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“From Whence Cometh My Help?”: Exploring Black Doctoral Student Persistence

Melanie M. Acosta, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education and Literacy at the University of Alabama. The aims of her scholarship are to improve the teaching and learning experiences of African American students and teachers through improved teaching and teacher education. Her work is featured in such journals as *Urban Education*, *The Urban Review*, and *African American Learners*. Prior to her work in higher education, Melanie was an elementary school teacher and a community organizer for a grassroots parent empowerment group.

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Thomas E. Moore, PhD, is a Manager for City Year Inc., in Dallas, Texas. City Year is an educational nonprofit organization designed to provide students in under performing schools with academic, behavioral and social-emotional support. In this capacity, he works with teachers, instructional coaches and administrators to create and implement classroom, grade-level and school wide interventions. His research objective is to improve educational experiences for African American students through the continued development of culturally relevant administrative practices.
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Bridgette G. Johnson is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida. Prior to entering her doctoral program at UF, she was an early childhood educator for seven years in Paterson, NJ, formerly an Abbott school district. Her interests include teacher efficacy, pertaining to teachers of students in the low-incidence population, inclusive education, assistive technology, and social justice in education. Currently, her research is focused on teacher self-efficacy as it pertains to teachers serving students with disabilities.

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The recent protest by Black students, student–athletes, and faculty at the University of Missouri is a blaring indicator of the tenuous state of race relations on college campuses nationwide. Students and faculty protested the university’s lack of consideration and treatment of racial issues on campus, and they are not alone in their fight. Many Black students have similarly protested the lack of culturally diverse presence and voice in the daily happenings of college life, as well as race-related hate crimes and microaggressions on their respective college campuses. This is particularly the case for Black students attending predominantly White colleges (PWIs) and is true for Black students pursuing doctoral degrees. Researchers found that Black doctoral students preparing for careers in higher education endure a particularized doctoral socialization experience based on their racial and cultural identification. Students reported difficulties in establishing mentoring relationships, securing adequate funding to support doctoral studies, frustrations with faculty who provided a lack of academic support related to research and academic writing, and feeling like an outsider. Black doctoral students also reported dealing with institutional and individual racism, such as cultural isolation and tokenism. This was manifested in experiences such as the expectation that students be the representative for their entire race or cultural group, lack of mentoring, and lack of diverse perspectives in the curriculum. 

Despite this often racially hostile context, scores of Black graduate students are persisting and earning their PhDs. Researchers have identified factors such as intrinsic motivation, self-determination, and inner strength as contributing to Black doctoral students’ persistence in their programs. However, the scope of these factors were unexplored in ways that connect the racialized context of the institution to culture-specific attributes like motivation and inner strength. Such an underemphasis heightens the seductive tendency to homogenize Black doctoral student persistence within a universal doctoral socialization context. This colorblind approach fuels the assumption that race and racism are not influential factors in the experiences of Black doctoral students. Therefore, we argue that racial and ethnic neutrality in understanding Black doctoral student experiences perpetuates institutional inequity and ignores the authentic needs of Black doctoral students, thus contributing to the limited presence of Blacks in the professoriate.
Findings from this study show three major themes that highlight the factors Black doctoral students believed contribute to their persistence: 

- **Authenticity in student–faculty relationships**
- **Systemic institutional support**
- **Psychocultural tools**

The Black doctoral students we interviewed perceived the kind of mentoring relationships that contributed to their persistence were those based on authenticity. They agreed that the kind of authenticity in relationships with faculty that was a positive contributor to their persistence occurred when faculty had a critical understanding of the racialized context of the “ivory tower” as well as how Blacks were positioned therein. This can be characterized as **sociopolitical authenticity** in the mentorship. They also perceived that academic authenticity was an important factor that contributed to persistence in their doctoral program. The definition of authenticity in this context can be described as a critical assessment of skills in terms of ways to improve, or **academic authenticity**. Black doctoral students also expressed a desire to be systemically integrated into their institution because the lack of such integration in their respective departments played a major factor in their ability to persist in their programs. They conveyed that they wanted to be taken seriously as prospective scholars, which meant that administrators and faculty needed to be proactive and thoughtful in providing them with support.

Finally, the data showed that the existence and prominence of liberatory consciousness within the participants themselves greatly contributed to their persistence. Liberatory consciousness relates to a state of mind that is focused on freedom and democracy, that considers the larger sociopolitical impact of behaviors, events, actions, and is an ideology that maintains a vision of democracy and equity as a central purpose for education. In this study, a liberatory ideology for these students seemed to provide the mental fortitude to survive on a daily basis, and it fueled their persistence. Listening to the voices of three Black doctoral students revealed that their persistence was supported by a distinctive cultural consciousness connected to their ethnic origins and shaped by their racialized identities.

**Moving Towards Action:**

What Administrators and Faculty Must Do

Faculty and administrators in schools and colleges of education must create space and opportunities for race work within the department. Explicit attention to racial issues on the part of institutions can be a significant support mechanism for Black doctoral students. In addition, faculty and higher education administrators must seek to understand how racial domination in higher education (i.e., prevalence of an ethnocentric curriculum, limited presence of faculty of color, allocation of funds for research and programs, etc.) impacts programs designed to support Black doctoral students. Finally, administrators should rethink the interpersonal supports they offer Black doctoral students. Academic mentoring is paramount to a student’s educational success, especially at the doctoral level (e.g., publication, research, funding, and graduation). Faculty and administrators must create college-wide initiatives and incentives to promote faculty mentoring for Black doctoral students, and professional development activities must be created to help faculty develop mentoring expertise.

Promoting racial and cultural diversity on college campuses includes cultivating a cultural and racially diverse faculty and administration. This means that supporting the professional development of culturally and racially diverse doctoral students, who will one day become college faculty and administrators, is of great importance. For institutions of higher education, the persistence of students is critical to the mission of the institution. Specifically, for Black doctoral students, persistence is a key element that supports these students to excel in higher education.

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