

A Call For Black Superintendents To Document Their Experiences Through Autoethnography

By Dr. Shawn Joseph

Summary

In this article, Dr. Shawn Joseph, a former superintendent, helps readers understand the importance of systemically documenting their experiences.

The project illustrates the importance of using culturally responsive practices highlighting:

- Double consciousness
- Counter narratives

Guiding Questions

After reading the article, consider the following questions?

1. What resonated with you?
2. What did this spark in you or inspire you to think about?
3. What was an Aha moment for you while reading?
4. What is 1 thing you will do as a result of reading this piece? Explain.

Don't have time to view this project? Here is the synopsis sheet with what we learned.

In the video of the article summary, Dr. Joseph states,

Black superintendents are dying in the field left and right. The average tenure of Black superintendent is less than [1.2 years](#). We're dying and we don't know why, because Black superintendents tend to not have the ability to tell the tale of the story. We don't understand the true tale of the hunt until the lion is able to tell the tale. An autoethnography gives us the tools to tell it. ... This is a problem that is worthy of solving.

In his article, he reminds,

- Black superintendents face prejudices, job-related pressures, higher expectations, harder work, and atypical challenges (Simmons, 2013; Wilson & Kowalski, 2017).
- Black superintendents face particular types of racism-related challenges. Frequently hired to increase equity in districts, such efforts often produce backlash in the White community (Bojorquez & Alyberty, 2022; Green, 2021; Guerra, 2020; Kingkade, 2021).

As a result, Dr. Joseph argues the need for Black superintendents to document their experiences, specifically focusing on how race and racism impact their work. He suggests this can lead to change in the superintendent pipeline and how we recruit, educate, and retain them.

The Importance of Black superintendents

- Black students do better when they see and learn from Black leaders.
- Black superintendents are only 3% of the population despite the 14% of Black students in the U.S. population.
- Black superintendents are more likely to understand the cultural needs of their children, hire Black teachers who “can leverage their affirming and reflexive pedagogical techniques to build reciprocal relationships with students.”
- Black students who had two Black teachers by third grade were 32% more likely to enroll in college (Perry, 2019).
- Black leaders demonstrate higher expectations and cultural understanding of Black students than non-Black leaders (Castro et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Hansen & Quintero, 2018).
- Black educators and leaders serve as “mirrors” to students that allow them to see reflections of themselves in leadership.

- Black superintendents are also more likely to hire teachers and staff who reflect student identities and are less likely to criminalize student misconduct (Castro et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Hansen & Quintero, 2018).
- Educational leaders with identities that reflect the students they serve are more likely to lead their schools with culturally responsive strategies that have a positive influence on students' well-being and academic outcomes (Castro et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Hansen & Quintero, 2018).

Why Autoethnography

As Dr. Joseph states, "We've normalized the trauma. We see Black superintendents losing their jobs every 2 years." As a result, "we can't keep allowing the oppressor to continue to beat us, because they will think it's ok, because we're not saying anything about it. See some key points taken from the article:

- Through the autoethnographic method, superintendents can "document, examine, and inquire into their past experiences as well as their thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and any lingering effects associated with these experiences."
- Autoethnography allows leaders to "deepen understanding of social phenomena in organizations, families, and communities, typically by focusing on a troubling experience (Edwards, 2021)."
- "The goal is to make contributions to social science that provide insights into what it was like to endure a particular lived experience and provide greater meaning to a cultural experience for others (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2016)."
 - "autoethnography can be used to describe successes and joy of the Black educator experience in spite of systemic racism (Love, 2019)."
 - "The findings have the potential to help readers learn how to navigate similar situations and empower them with information about what strategies should be employed to enhance their own experiences in a similar cultural context (Adams et al., 2017; Wall, 2016)."
- Autoethnography allows the writer to get through their own trauma by helping others.

Tool for Black Superintendents Documenting their experiences

Let's get started. Use this tool to help navigate your superintendent tenure for an equitable school/district.

Keep a journal reflecting on day to day experiences

1. Make detailed entries in a personal journal, updated at least weekly. See the example below.
2. Keeping an ongoing account of incidents, stories, and events as well as any thoughts, feelings, and personal perspectives about these interactions documents the experience, allowing a superintendent to process weekly successes and challenges, particularly as it relates to race and how race impacts their ability to lead.
 - a. For example, the journal can highlight any clearly racialized incidents the superintendent encounters while operating in the leadership role. When updating this journal, superintendents should recount any pertinent conversations with as much fidelity as possible and write in a way that could be instructive to other Black superintendents.
 - b. Dr. Joseph kept both a formal journal for the board (weekly updates) and a personal journal.
3. In addition to keeping the journal, superintendents should save meeting minutes, newspaper articles, and evidence of news stories that will help them to recall and remember specific details, dates, people, thoughts, and feelings generated by these events

Day in the life of Black Superintendent

How was the day?

Thoughts	Feelings
Perspectives	Racial Implications

Anything else?
