "angry Black woman" by administrators and fellow teachers. Consequently, Salandra decided to leave this school environment and transition to a setting with a predominantly Black and Hispanic student population. Finding similar anti-equity dispositions even amongst majority-minority contexts, she now resides in higher educational spaces dedicated to preparing pre-service teachers to embody equity-based teaching practices and pedagogies.

Virginia

Growing up in a rural and suburban setting in the southern United States, she encountered both overt and covert acts of racism during her school years. Her earliest memory of racism dates back to when she was as young as six years old, and she recalls a particularly impactful moment during her 7th-grade honors history class, where she faced subtle or indirect discrimination from a challenging teacher with a negative disposition. These experiences motivated Virginia to pursue a career in education. As a teacher, she prioritized meeting the needs of her students, drawing from her own experiences, and establishing strong connections with them by actively listening, attending their extracurricular events, and crafting engaging lessons that resonated with their lives. Virginia viewed it as her responsibility to support and advocate for her students and stand up for Black women educators, often speaking out on issues relevant to their experiences.

Alexes

Alexes embarked on her teaching journey by instructing American and African American history at a predominantly Black school in a suburban area. While she found fulfillment in teaching Black students, Alexes ultimately felt compelled to leave the dysfunctional district. Transitioning to a new district, she took on the role of teaching Dual Enrollment/Advanced Placement courses. Here, Alexes encountered challenges where she had to assert herself against various individuals, including parents of students, often finding herself as the sole Black individual in these settings. She faced scrutiny regarding her qualifications, certifications, and degrees. Within this role, Alexes was tasked with increasing the enrollment of Black students, supporting their retention in the program, and guiding them through challenging situations. Despite feeling drained and encountering resistance, Alexes recognized the importance of advocating for herself and Black

students in this environment. Following her departure from K-12 education, Alexes now dedicates her efforts to advocating for others through an educational preparation program.

Maiya

Maiya's educational journey has been profoundly influenced by her two-year experience and adversity in a predominantly white school. In 5th grade, as one of only two Black students in the school, she encountered her first instance of racism, enduring derogatory language, ridicule for her attire, and mockery of her speech. The following year, she was removed from gifted classes. She faced accusations from teachers suggesting her mother's lack of concern for her education due to her enrollment back into her home district. These experiences highlighted the disparities faced by students who shared her background, prompting Maiya to become an educator in her hometown district. From that moment on, she focused on being a presence and advocating for students who resembled her, teaching English in the same school and classroom where she once was a student.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study began in Spring 2024. After developing a series of questions about our teaching experiences, each co-author was given anonymous questions to share our experiences in academic settings. The questionnaire posed questions about our identities, personal experiences, and advocacy in challenging racial academic environments. It remained open for two months, allowing ample time for each participant to complete our responses.

Data Analysis

The initial data analysis phase involved open coding, where we identified and categorized distinct concepts and ideas within the text responses. This process entailed breaking down the content into smaller segments, extracting key concepts, and assigning descriptive labels to capture the essence of each segment. The diverse group of Black American women in the study described their Superwoman role as multi-dimensional, discussing their perceptions of this role, the contextual factors influencing it, and the disadvantages and motivating factors for such a role. These insights were categorized into themes such as perceptions, contextual factors that influence, and the disadvantages and motivating factors of the Superwoman role. These related codes were subsequently dissected into more specific sub-themes or characteristics.

Collaborative Autoethnography

Autoethnography as a qualitative method has allowed for the researchers to center themselves as subjects within larger contexts that often challenge social norms and are ground sociocultural context (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kim, 2016; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Collaborative Autoethnography takes this a step further as it is a qualitative approach that provides researchers the space to work with one another to analyze autobiographical material to understand sociocultural phenomena within each authors' autobiography (Chang et al., 2013). Similar to James et al. (2020) who employ counter storytelling to tell the stories of Black faculty members and Ashford-Hanserd (2020) who found it important for Black girls and women to tell their stories through research as a means of countering racist, classist, and sexist views, we too, align with the views and goals of collaborative autoethnography as a method to share our stories as well. As such, the data in this study was examined collaboratively by the Black women in this

study to garner an understanding on the impact of shapeshifting while within the SWS and the impact of such a complex social identity dynamic.

Findings

Our diverse group of Black American women educators in the study described our Superwoman role as multi-dimensional. As such, several interconnected themes emerged as key factors including discussing our perceptions of this role, the contextual factors influencing it, and the disadvantages and motivating factors for such a role.

Perceptions of the Superwoman Role

We identified five key perceptions of the Superwoman role: duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, reluctance to show vulnerability, responsibility to assist others, and pressure to suppress emotions. Below is a breakdown of the nuances uncovered within each sub-theme.

Duty to demonstrate strength.

Maiya: I often don't get the help I need because they think, "I got it." When I do ask for help, I am looked at as incompetent. I think I can appreciate being seen as a force, but sometimes I wish I had more support from people and not this assumption that I am a strong Black woman and don't need any help. Sometimes I'm weak. Sometimes I need help.

Virginia: When I was expecting my only child with extremely high risks, I went to my principal to have a one-on-one conversation about leaving school for mandatory bed rest. Her response was, "Gee, oh my, pregnant? I guess while you are fighting for your baby, somebody has to be fighting for your test scores. There goes our scores, but you're strong."

Determination to achieve success.

Alexes: I did notice that there were periods in the early stages of this profession when I believed that I needed to adopt the status quo in order to be successful in my classroom with my students.

Maiya: I recognized I was sick (not to the extent, obviously, because I thought I had COVID or a cold every time) because things progressively got worse. But I still tried to be a superwoman. I showed up where I was supposed to when I was supposed to. I made sure I was producing. I had to be at my best, and I couldn't let feeling a little funny mess that up. I had to be amongst the best, representing Black women and my family. The health issue I'm facing is actually giving me more clarity and space to be more present in my life.

Reluctance to show vulnerability.

Salandra: I constantly doubted myself, and I was hyper-vigilant in my teaching environment because I felt like I was being watched. I received numerous unannounced walk-throughs in my classroom at one point. I knew they (the administration) were trying to "catch" me doing something to counter the accusations I was making against my teammates and supervisors at the time. I also

worried about some of my students who were in classrooms with teachers who were mistreating them. Deciding to speak up about the mistreatment I witnessed on behalf of my littles was scary and disappointing at times. The retaliation that often followed was stressful and isolating. Teaching is already hard enough. It was even harder knowing I could not trust my colleagues and there was no one to have my back.

Virginia: There were times that I would say, my outside life was "raggedy." I would be battling health issues, family issues, or financial issues, but I would hide those struggles from my colleagues. When I was supposed to be on bedrest because my daughter was trying to come super early, I went against my doctor's wishes and returned to teaching elementary school because I believed I needed to power and push through. My doctor said that my teaching career was so stressful and toxic, that I was bound to have my daughter at the school, literally. It was not smart to try to carry on teaching during this time period, and I only lasted 3 weeks before having no choice to obey the doctor's orders. I often avoided discussing my feelings or what I had going on outside of teaching because I knew that I needed to display strength to eliminate any doubt of my professionalism and being able to handle my job responsibilities.

Responsibility to assist others.

Salandra: *I feel like I am always advocating for myself and others!! All three classroom teaching experiences provided me with ample opportunity to advocate for myself and my students, particularly Black students. Furthermore, because of my identity, I feel as though I have an increased affinity for Black students. As a mother of young Black children with learning*

disabilities, I am especially hyper-sensitive to protecting them and ensuring they are treated equitably in school. There have been many times when I have had to step in as an advocate for my children when I felt that their teachers were letting them fall by the wayside. Again, I believe that in these instances, some teachers (particularly white women) felt threatened and did not want to communicate effectively with me.

Elissa: I was voluntold by my principal to "make my department better, coach and support" all the staff [including my department chair] as a school improvement effort. This request was an expectation and not optional. This ask also came with no additional support to help manage power dynamics with a Black woman coaching an all White English department led by a White male. For example, I was asked by "how" did you get to do this role by multiple staff members with no acknowledgement of my receipts (students consistently improving testing scores, students gaining self-esteem and cultural validation, and implementing ways to outreach and build positive connections with families). I felt very alone especially when there were ongoing off the books meetings led by disgruntled staff following our scheduled department meetings. I was left out of the loop intentionally. I found myself with new responsibilities to help others, but I lacked support and mentorship to manage this new positon. I felt isolated and trapped.

Alexes: I was the only Black person in the room when I started teaching at this school for years. Part of my advocacy at this campus was increasing the number of Black students in the Dual Credit program, helping them remain in the program, and—most importantly—protecting Black students who entered into this dangerous space. While I was doing some great work, this work was also

draining. White students hated me, Black students needed me, and I was constantly in defense of me and my actions.

Virginia: As a Black woman, I have often felt the need to be obligated or the gatekeeper for Black students and other Black women, knowing the disservice, issues, and challenges we all face.

Maiya:I think I have always advocated silently and in the background by being a supporter of Black women. Like the young folks say, "I'm a girls' girl." I think it is important to pour into Black girls and women in these spaces so that they have the confidence to advocate for themselves. I remember one time a Black professor I had was facing opposition from the white women in the class because they felt that her course was too hard. I couldn't advocate on a larger scale because the students' complaints were ultimately private but I made sure to set up a meeting so I could pour into her and let her know I saw her and thought she was doing a good job.

Pressure to suppress emotions.

Alexes: I've just learned to show up as my authentic self and be who I am. In all honesty, I do find myself sometimes being mindful of not coming off as "too Black" or "too emotional," but I quickly have to check those thoughts because that's me, and I feel like it's all in my head. Plus, I understand how white supremacy works and WSC forces people of color to "not be too much" so we can make whites feel comfortable and like they are enough–I refuse to do that!

Elissa: This is hard. As a woman, I am expected to move over for others, support at all costs, and to allow others to disrespect me without speaking up. As a Black woman, I struggle internally with not wanting to be labeled with all of the negative tropes of being angry or aggressive.

Contextual Factors Influencing the Superwoman Role

Three contextual factors were identified as influencing the Superwoman role: identity, proving oneself, and challenges such as acceptance, racism, stereotypes, and interactions with other Black people.

Identity. We described how our race and gender intersected and were key factors shaping the Superwoman role. The findings also show that Black women view our identity as having a significant impact on our experiences in educational settings. We reported feeling pressure to take on extra responsibilities with limited resources and being expected to serve as spokespersons or advocates for Black students, colleagues, and the broader Black community. We noted that our Blackness often overshadowed our gender, with the femininity of white women being more highly valued in educational environments.

Virginia: Being a Black woman in these spaces has motivated me heavily. It has driven my passion, guided my instruction, given me a voice, and made me give students what I needed in various educational spaces. I never wanted students to feel isolated, targeted, or bored so I made sure to create lasting meaningful relationships and connections along with engaging material. On the

graduate level— whew! The most challenging part has been everyone trying to check our identity, even Black folks.

Alexes: So my identity as a Black woman influences everything that I do in an educational setting. I noticed early on in my education career that the way I showed up for students, the way I showed up for myself, the way I designed lessons, the way I coach my team, and the way I lead as an educational leader was all connected to how I view myself as a Black woman in education. I became very intentional about how I showed up in this space as a Black woman. Being a Black woman again shapes and defines everything that I do, from the organizations that I associate myself with to what I write about, what I research, and what I design lessons about, all root down to what I want to happen in educational spaces for Black people and most importantly Black children.

Elissa: My identity influenced my experiences in educational settings because I was expected to be content with less, work longer and harder than others, and prove myself--even after I had already produced well above my peers. I was the "workhorse," while others were to direct where I would go--instead of me directing my own path.

Salandra: My identity influences everything I do in educational spaces as I know that my presence, tone, ideas, etc., can cause discomfort for others who harbor anti-black sentiments. My presence alone makes some feel "some type of way," combining that with challenging their deeply held beliefs about educating students of color (particularly) Black students, puts many on the defense around me. I feel as if I am constantly trying to prove myself as capable, intelligent,

knowledgeable, and nice enough, so others will appreciate my contributions. Unfortunately, it appears that no matter how knowledgeable I am or how nice I believe I am being, there is always a hate it (me) or love it (me) dynamic at play.

Maiya: They've influenced it a lot. I often don't get the help I need because they think, "I got it." When I do ask for help, I am looked at as incompetent.

Proving self. We recalled how we were tested in our educational settings by having to prove our skills, our concern, and our knowledge. Elissa insisted that she always had to prove herself to her colleagues because they made it a point to question her every move:

> *I was underestimated when I proved time and time again that I was highly competent. Even in my doctoral program, my non-Black colleagues who did not identify as women were asked fewer questions in class to substantiate their claims and given opportunities to turn work in late.*

Alexes and Virginia could relate and added:
> *I can remember in my role as the Dual Credit/AP Teacher, when the parents would call the school and ask about my degree qualifications and certifications. Because you needed to have at least a Masters degree to teach the course. Over the course of 6 years, one the the biggest questions I received from parents was rooted in what type of degrees I had and where I received my degrees.*

Many times my credentials have been questioned when I started a new school because comments about my age or experience come into play. I remember when I started in a new school district, they first put 'staff' on my identification card like I was just a helping worker. Some people told me it was not a big deal… to me it was. I was further offended as I looked around and other people had theirs labeled specific stating 'teacher.' At this point, I had been teaching 10+ years, and decided to use my voice to rectify the situation. I went to the office and asked if there was a specific reason my correct title was not displayed. My id was then changed to define my role as a teacher of record.

Challenges. Findings from the survey responses conducted with educators indicate that Black teachers facing challenges within educational environments are encountering covert racism from multiple sources, challenges with acceptance, and battling age-old stereotypes. As the conversation shifted to various challenges, others chimed in and shared their experiences of these challenges by adding:

Alexes: The major misconceptions are stereotypes that I've encountered about Black women in educational settings is that "if you met one of them, you've met all of them" and that we all act and think a like. I challenge this stereotype through relationship building and pushing back against any pressure to be exactly like another Black women. I am all for divergent Black thought and individuality so for me it is important to show the variety of ways Black women show up into spaces unapologetically.

Salandra: I was always the "angry" Black woman, or I had an "attitude." Granted, I am not sure I addressed issues appropriately, but they were addressed! I can express myself in a way that has been seen as emotional at times especially when I care deeply about an issue. People have taken my tone to be personal when really it's more about the situation than them.

Virginia: The most common stereotype that I have encountered is labeling us as angry, single, aggressive, conspiring with other Black people, not knowledgeable, and not a team player. I have addressed each of these by communicating, working with others, building a strong rapport with my students and their families, allowing my craft to be seen letting my actions and results speak loudly.

Elissa: In working within predominantly White spaces, I experienced resentment and isolation. I beleive this was in part due to my confronting inappropriate behavior speedily, and my failure to allow myself to be diminished at the expense of being a team player. For example, one of my coworkers called me "homegirl" instead of my name when everyone else was called Mr. or Mrs. And, when I pulled him aside and spoke to him about it, he looked shocked.

Alexes continues to share more experiences of challenges.

Alexes: What my advocacy has looked like has been fighting for the freedom of Black women to show up as their authentic selves and not be placed into this box of Blackness. Unfortunately, this

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fight for Black women to show up as their authentic selves have been against other Black folks. What I've seen recently is this mindset of the black monolith and it's been disgusting in the humanizing because in the work culture that I exist in other Black folks have tried to define what it means to be Black and if you did not fit into that narrow box of Blackness then you've been criticized for comforting whiteness or protecting whiteness. Honestly, that's the dumbest thing that I've ever heard, and sadly, the past year or so, I have been deeply engrossed in a battle of allowing Black women to be accepted into spaces as who they are and not forced to change to be accepted by their own people. I don't care what a Black woman subscribes to. I don't care if they have conservative views, they have liberal views, if they quote unquote act right, if they talk white, if they think white, none of those things matter to me because I understand that we all have some decolonizing of our minds to do. In this journey, we don't attack other Black people because they are not where we are in our journey; instead, we pull them in, protect them, and love them even if they don't love the things that we love.

Disadvantages and Motivating Factors of the Superwoman Role

The Superwoman role puts Black women's health at risk because of the ongoing pressure to meet high standards at work and in our personal lives. This constant stress can lead to physical health problems like high blood pressure, headaches, and extreme tiredness, as well as mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout. Although these characteristics of the Superwoman role may have an abundance of hindrances within our lives, we explicitly define ways we are motivated to continue to show up for our students and ourselves.

Health issues. A key aspect of taking on the Superwoman Role is the potential impact on one's health. We shared numerous experiences of health problems, complications, breakdowns, and stress, stemming not only from the demands of teaching but also from the additional responsibilities and challenges associated with being a Black woman.

Salandra: Stress isn't even the word! At one point, I thought I was crazy. The constant conflicts I experienced with my white colleagues, the gas lighting, and dismissal of my experiences was taxing. I would cry when I came home from work when I was in K-12, often.

Elissa: I experienced stomach aches for almost a year straight when my department chair was intentionally diminishing my work---while using my work and presenting it as their own to staff in formal training. My expertise was not valued and was used in an extractive way. I also experienced migraine headaches 2-3 days out of the week for most of my doctoral journey being the only Black Woman in my academic cohort. I felt like I was constantly under pressure.

Maiya: During my time pursuing my PhD, I was diagnosed with Lupus. What made my case different was that I was diagnosed with Lupus after irreparable damage had been done to my kidneys, leading to End Stage Renal Disease. My doctors are pretty positive that I have had active Lupus for a very long time based on my biopsies; however, a stressful situation stemming from my temporary advisor caused me so much stress that the lupus was able to take over. My health took such a hit that I actually had to move home to receive dialysis and treatment from a team of doctors to maintain my health.

Virginia: Oh my… I have stories about my health issues and stress for days trying to be a super teacher and this strong Black woman. I remember one time when I was teaching 5th grade math, I was sick to where I couldn't eat or drink for weeks without being physically ill. I kept going to work, taking no days off because I had to push through and be there for my students. After about six weeks of this, my doctor called me literally at school teaching to inform me to get to the hospital immediately because my feet had begun to break out, which was an indicator of my organs possibly shutting down. Everyone commended me on being there for my students, still working hard, and going home and crashing because my body was overworked. I would cry every night, making new lessons for the next day in pain.

Alexes: A story I never share is the real reason I switched doctoral programs. The story I hid behind was that my oldest son was in high school and I didn't want to uproot him to move closer to the campus. And while that was true, what caused me to withdraw from my PhD program was that I had a mental breakdown as a result of trying to manage it all and do it all. I was still grieving the loss of my father figure, struggling to adjust to postpartum life with four kids and no longer being in the classroom as a teacher, and coming out of the pandemic. Everything was happening too fast all at once. I remember at that time I was adjuncting for two colleges and when it all came crumbling down, I called both of my deans and tried to quit both positions with class starting in a few days. Lucky for me, they all knew something wasn't right with me–my graduate advisor and Deans–and they knew I was in distress. When I was at a low point, they came in with solutions and saw my humanity which is a part of me that I feel is often overlooked.

Hindering. We shared ways this Superwoman role could be hindering various aspects of our lives.

Elissa: I think that my "wanting" to not bother others has impacted my ability to draw reasonable boundaries. My children always see me as "at work," even when I am with them. I have a constant feeling that I am behind, can never catch up, and will be viewed as "less than," if I am not working. I am exhausted, and I have to "work" to actually feel that I am worthy or can have reasonable boundaries.

Salandra: I believe being a superwoman is a double-edged sword. Yes, I embrace it most of the time and use it as fuel to help me accomplish goals and succeed in my daily life and struggles. At times, especially in romantic relationships, I have been accused of being "too independent." Apparently, I was so self-sufficient (at the time) I didn't leave room for my partner (at the time) to do much. I thought that was a good thing, but I guess not. It can also be stressful when you feel like you have to do everything on your own. Even when I do ask for help, sometimes, I am disappointed in the level of effort put forth and feel like I should have just done it myself. When it comes to my children and maintaining my household, I have tried to allow others to help because I have realized, I can't do everything for everybody, every day. I'm exhausted! I try to commit to self-care, but mostly that just consists of going to the nail salon or resting at home.

Alexes: People look at me and just assume that I have it all together. I am proud of where I am in life and all that I have accomplished but what people don't see is the hurt that often comes with being the person others can turn to when in need but when the tables are turned, I have no one I can go to. And I mean absolutely no one. I'm known as the person who makes stuff happen but

that is so exhausting sometimes. I want to know what it feels like to have a problem and be able to pick up the phone and call someone else to solve it. I want to be able to feel what it's like to sometimes not have to worry about everyone else then worry about me. Because people think I "got it all together," this often leads to me being overlooked or often an afterthought to my family or "friends". People always wonder why and how I do all that I do and it is simple. If I don't do it, no one else will. It is what it is, I guess.

Sister Girl as Manipulation. Unfortunately, there is often a perceived or actual lack of support among Black women, even within spaces that should foster comfort, acceptance, and collective growth. Instead of being environments of empowerment, these spaces can sometimes be polluted by manipulative behaviors, insecurities, and competition over seemingly limited opportunities. These actions are often rooted in internalized oppression and societal pressures, making it harder for Black women to navigate these environments. While the root causes are complex and shaped by external forces, these behaviors present additional challenges that undermine solidarity and progress.

Alexes: I get so giddy when I get to share space with other Black women. However, I realized fast that you can also go from "pet to threat" with them as well. This blew my mind because when I was in the K-12 space, I had great working relationships with Black women. But now, other Black women have me in therapy questioning "am I the drama?" The lies, manipulation, and behind the back stuff has been something I have never experienced in my life. And man, it hurts because these are people that I'm looking at for a bond that I unfortunately don't have with my biological sister. I came in so open and trusting in hopes that my vulnerability would lead to community and

solidarity. Instead, without going into details, I feel like I was being played so they could accomplish something but once they realized they couldn't manipulate me and I had a mind of my own, I became their enemy. And now, this Black woman who stood before them was no longer "Black" enough to be with the in crowd or I was Black with "a white mind". You know? This skinfolk that was no longer their kinfolk because I refused to be their tool. That cut deep and ruined my ability to trust. My trust has been broken so much that I am holding back on telling my story because I don't trust what another Black woman will do with my truth when it no longer serves them.

Elissa: I enter education spaces with an unrealistic expectation that my people are always my people. And that's just not the reality. I have been in spaces where it was safer for the "other" Black person to barely speak [when others were around] and disassociate themselves from my Blackness so they would not be mistreated or labeled as giving me a leg up. Although I recognize this as a survival mechanism, it makes me tremendously sad.

Maiya: It ain't really no sisterhood, at least no sisterhood I want. During one of our in-person meetings, there was a member of a D9 fraternity who recognized my backpack and wanted to say hello because he was new to the area and hadn't met many D9 members yet. After a brief exchange, he left. Following this, a professor had the audacity to lecture me on the importance of helping others take advantage of my sorority's networking power since I was so well-connected and involved. She then went on to talk about how her husband is a member of a D9 fraternity and how she recognizes how advantageous that is for him. The underlying theme there was to bring her

into the sorority—not so she can do service, not to foster sisterhood, but so she can take advantage of the resources.

Salandra: Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Unfortunately, in my experience (especially in K-12), many Black female teachers only wanted to "be Black" behind closed doors. They would rant, cry, cuss, and spill all the tea about the racist practices and microaggressions they experienced at the hands of their white colleagues (and white thinking) school leaders of color. Then, when it came time to address issues and present solutions, they were silent in meetings and often left me hanging. This saddened me more than anything as I knew they were put in a tough position: keep their jobs and be the "happy negress/mammy" or face rejection and isolation (and possible retaliation) from their white colleagues and superiors. I know that many of them needed good letters of recommendation as they were trying to be future diagnosticians, assistant principals, and administrators. I knew they didn't want to rock the boat as that would be detrimental to their careers. Even still, it was hard knowing no one had my back (not even my own people) when I spoke up about the discriminatory practices I witnessed and endured.

Virginia: Coming into academia, I was excited to meet other educated and unapologetic Black women. Sadly, I was faced with some Black women who conform to societal expectations and encouraged us to, too. I was pumped to get a closed session with a Black woman so we could do what we do best: talk, guide, and encourage each other. However, one of my first encounters with a Black professor saddened me. That professor told me, with my beautiful freshly retwisted micro locs for this occasion, to think about changing my hair or straightening it. The professor also told me about attire, how to talk, and things we should do, all while masking these subtle digs with 'as

a Black woman….." This crushed my spirit because, as a Black woman, you come into these spaces looking for the answers, the knowledge, the acceptance, and the safety. Nevertheless, that just isn't the case on many instances. The most telling part is that it indeed turns out to be your own people turning the knife in your back.

Teaching higher education. As Graduate students, Black women educators often take on lecturing roles to gain valuable experience and familiarize themselves with the demands of the professoriate and academic life. This journey can be both eye-opening and enriching, providing insights into teaching, curriculum development, mentoring, and student engagement. We share several stories from our experiences teaching a critical multicultural course to predominantly white undergraduate students, highlighting the lessons learned and the challenges faced.

Maiya: When I was teaching the course, I had a great rapport with my students, but I noticed they still needed some help interrogating their whiteness. I invited a white women sociologist to speak to them, and she explained how she interrogated her experiences. After that, it seemed like class went to hell. For most of the class, we were able to get back on track and rapport was good because they separated me from the sociologist. However, for one of the young ladies, she could not forgive me for allowing that woman to call her out. When I got my evals, I knew it was her because I only had one negative review about how I felt white people were evil.

Salandra: When teaching critical pedagogies to predominantly white pre-service teachers, resistance is real and formidable. I've had students not only disregard me as a professional but

also as a human being as well. I was threatened with "legal action" at one point if I enforced the university attendance policy as prescribed. It was crazy how many white students, who want to be teachers of diverse students, don't want to learn anything about teaching practices (like culturally relevant pedagogy) which will help them be successful.

Virginia: Teaching the class was excellent, but with some hiccups, some slight chin checks needed to be done academically. Many of the students first told me that I was their first or one of the few Black educators they had ever experienced. They would make it a point to highlight how intelligent I was, shockingly. So, during the course, the students had to complete a project interviewing someone 55 or older to capture their experience integrating schools. During one presentation, one student kept referring to Black people as 'colored folks.' I addressed it, but she kept doing it. I had to stop the presentation, and I had a short lesson on correct and respectful language, circling back to calling us Black and not colored. It was a big deal! The student wanted to keep up banter about it as if, at 20 years old, that was a term that she used regularly.

Spirituality. We spoke about relying on our faith, religion, and spirituality. We shared how our connection to a higher power helped us stay focused, remain calm during difficult times, and overcome challenges we faced in educational settings, fostering an internal force of motivation.

Virginia: It's simple… God! I look back throughout my career, especially when I literally exploded on my partner teacher because she accused me of cheating to the testing coordinator, and I am just thankful that God kept me. There was growth within me from reacting to every evil thing sent my way involving co-workers, parents, or administration. I am thankful for a family, a

praying family, and the values they have instilled within my country upbringing. Every day, I hit the ground and pray for peace. I would do that walking into my classroom, too. I do that walking on campus because I have to be prepared for every encounter. I definitely need His power to keep me grounded and to keep me pushing on even when times are difficult. Also, a great therapist with consistent therapy keeps me focused, too.

Elissa: I center myself with my faith in God. I keep Sabbath, which gives me peace and a measure of calm, hopefulness, and gratitude. I also try to spend at least 1 hour of time with my husband, usually watching a comedy special and laughing together. We like each other as friends, and this time helps to ease both of our packed lives. I know that I have been blessed with exceptional gifts, with loving people, and with good friends. I have also recently begun to incorporate at least once a month personal connection time with groups with whom I share interests; I attend my Women of Virtue brunches to talk about real-life issues like "relationships" or how unforgiveness can manifest. I also attend my sister-girl mom's group, where we eat, drink, and talk about problem-solving for our everyday issues.

Salandra: I push through with the Lord's help! That's it! I wouldn't be here today if God hadn't continually saved me! I don't judge people with mental health struggles that are more visible than mine. One thing I have learned is that we all struggle, some of us are just better at hiding it than others. I believe my superwoman characteristics shield those vulnerable parts of me from others. People would only know my true struggles, insecurities, anxieties, frustrations, flaws, etc., if I disclosed them. I often don't. Only to a select few.

Alexes: God has been my daily strength throughout my educational journey. Heck, it is because of God that I am where I am today in my educational journey. There have been times where I have tried to do this thing called life without God and I was constantly depressed and miserable. While I still have some of "those" days, starting my morning off with a 3 mile walk and prayer and worship has helped me to make it through those days and have allowed me to see God's hand in the good and bad. Heck, it's because of God's hand that I am still employed. If it weren't for me developing this morning practice of prayer and encouraging myself, it would be hard to hold back those parts of me–as a Black woman–that are not allowed in public. You know? The angry, frustrated, sad, and "emotional" parts. Because I can't let others see me like that–well, I don't trust others to see me like that–I have to give it to God before it's time to start my work day.

Maiya: I've found God again. I strayed away in the beginning semesters of my doctorate program. I was giving myself credit for things that God had done. Like the old folks say, I was smelling myself. But in restoring my faith and my walk with God, I have found purpose, which gives me motivation; it gives me joy to where I actually enjoy getting the work done because I know I am helping people, and it brought me to a place where I feel that my goals and God's plans align.

The findings above demonstrate the various, complex, yet interconnected experiences of Black women educators. Our reflections revealed the dynamic themes and sub-themes that encompass our racialized and gendered experiences noting how our Blackness often overshadowed our gender as standards of white femininity were held up against as a barometer of measurement.

In the next section, we will further the discussion on such complexities and revisit our initial research inquiries in hopes of new insights and reflections.

Discussion

The Black educators in this article shared their perspectives and experiences on managing life, family, schooling, and career while within the confines of the Superwoman role. They described what the role means to them, identified the factors contributing to its complexity, and discussed their challenges and drawbacks in fulfilling this demanding role within an array of educational settings. Returning to the research questions, our key themes can be fully actualized within our initial inquiries. In reference to the first research question, how do Black women educators understand their identity and personal experiences in challenging racial environments within educational spaces, we found that our perceptions of the Superwoman role showed up through a duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, reluctance to show vulnerability, responsibility to assist others, and pressure to suppress emotions.

The "Strong Black Woman" trope embedded within SWS has been both a source of pride and an unbearable weight for us. We are often celebrated for our resilience and ability to persevere through adversity. We are seen as tireless, unbreakable figures who can do it all. Unfortunately, this carries significant emotional, physical, and psychological costs (Leath, 2019; Wheeler, 2022). The pressure to maintain the image of invincibility often resulted in burnout, poor mental health, and an overall diminished well-being. Such realities highlight the urgency in dismantling the unrealistic and harmful expectations we contend with.

Although we aimed to find educational spaces which effectively served us as Black women faculty, staff, and students, our educational environments were more often than not unsuitable for such outcomes to occur (Gist, 2017). We were fraught with an onslaught of interpersonal and structural racism which put us at intense physical and emotional risk and threatened to push us out of education all together (Kohli et al., 2022). There were numerous instances where we felt others were trying to put us "in our place" by enforcing societal expectations of what a Black woman should think, act, and engage as. In overt and covert efforts to maintain whiteness within education (Bennett et al., 2019), our Superwoman roles were at times amplified to the detriment of our true vulnerable selves.

Our second research question regarding what insights do educational researchers gain about Black women educators through a collaborative autoenthnographic research approach reveals three contextual factors identified as influencing contributors to the Superwoman role. Those factors included identity, proving oneself, and challenges such as acceptance, racism, stereotypes, and facing other Black people. Our autoethnographic approach exposes these themes through the use of the inclusion of our complex narratives about our social, cultural, and epistemological positionality within. Historically, the SWS is deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery and systemic oppression (Braveman et al., 2022). In response to this generational emotional trauma (Burnett-Zeigler, 2021), we contend with modern day perceptions that Black women educators should handle anything without complaint. Whether self-inflicted or induced by environmental factors within our particular contexts, we are dehumanized and denied the right to express pain, struggle, or emotional needs. Our identities as Black women educators carry a range of emotions and lack of support from those inside and outside our perspective circles can exacerbate such emotional realities. Positioning an autoethnographic lens throughout this inquiry

also allows us to release some of the hidden and underlying trauma we may have been suppressing. This process of recollecting on our experiences has been eye-opening, therapeutic and cathartic all at once. Releasing the tension and pressures from holding onto racialized trauma has been healing. The autoethnographic approach has been integral to this process.

In answering our third research question pertaining to what thoughts do Black women educators share about their teaching experiences, and what keeps them motivated, we found the Superwoman role may have an abundance of hindrances within our lives as educators. As such, we explicitly define ways we are able to continue to show up for our students and ourselves which influences our motivations. On the whole, the Superwoman role puts Black women's health at risk because of the ongoing pressure to meet high standards at work and in our personal lives. This constant stress can lead to physical health problems like high blood pressure, headaches, and extreme tiredness, as well as mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout (Erving et al., 2024). The pressure to conform to the Superwoman image places immense emotional and psychological burdens on Black women. This creates a dangerous cycle where the fear of judgment or societal rejection forces us to suffer in silence.

On the other hand, despite these circumstances, Black women educators continue to draw from their sources of motivation to help them stay the course. Our connection to a higher power helped us stay focused, remain calm during difficult times, and overcome challenges we faced in educational settings. Maiya pointed out that refocusing on her spirituality was a turning point when she states:

I've found God again. I strayed away in the beginning semesters of my doctorate

program. I was giving myself credit for things that God had done. Like the old folks say, I

was smelling myself. But in restoring my faith and my walk with God, I have found

purpose, which gives me motivation.

Within this context, centering ourselves within the spiritual realm creates an opportunity for rejuvenation, refocus, and an internal motivator to push through our harmful racialized and gendered experiences so that we may continue to press toward our goals. However, even within our spiritual centering, scholarship continues to point to a need to remedy the negative experiences of Black women educators in all educational settings (Hawkins, 2021; Mahatmya et al., 2022; Ogden, 2024). Our discussion and findings support continued investigations in this area as although retelling our experiences has been therapeutic, it is not complete without resolutions coming into focus as well. With the conclusion of this discussion, we suggest a few recommendations for P-12 and higher educational settings interested in committing to more equitable and positive environments for Black women educators.

Recommendations

Supporting Black women educators in schools requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges both the unique challenges they face and the significant contributions they make to the education system. To ensure their success and well-being, educational stakeholders must implement and be committed to targeted strategies to foster inclusivity and positive professional support. The following recommendations aim to create a more equitable and sustainable environment for Black women educators which not only benefits them but the broader school community as well.

Create support/affinity groups for Black women. Black women need spaces where they can connect with others who understand their unique struggles, fostering environments that encourage

emotional honesty and mutual care (Mosely, 2018). Due to the psychological and emotional challenges they face in educational settings, having a committed space/time such as an affinity group sets the stage for Black women educators to openly (without repercussion) their experiences and obtain guidance and support from other Black women in similar positions who can offer guidance and support. *Believe Black women.* Our stories and experiences matter. Allies including, family members, friends, employers, and institutions, must take responsibility for not only hearing the voice of Black women but challenging the harmful contexts many Black women educators endure by promoting equity and emotional well-being. Systems of education must be committed to cultivating environments that honor the experiences and world views of Black women educators. The common practice of dismissing or gaslighting their experiences needs to cease as it only exacerbates racial inequities when they are ignored. *Invest in equity initiatives within educational spaces.* As equity initiatives continue to be a point of contention in educational realms, stakeholders need to prioritize even more the importance of creating and maintaining positive and inclusive educational environments for not only Black women but students and families as well. Organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion efforts are better prepared to retain their Black women educators and recruit more highly qualified individuals. These recommendations represent only a slew of the efforts needed to reverse the trend of emotionally, psychologically, and physically harmful educational spaces for Black women educators.

Conclusion

This collaborative autoethnographic inquiry unveiled the continued need to elevate the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of Black women educators in P-12 and higher

educational settings. Through the lens of the Superwoman Schema, we expound upon the double-edge sword of the strong Black woman. The mental, physical, and psychological shapeshifting that is a constant obstacle in the well-being of Black women educators, proves to be a superpower and a hindrance simultaneously. The myth of the Strong Black Woman may have been born out of a history of resilience and survival, but now is a source of profound harm. Why do we have to keep shapeshifting in order to be successful educators in U.S. public schools? As our experiences show, Black women are not superhuman; we are individuals with complex emotions, needs, and limits.

Should we keep up this magic trick which seems to do more of a disservice to us than to those who watch us contort ourselves out of recognition? No! We instead resolve to keep ourselves whole and authentic and still be the advocates for educational liberation we have always been. Even still, we don't have all the answers to these questions and solutions are still on the horizon. Dismantling the myths of the SWS requires collective action, both from within circles of Black women, educational spaces, and society at large. We look forward to a world where Black women, particularly Black women educators are valued for their full humanity, not just their strength. However, one thing we do know, that no matter what comes our way, no matter what obstacles we face in these public education streets, we gon' always keep STANDING on business!!!!!

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