

Towards equitable leadership development: active ingredients of a culturally responsive program for Black community leaders

Towards
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leadership
development

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Abstract

Purpose – The current study evaluated (1) characteristics of the community leadership development program associated with successful participant recruitment, (2) active ingredients that promoted fellow engagement and program completion and (3) how the program addressed blackness and racism.

Design/methodology/approach – Individual interviews were conducted with a representative subset of former program fellows.

Findings – Results indicated that offering training in small cohorts and matching fellows with individual mentors promoted program interest. Program strengths and unique ingredients included that the program was primarily led by people from the Black community, program malleability, and that the program was a partnership between fellows and leadership. Additionally, the program was responsive to fellows' needs such as by adding a self-care component. Fellows also noted dedicated space and time to discuss race and racism. Results offer a unique theoretical perspective to guide leadership development away from the uniform or standardized approach and toward one that fosters diversity and equity in leadership.

Originality/value – Altogether, this work demonstrates how leadership development programs can be participant-informed and adapted to participants' social and cultural needs.

Keywords Qualitative research, Race, Leadership education, African American community

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Racial inequities proliferated through structural racism pose a significant problem in the United States (US) (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Black leadership is a

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We further wish to acknowledge those who dedicate their time to community leadership training, namely the leadership, faculty, and staff leaders within the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute, as well as the Bunting family, and the instructors and program directors and the fellows themselves. And we thank the research assistants – Ms. Christina Knepper and Ms. Ericka Muempfer – who conducted qualitative interviews. This work would not be possible without this institute and these incredible professionals.

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critical component in civil rights work and efforts to reduce racial inequities. Many community leaders working to address inequities within Black communities in health, education, housing and legal systems have few affordable training opportunities, and serve with limited financial, technical and leadership support. Use of a more standardized and uniform leadership development model is commonplace, but this approach is limited. The current study aimed to examine whether our proposed framework of Black leadership growth is supported and to elucidate the critical aspects of leadership development that can promote equity through identified best practices in leadership development programming for Black leaders who may have training needs or expectations that differ from the typical and more standardized approach. We used data Black community leaders' incorporating voices and experiences in this work.

Theories in leadership studies assert that leaders can essentially be born or made (e.g. Bass, 1990; Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Fiedler & Chemers, 1974), yet those who work as leaders are predominantly White, male, cisgender, without a disability and heterosexual. The norm in leadership development trainings is to center on the needs and strengths of those who historically have been in power, maintaining a culture of racial inequity and oppression. To date, we are aware of just one leadership development program with content specifically tailored for Black leaders who serve the Black community (Fix & Atnafou-Boyer, 2021). Opportunities to learn from participating fellows could prove transformative in the field of leadership development studies.

It is now recognized that to address complex problems, effective leadership, humility and creativity are needed (Sowcik, Andenoro, & Council, 2017), so too is lived experience or perspective (Kniffin & Patterson, 2019). Conversations about racism and equity in leadership are not a given in leadership development programming. Targeted discussions about and across "diversity and difference" (Dugan *et al.*, 2012) are an invaluable contributor to leadership development; however, this pedagogy is often omitted from leadership development curricula. Moreover, if addressed at all in leadership development, a "diversity and difference" curriculum is included as a supplemental component and not core to leadership development.

The importance of Black leadership

Black leadership is necessary to promote a shift toward equity and social justice. Indeed, Black leaders in countries like the US have lived experience that uniquely positions them to promote a culture of anti-racism (Kniffin & Patterson, 2019; Ladkin, 2021; Nixon, 2019). Black leadership may guide organizations and institutions to more carefully examine and respond to how race (and other social identifiers) may intersect and permeate the institutional culture (López, 2003; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). As noted by Ladkin and Patrick (2022), "much current leadership theorizing is actually 'White' leadership theorizing and does not speak to the totality of how leadership is expressed." Liu (2019) discusses the history of leadership studies and how it became a source and maintainer of inequity, which suggests leadership from individuals who are, for example, racialized as Black, Indigenous, Asian and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is necessary to disrupt the norm of Whiteness in leadership studies.

Critical race theory and Black leadership development

In the current study, our conceptualization of the importance of naming anti-Black racism in leadership development is also informed by critical race theory (CRT) (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989). Altogether, through the lens of CRT, we can illuminate the harms of racism within leadership studies, while emphasizing the importance of elevating Black leaders to challenge the status quo. Aligning with several (generally agreed upon) CRT tenets, we recognize that racism is embedded within all US systems, and therefore appreciate the need to consider race

and racism in leadership development programs. And we recognize the need to recognize and resist deeply entrenched influences of normalization, solipsism and ontological expansionism of Whiteness within leadership studies as explained by [Ladkin and Patrick \(2022\)](#).

Again, through the lens of the CRT, Black leaders can offer a counternarrative to mainstream narratives within the US ([Peters & Miles Nash, 2021](#)), which can ultimately transform policy and practice ([Buras, 2013](#)). Through providing counternarratives, Black leaders can elevate voices of those that have been silenced and challenge existing systems. And Black leaders can promote social justice and democratic community, capitalizing on both constraints and resources used collectively within leadership contexts ([Ospina & Foldy, 2009](#)).

Paralleling countless other academic fields and disciplines of practice, widely integrated and studied theories of leadership development omit critical examination of race ([Ladkin & Patrick, 2022](#); [McCauley & Palus, 2021](#); [Vogel, Reichard, Batistić, & Černe, 2021](#)). Existing theories of leadership development tend toward maintenance of the existing norms of Whiteness (e.g. [Ospina & Foldy, 2009](#)). Yet, the field of leadership studies is being increasingly (albeit slowly) influenced by CRT. Indeed, there is extant literature on Black leadership development that emphasizes it as an inherently beneficial endeavor ([Peters & Miles Nash, 2021](#); [Smith, 2021](#)).

Developing a framework of leadership development beyond the status quo

Theory and research demonstrate five integral aspects of leadership developmental programs. These include (1) understanding and effectively working within complex systems, (2) ethics-centered decision making, (3) highlighting the importance of – and strengthening – emotional intelligence, (4) fostering resilience and adaptability, and (5) culturally informed ([Allen, 2018](#); [Caver & Livers, 2021](#); [Kniffin & Patterson, 2019](#); [Watkins et al., 2017](#)) and participant-informed ([Schweiger, Müller, & Güttel, 2020](#)). The critical role of recognizing and responding to what one brings as a leader—and finding ways to integrate one’s individual identity into the collective—is central to the success of community leadership programs ([Caver & Livers, 2021](#); [Kniffin & Patterson, 2019](#)). In practice, this critical element is overlooked and perhaps included in trainings as a supplement or afterthought, maintaining the status quo.

There are some clear guidelines about best practices and foci in leadership development programs worth noting (for a more comprehensive overview, see [Kjellström, Ståle, and Törnblom \(2020\)](#)). Yet working knowledge about active ingredients in leadership development programs (especially knowledge informed by voices of emerging leaders who identify as Black) is limited in two key ways. First, many evaluations of active ingredients are centered around individual fields or organizations (so designed for employees in a particular company or working in a specific field such as health care) (e.g. [Daniëls, Hondeghem, & Dochy, 2019](#); [Holt, Hall, & Gilley, 2018](#); [Parker & Carroll, 2009](#); [Pinnington, 2011](#)). Second, many leadership programs do not include a specific curriculum for working with emerging leaders (or leaders at any developmental stage) from historically oppressed communities or to leaders serving historically oppressed communities like the Black community ([Fix & Atnafou-Boyer, 2021](#)). Members of Black communities in the US and beyond have been overlooked as partners. Likewise, Black community leaders have been overlooked as participants in leadership development programming for too long. Key curricular needs to serve Black communities include discussion of Blackness and Whiteness, structural racism, and anti-Black racial bias. But adding these components independent of incorporating Black leaders as trainers and participants in trainings would be a mistake. Given historical and structural racism in the US Black leaders are liable to have unique experiences compared with non-Black leaders ([Nixon, 2019](#)). The voices of Black leaders must be elevated to improve existing trainings and develop new trainings.

While limited, existing theory and the body of literature specific to overcoming gender bias in leadership studies offers a useful starting point for considering a theoretical approach to addressing race and racism in leadership development work. The gender consciousness framework (Bierema, 2017) recognize the need for individual-level and society-level change to achieve active organizational change to promote leadership equity. In Bierema’s (2017) gender consciousness framework, advancement of women as leaders will take intentional effort, through creation of new organizational structures and societal transformation. We argue that so too will creation of new organizational structures – including targeted trainings – advance Black leaders.

A radical framework of Black leadership growth

French et al. (2020) developed a framework of radical healing in the field of counseling psychology that has principles which clearly intersect with goals of intentionally advancing leadership development training opportunities among Black leaders (see Figure 1). Similar to Bierema’s (2017) theory, the framework of radical healing in communities of color recognizes the need for individual-level and society-level change to achieve equity. In the context of Black leadership growth, we modified this framework recognizing that individuals working in a leadership capacity must learn to navigate systems of oppression while at the same time promoting ideas about justice and liberation among those they lead and in their everyday practices and work. Support for this adapted framework within leadership development studies would be indicated by Black leaders (1) recognizing a need for strength and resistance in the face of oppression, (2) demonstrating critical consciousness about historical and ongoing racism across systems, (3) embracing cultural authenticity and self-knowledge as leaders, (4) implementing strategies to achieve and maintain emotional and social support as leaders and (5) demonstrating radical hope. Radical hope refers to the notion that one has the capacity to affect the change they want to see and that it is possible to affect change, requiring vision and courage (French et al., 2020). Our proposed framework incorporates two additional components critical to leadership success: field knowledge and leadership skills development.

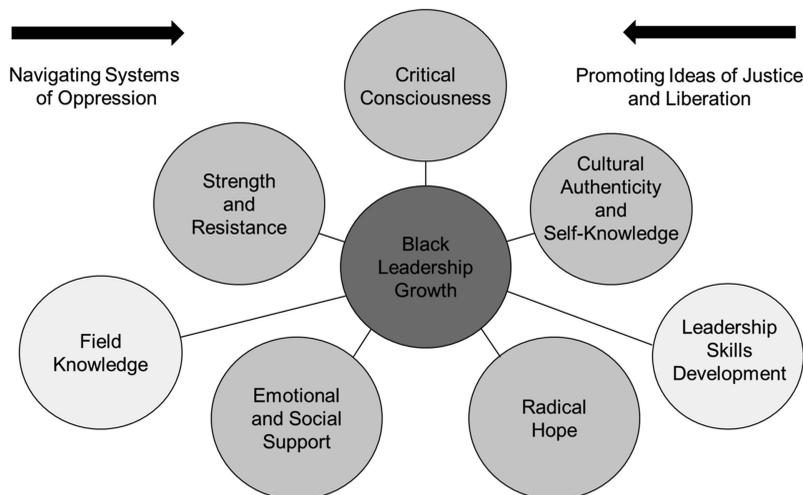


Figure 1.
A radical framework of Black leadership growth adapted from French et al. (2020)

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The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program

An example of a leadership development training program that aims to center Black voices and experiences is the Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program (BNLP). The BNLP is a community-university partnership developed to strengthen community leadership skills among Black leaders serving Black communities. Informed by theoretically derived and empirically supported best practices, the BNLP offers fellows a stipend to complete weekly leadership development sessions where they focus on skills and knowledge building for a year. Fellows are required to sign a contract indicating that they will complete the program to secure that stipend and enroll in the BNLP. Fellows are also connected to an individual mentor and provided with structured networking opportunities and support in working toward their community leadership goals. For more information on the BNLP curriculum and associated outcomes, please see *redacted for review*. At the time we wrote this paper, all BNLP participants self-identified their race as Black. However, while the BNLP targets Black leaders and those serving the Black community, its curriculum was not created to train Black leaders alone; the curriculum and discussion foci iteratively evolved over time to meet the needs of Black leaders.

The BNLP was founded with the ultimate goal of developing the capacity of neighborhood leaders in East and West Baltimore, Maryland to ultimately improve community health and wellbeing and specifically address community priorities. To date, these have included: reducing community-level traumatic stress symptoms, maximizing educational attainment, increasing neighborhood safety and security, and strengthening neighborhood services to improve community health outcomes. Thus, the BNLP is intended to not only serve emerging leaders participating in the year-long program but also the individuals within the communities in which they work. Program fellows often work with community organizations (or plan to develop their own community-based non-profit organization) when they enter the BNLP. In turn, the organizations with which BNLP fellows are affiliated have a strengthened capacity to successfully implement or enhance projects within their communities.

Current study

Research and theory suggest we need to move away from a “cookie cutter” approach to leadership development training. The current study sought to test whether our proposed framework of Black leadership growth is supported by data from program participants in a leadership development program that centers systemic racism. It also aimed to clarify active ingredients of a unique leadership development training for Black leaders working in Black communities (the BNLP) through participants’ voices. In the current study, we interviewed a subset of BNLP fellows, during which we observed themes that informed our understanding of (1) what drew fellows to the BNLP, (2) what aspects of the BNLP promoted matriculation through the BNLP and (3) how fellows perceived the importance of addressing blackness and racism in community leadership curricula. All analyses were exploratory (and thus rooted in grounded theory), but emergent themes also were guided by our adapted radical framework of Black leadership growth. Our collected data ultimately provided important information about ways to reconsider the status quo approach of leadership development trainings toward models that promote equity and critical examination of racism within leadership and beyond.

Methods

Program description

The BNLP was initiated in 2017 within the Johns Hopkins University – Urban Health Institute to equip Black local community advocates with skills, tools and knowledge to affect community-level change. The BNLP provides a structured evidence-based curriculum with

six core focus areas: (1) leadership skills, (2) communication, (3) deconstructing racism, (4) policy and advocacy, (5) relationship building and (6) systems building. Each of the focus areas includes critical review and active discussion of the influence of systemic racism and inequity.

Participants and procedures

The current study uses data collected from individual interviews with a subset of BNLFP fellows. Seven BNLFP fellows were recruited through an emailed study flyer distributed to the BNLFP fellow listserv (which includes current and former fellows). The entire research evaluation team was not directly affiliated with the BNLFP but did attend one BNLFP event to help guild familiarity with former and current fellows. Those interested in participating were instructed to email a study contact to schedule an interview and were interviewed by one of two interviewers using a semi-structured interview guide (see [Supplemental Appendix](#)). To ensure confidentiality, participants met with the interviewers via a virtual platform on their own time and were assigned aliases to use in de-identified transcripts. Interviewers were trained research assistants with previous experience collecting qualitative data – neither was directly involved in BNLFP. The two interviewers self-identified as a Black cisgender woman with a training background in cultural anthropology and as a biracial cisgender woman with a training background in social work.

Six interviews are needed to derive meta themes from participant responses ([Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006](#)). To ensure sufficient gender and cohort representation and achieve saturation, an additional (seventh) fellow was recruited and interviewed. All participants identified their race as Black; three identified their gender as female. Participants provided consent prior to data collection. All individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and covered content regarding experiences during the BNLFP, BNLFP strengths and weaknesses, community work relevant to the BNLFP, and BNLFP educational material. Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the co-authors.

Data analysis

Using grounded theory ([Strauss & Corbin, 1997](#)), and informed by [French et al.'s \(2020\)](#) framework of radical healing, a codebook was developed based on emerging concepts and common patterns identified after reviewing a random sample of three transcripts. Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data were informed by the radical framework of Black leadership growth framework adapted from [French et al. \(2020\)](#). See [Figure 1](#) for an overview of our adapted framework of Black leadership growth. Categories and subcategories were compared and rearranged or combined as needed to ensure that the concepts accurately reflected the assigned category. This process was completed until saturation was reached. That is, coding resulted in no new categories and all data were accounted for within the main categories and subcategories. All main categories and subcategories in the resulting codebook were given operational definitions to increase coders' reliability and aid in the coding process. Coders' reliability was tested by having two researchers independently code a randomly selected individual interview and compare codes assigned for each segment. During this process, disagreements on code assignment were discussed and, if needed, definition of coding categories was refined. This process was deemed complete after the research dyad established an agreement above 80% ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)). Next, researchers independently completed the remaining coding of the individual interview transcripts using Dedoose Version 8.1.10 (2018).

We established trustworthiness in multiple ways ([Padgett, 2008](#); [Shenton, 2004](#)). We conducted interviews until saturation was achieved. In addition, members of our research

used member checking during interviews by asking participants for clarification to ensure accuracy of interpretations. Finally, our team held debriefing meetings to collaboratively confirm consensus on codes and develop and refine themes and sub-themes.

We also were reflexive in our coding approach, acknowledging that developing an understanding of our data required team members to have awareness of our own lived experiences and presuppositions. Research team members had a range of varied personal and professional experiences. Using a reflexive process, we each recognized, examined and challenged how our values and lived experiences impacted our understanding of the data and responses to participants during interviews.

Four parent themes emerged across the seven individual interviews with BNLP fellows. More specifically, the four themes were (1) aspects of the BNLP that promoted fellows to apply, (2) factors that encouraged fellows to complete the full yearlong BNLP curriculum, (3) strengths of the BNLP promoting matriculation, and (4) race and bias and how the BNLP's work with Black leaders responded to a clear need in the community. Multiple subthemes emerged within some parent themes, and our posited framework of Black leadership growth was largely supported across themes. Results from individual interviews are presented below by theme.

Results

What attracts such strong applicants to the BNLP

Fellows were asked what initially drew them to the BNLP. Altogether, Black leadership growth was at the forefront of fellows' decision-making process concerning applying to the BNLP. Some responses highlighted the importance of not only acknowledging race in leadership programs but also of intentionally supporting Black leadership growth and development through recognition of the unique experiences and needs of Black leaders. Two fellows mentioned the limited opportunities for community leadership training specific to working in the Black community. Also, in fielding this question, one fellow described how experiences in the BNLP exemplified what had appealed to them about the program in the first place. They described how the BNLP instructors encouraged Black leadership growth saying, "I had never been asked or pushed like that before. No one's ever asked [about my drive to succeed as a Black leader]. Especially being a Black man, no one has ever asked me that."

Two other fellows recognized a need for Black leadership growth and connection and sought out the BNLP because similar training opportunities were unavailable in their workplace or elsewhere. For example, one fellow described seeking out emotional and social support and Black leadership skills development, said:

I was drawn to the program... really it was about the networks for me. So, like being a part of a young professional network. . . I saw [the BNLP] as an opportunity to get leadership skills in a way that I didn't feel like I was getting at work. And training very deliberately outside of like the academic world, because yeah just recognizing there were skills that I thought I should be getting on the job in the workplace that I just wasn't getting.

Finally, it is worth noting that four fellows experienced an increased desire to be selected as a BNLP fellow once they began the application, demonstrating radical hope in their ability to engage and make real and lasting change as Black community leaders. One fellow stated,

I started filling out the application and I'm like, 'They're really asking some really in-depth questions.' And I said, 'This might be something a little bit different. . . I want this [to be a BNLP fellow]. Yeah, I want this. Yeah'

How the BNLP kept fellows engaged for a full year

The BNLP requires full-day weekly commitment for 34 weeks plus attendance at two weekend retreats. Our team asked fellows about factors that contributed to them completing this time-intensive program – a metric of program retention. Three fellows described how the program content that increased field-specific knowledge was so engaging, motivating, and relevant that they easily maintained motivation to complete the entire BNLP curriculum. For instance, one fellow said,

It was very intriguing. It was very educational about the times we're living in, the city that we were living in. It was just so much information that was shared. It was like, you couldn't wait until the next Friday to get there, to get the information.

As an example of how well-received the curriculum was, a second fellow said, "Well, I loved it. . . I learned more in [one instructor's] class probably than I learned in a semester in grad school."

Along similar lines, two fellows described the relevance of BNLP content to their leadership development and current work and to growth for subsequent leadership work. One fellow said,

I was eager to do the entire year. . . I definitely figured, you know, it would be a good growth process for me to complete. I was anxious to see what I would learn, taking that specific amount of time to growing myself.

Another fellow described how the BNLP led to improved work situations for the fellow, "my organization was experiencing [retracted for confidentiality] issues . . . Every Friday, BNLP, whatever we learned that Friday was so connected to my work." They then continued explaining how they were able to apply new field knowledge and leadership skills in their job. This became especially relevant when the fellow described a new leadership role they were assigned mid-way through the BNLP, perhaps signifying their leadership growth had been recognized within their community organization.

Two fellows described development of an emotional and social support network with BNLP cohort members as their primary reason for their own program retention. Said one fellow, "Honestly, the cohort [was the reason I stayed in the program]." Another fellow said, "I just got so much love for my cohort and I will say what made me stay is, it was fun." Based on further fellow comments, the rigorous selection process used by BNLP along with intentional practices by BNLP leadership to create a sense of community within the cohort were the practices which contributed to a tight-knit cohort.

Finally, one fellow mentioned signing a contract as motivating program completion saying, "I don't like signing things and not completing the whole duration of it." While this statement was not representative of this fellow's experience or the broader cohort experience observed during interviews, it may reflect an important detail for program implementation and retention that was not directly stated during interviews with fellows.

Self-efficacy and gratitude for being selected as a BNLP fellow

In addition to describing why they stayed in the program, most fellows expressed simultaneous experiences of "imposter syndrome" (i.e. recurring thoughts wherein people – regardless of external evidence of success – lack confidence that they can succeed and worry about being identified as incapable) and gratitude about being selected as a BNLP fellow. Three fellows' quotes in particular captured the experienced value of being selected as a BNLP fellow. Overall, fellows appeared to view themselves as unworthy – perhaps reflecting limited hope or self-efficacy concerning their ability to make change which may be a direct effect of both being members of a group that has experienced marginalization for generations

and growing up in a society riddled by systems of oppression. “At first, I didn’t feel like I was worthy of such an opportunity but then I had to really be like, dude, what are you telling yourself right now? . . . I had to really check myself on that” said one fellow. Another fellow said, “When I came into BNLP, I was shocked that I was chosen. . . by the time we finished the program, I knew why I was chosen.” These statements emphasize that while fellows came into the program with self-doubt, they emerged with a clearer sense of purpose and more self-efficacy.

“I’m just this Black guy, this Black kid from Baltimore City. I don’t know. [This program] seemed so big and so like... It’s up there.” Systems of oppression of Black people in the US may have contributed to fellows’ feelings of uncertainty and apprehension about fully committing to community leadership work. However, during another interview, a fellow remarked on how the structure of the BNLP promoted their personal and leadership growth saying, “it was the elevated way that Black people were asking me about something that I didn’t know that I had in me.” This remark appears to reflect how the BNLP challenged the fellow to envision and in part realize liberation from systemic oppression. Such work is necessary for leaders who wish to promote change toward justice and liberation.

Strengths of the BNLP promoting matriculation

During their interviews, fellows also discussed program strengths. Responses across fellows and cohorts demonstrated multiple strengths of the BNLP as described in greater detail below with quotes to exemplify fellow perspectives. These strengths kept fellow attendance and engagement high. They also contribute to Black leadership growth overall.

Safe space fostering cultural authenticity and self-knowledge

During their interviews, four of the fellows described how the weekly BNLP meetings offered a safe space to expand one’s knowledge base, process new ideas and grow professionally as Black leaders. Further, multiple fellows disclosed that being in a shared space with other Black leaders was critical for their development. One fellow’s statement clearly describes the BNLP as a safe space promoting cultural authenticity and self-knowledge:

[BNLP] was engaging. It was learning. It was a safe space to unpack all of the things that I thought or all of the insecurities that I may have felt in other places personally or professionally. It was just a good space. . . a safe space to say what you need to say.

Other fellows made similar statements alluding to the BNLP as a safe space when talking about their experiences. For example, “you were expected to be yourself,” “it felt comfortable” and “we could be real. We could be honest. . .It was a room without judgment.” Through providing a safe space for learning, BNLP fellows maximized the dedicated weekly time to promote growth.

Being in a physical space with exclusively Black cohort members and being in a space with instructors and staff who predominantly identified as Black was appreciated and named by multiple fellows as fostering a safe space. “I’m sitting there with other Black people” and “we were a room full of Black positive alpha people” are phrases from interviews with two fellows that exemplify this overarching theme. Another fellow described how they were able to benefit from a space comprised predominantly of people who identified as Black, saying:

So, this was a way for me to gain a lot of the knowledge base, learn, sit back and pump the brakes and not be judged. Where I didn’t have to be the perfect Black person in the room. There are plenty of days where I just sat back and I didn’t say a word, and it felt good just to listen, you know, and then to ask dumb questions.

Creation of a safe and open community with Black leaders in the BNLP provided fellows with scaffolding to navigate a difficult space of working as a Black community leader while reflecting on their leader identities. Through this practice, fellows could strengthen their cultural authenticity and self-knowledge in their leadership style while retaining radical hope for the reality of systemic change and their capacity to make that change.

Networking fostering field knowledge and skills development

Fellows appreciated opportunities through the BNLP to expand their professional network. Networks were perceived as a source of increasing field knowledge and skills development. Networks also served to foster radial hope to effect real and lasting change for some. One fellow mentioned meeting their goal of networking through the BNLP:

[One thing] that is definitely done well with [BNLP is] connections. . . grow[ing] my network. . . I thought that [the BNLP] really helped with that. Even outside of just face-to-face connections, the leaders do a good job of connecting us with their connections.

Fellows gave examples of career-changing networking opportunities through access to instructors and other professionals, “who are doing a lot of great work here in the city.” Networking with other fellows was also important. All participating fellows directly spoke of the benefit of being a part of a small cohort of likeminded persons and many named being connected to people who identify as Black as an important factor in strengthening their networks. And one fellow made a statement recognizing that the BNLP offers a network of professionals that is ever changing and growing. As one fellow said, “as we continue to grow BNLP, the network will just become stronger.” Two fellows mentioned the BNLP’s mentoring relationships as central to their experience in the BNLP. Altogether, fellows appeared to lean on their networks for a source of strength and resilience (modeling, mentors), to provide field knowledge and skills development, and to help achieve proximal and distal leadership goals.

The BNLP connected community leaders who identify as Black as one method of promoting or preserving cultural authenticity while increasing knowledge and skills. One fellow’s remarks described how the BNLP outshined their university experience which had been intended to promote service and leadership in a Black community:

I went to an HBCU. Very proud of my culture and my background, where I come from. I do feel like in BNLP, I learned more about me and the systems of the city, than I did from my university. I loved that as a takeaway. Some of my cohort members could agree. It was overall, an outstanding experience.

This fellow described embracing their culture while also being open to new perspectives and knowledge, which came across in multiple interviews as a critical element of the BNLP in realizing Black leadership growth among fellows.

Instructors providing field knowledge and promoting critical consciousness

“So many powerful people that came through and spoke with us and met with us, and we went to see. I mean, the education that I got with that program was just outstanding.” Fellows reported instructors were received favorably overall. Here are two examples of statements fellows made when describing field knowledge instilled by BNLP instructors: “every question that I had in my head about how these things happened, every instructor answered,” and “the instructors were just unparalleled.” In discussing their experiences, two other fellows acknowledged the importance of representation of Black leaders as instructors:

They weren’t perfect, but they were easily accessible. They were open to suggestion... the instructors were so profound. Not only that, they were people who had voices that were strong enough to have a seat at the table.

Another fellow described how instructors promoted critical consciousness among fellows, modeling and inspiring radical hope that fellows could effect change through liberatory practices. “We were able to get information from people who are really sitting at the table with the oppressors or people who are sitting at the table with those who have fought.”

Cohort fostering emotional and social support

“We had a tight cohort,” “we know each other and continue to stay connected,” and “I enjoyed the cohort” are representative general statements describing the three represented BNLP cohorts. The BNLP leadership team was intentional in their selection of fellows. Cohort characteristics that appeared important to fellows were the small number of members; camaraderie between members; and cohort members’ varied traits, backgrounds and expertise. All interviewed fellows spoke about how belonging to a small cohort strengthened their experiences and takeaways from the BNLP, as well as their abilities to grow as Black leaders. Because each BNLP cohort was small, fellows were able to have more individualized time and to bond with other cohort members. Put another way (using the words of two fellows), “[our small cohort] definitely makes for a more intimate approach,” and “we kinda rallied together and helped each other through difficult times.”

Expertise of cohort members appeared to motivate fellows to succeed and grow as leaders. Three fellows demonstrated a clear sense of camaraderie and appreciation for their cohort members. One fellow said, “You could see there was something different about [my cohort members], and there was a level of depth in their questions and their commitment to just showing up.” A second fellow said, “I was just amazed at the strength, um, and the power that the people had.” One fellow was particularly happy about heterogeneity within their cohort, saying, “[my cohort included people with] a diversity of ages, diversity of backgrounds, diversity of education and experiences.” Another fellow made a statement demonstrating connections made between members of different cohorts as an additional strength of the BNLP model (which hosts regular events to serve as opportunities for connections between former and current fellows), “just recently two fellows connected, two different cohorts.”

Being a part of the BNLP family means more support

Emotional and social support were the primary mechanisms through which fellows described their cohort fostering Black leadership growth. “Our cohort as it stands is still very connected. . . I actually love them.” This quote nicely introduces how fellows experienced the BNLP as a family. All interviewed fellows indicated they felt and continue to feel like they are a family with other members of their cohort, members of the BNLP administrative/leadership team, and BNLP instructors.

It follows then, that when describing strengths of the BNLP, three fellows used the word “family” to describe positive aspects of their experience. One fellow described how the BNLP offered them an emotional and social support network, saying, “I had friends. I had a support system. . . this place where I can actually talk to somebody and not have all the right words and be free of judgment.” When talking about the BNLP family, four fellows named and recognized the pivotal role of the program director in shaping this experience. Through creating this shared sense of family, the BNLP promoted emotional and social support among all fellows, which is critical to Black leadership growth. Fellows described the BNLP director positively, for instance: “[the director] fought for people. . . this woman put it all out here for us. . . she was always accessible to us,” “[She] was awesome. . . anytime I [need] any type of assistance or help, they definitely are there,” “I can still call on [the director]” and “she definitely always made sure that we were okay and connected us.” With sufficient support of a cohort and a larger network of Black (and non-Black) leaders, fellows demonstrated greater

openness to cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, as well as strength and resistance in navigating systems of oppression.

Curriculum to strengthen field knowledge and critical consciousness

Specific session content was mentioned by all seven fellows as an aspect of the BNLP that encouraged engagement. During interviews, fellows named individual instructors and lessons, specific activities and content that was especially beneficial to their work. All of these program components contributed to field knowledge and critical consciousness for fellows. Field knowledge and leadership skills discussed during interviews included program-specific content, namely: (1) self-knowledge specific to leadership and self-care, (2) building relationships, (3) deconstructing racism through awareness of the history of oppression and increased critical consciousness, (4) communication skills, (5) policy and advocacy skills and (6) systems management. Awareness of the need for sociopolitical reform to contribute to longstanding systemic change was touched on in multiple interviews, demonstrating critical consciousness.

The people who founded the BNLP ensured the curriculum addressed racial bias and racism head-on. A few fellows remarked on the impact of the First Day BNLP Retreat. One fellow described it accordingly: “[I really enjoyed the] retreat where we just talked about bias and what should we do if somebody talks to us about their experience with bias and stuff.” Beyond recognizing the racial bias retreat, more than one fellow described how the BNLP wove racial bias and racism into the curriculum as a strength. Learning about the history of Baltimore during the deconstructing racism focus area was mentioned by two fellows, namely, “slavery, redlining, racism in different systems and how it affects urban communities.” The geographic disparities in Baltimore were also mentioned by two fellows who described the importance of knowing about “the Black butterfly and why does that exist.”

Fellows also listed multiple teaching methods used to promote an inclusive learning environment that allowed them to develop leadership skills. Four fellows specified experiential learning opportunities in the curriculum as a noteworthy strength of the BNLP. Fellows mentioned “hands on opportunities,” and “we got to actually go on site. . .and [see] how they operate.” Overall, fellows appreciated the opportunity to learn more about effective communication strategies, leading meetings, and to see “what organizing really looks like.”

In learning how to best communicate with people in different roles and development of policy and advocacy skills, the BNLP challenged fellows to demonstrate strength and resistance as Black leaders navigating systems of oppression. Moreover, fellows were encouraged to be culturally authentic in their approaches to their leadership work. A fellow described the importance of their race and culture in bridging some of the gaps between community leaders and people in communities, saying:

I feel like culturally, that’s something in [Black people’s] DNA, that I feel like storytelling is very important, especially for people who don’t look like who they serve. They can effectively tell the stories of who they are serving, and making sure that they’re not offending anybody. Storytelling is definitely very important. I learned how to effectively and responsibly do that.

Recognized improvements made to the BNLP

Leadership team members of the BNLP “practice what they preach,” meaning they themselves work to grow as leaders and ensure the needs of BNLP fellows are met. During multiple interviews, BNLP fellows interjected statements about how the BNLP has responded to the evolving needs of previous or current cohorts. Such actual/achieved improvements are discussed in this section.

A particularly robust example of how the BNLP leadership swiftly and intentionally responded to fellow needs involves self-care. Self-care was not initially integrated into the BNLP curriculum but was added during the first year of the BNLP to meet the needs of fellows. As emerging community leaders, fellows in the BNLP described how they tend to be overcommitted with paid and volunteer work. After the first few weeks of BNLP, the leadership team observed direct effects of stress on fellows (external to the BNLP) and made space for a discussion with fellows about how best to proceed. Since then, the BNLP curriculum reviews the importance of self-care and provides opportunities for professional psychotherapy. Particular attention is given to discussing the need for self-care among professionals who identify their race as Black and who do intensive community service and leadership work. BNLP fellows are encouraged to meet with a psychologist several times throughout year (these services are paid for by the BNLP). Three of the fellows explicitly named the psychologist and promotion of self-care in the BNLP as a program strength. A fellow from this cohort stated, “that self-care part really did become a part of the curriculum. . . It’s great to talk about [mental health].” Fellows explained their experiences with the therapist in promoting self-knowledge concerning leadership and more:

[The therapist] would meet with us I think between three and five times throughout the year, just to check in with us to see if there were any goals or issues that we had that we wanted to work on. She would kinda be a sounding board for them in case we wanted to build or just kinda have some more self-awareness.

Another fellow described how meeting with the psychologist benefitted their well-being, saying, “[Doing self-care is] helping us pump the brakes. . . focus and how do you take care of you, and what does taking care of you look like.”

Beyond the addition of a self-care component, leadership in the BNLP has been responsive to the needs of each cohort, using evaluation data and information presented in real-time to improve the BNLP. Three fellows described how curriculum content was modified and updated for their cohort, including the order of presented material. Another fellow described a programmatic change that occurred for their cohort saying, “[we] incorporate[d] some breaks in [our weekly meetings].” One fellow described how difficulties within their cohort impacted subsequent cohort experiences: “[the BNLP leadership] implemented some things that better, I think, managed the group after us because of some things they learned while we were in group.” Changes to the evaluation process was also mentioned by one fellow, who described a change in their cohort relative to previous cohorts: “For us, we didn’t have that much writing. . . We had projects due for each module, and it was minimal writing.” Finally, another fellow mentioned how they appreciated that the BNLP invited former fellows to attend sessions for their cohort.

The importance of addressing blackness and racism in leadership training programs

The BNLP was designed to train emerging community leaders who aimed to serve the Black community. To date, all BNLP fellows self-identified as Black. As is touched upon in subsections above, based on fellow’s own identification as Black Americans and the central focus of Black community leadership work in BNLP, Blackness and racism came up often during interviews. Instruction centers around promoting critical consciousness, strength and resistance to systems of oppression, and cultural authenticity in leadership through curriculum content including deconstructing racism, understanding structural racism, and learning about implicit racial bias. During interviews, fellows described regularly engaging in self-reflection through independent and small group exercises in the BNLP.

The BNLP dedicates a significant portion of time acknowledging the presence of racism, effects of racism, and strategies to reduce racism in community leadership work on myriad

levels. This ranged from one-on-one meetings with a therapist (however, this only occurred when initiated by fellows) and with the BNLN director that helped fellows process individual experiences of racism to lectures to group discussions about systemic racism and how to interrupt the harmful effects of related policies and practices to promote racial equity.

Race and racism impact community leadership practices, and participants talked about the power imbalances in their lived experiences. White privilege was named by multiple fellows in different contexts. One fellow described how it was an important concept everyone should learn, and the other two remarked on how White privilege negatively impacted their experiences both within and outside of the BNLN. More specifically, one fellow described an interaction with a White woman who was an invited BNLN speaker where the White woman engaged in interpersonal racial discrimination toward the Black fellow, “She just wasn’t aware of her Whiteness in the spaces, and the things that she was saying was just like, “lady, do you not know who you’re speaking to in this room?” The fellow went on to describe how that particular situation was discussed amongst fellows and the BNLN director and was addressed within BNLN. Some fellows described interpersonal racial discrimination that they felt as Black leaders working in a shared space with White leaders, “[This White person comes] from a rich world of entitlement. I see it. I smell it. . . They just know they’re better than me.” Another fellow described a general concern about privilege and power concerning for whom individuals and society should invest training resources:

Because it’s why do I want to train a privileged White kid who’s always going to have the advantage in life? ...nine times out of ten, I was the only Black person on the floor. When you start talking about Black creatives, I mean it’s like the 1% of the 1%. And I am always like, ‘Well, why should I train this one [*expletive*] who had every [advantage]... to get a decent job so he can just compete with me?’

Dynamics of privilege and power were touched on in the BNLN, but not as extensively as might be useful for fellows moving forward. Interviews made it clear that fellows are thinking about how privilege and power influenced their own individual experiences, but were also thinking about experiences not directly addressed in the BNLN like how to extend lessons learned into their own leadership work and navigate systems of oppression. And they did not always feel they had the space or time to address them within the BNLN.

Pre-existing awareness of the presence of systemic racism was evident in interviews and awareness of the extent and impact of systemic racism appeared to be strengthened by BNLN curriculum. Fellows recognized racism can impact people across systems and contexts, “racism it comes out, different ways depending on your income level or what location you were in, where you frequent.” Fellows also emphasized the ways in which Black communities are systemically impacted, which is particularly relevant to Black community leadership work:

I think one policy that’s harming [Black and] urban communities is redlining. Some people cannot choose to live where they want to live. The way the certain cities are set up, or the way the roads go around certain areas of the city, where you don’t have to see these really bad areas that are ... They’re vacant, trash everywhere, because the way that the city is structured, you don’t have to go past it. It becomes null and void. I feel like our education system, our policy around that, it’s not even, I feel like it was being highlighted even more during COVID, because kids don’t have technology, but before the technology, you have kids that can’t read.

Finally, tying their BNLN-learned and lived experiences together as a Black emerging leader, one fellow reiterated the value in supporting Black-owned businesses through their work. The fellow stated, “[My company has] a relationship with Microsoft, Black engineers, Blacks at Microsoft, the employee resource group.” Their intentional focus on seeking out and working with other professionals who identify as Black demonstrates one strategy for

shifting how to allocate resources to those Black-identified individuals and communities who have historically and systemically had resources withheld or removed.

Towards
equitable
leadership
development

Discussion

Training of community leaders – especially leaders who represent the communities they serve – is important – particularly in this era of maintained inequities and eroding public trust in institutions. In current study, we utilized data obtained during individual interviews with fellows from an intensive community leadership program that promotes Black leadership growth. Data were obtained to determine whether our proposed framework of Black leadership growth was supported and to provide a new perspective on how to take a flexible and responsive (rather than a one-size-fits-all) approach in leadership development trainings through identification of best practices in leadership development programs targeting racial equity. Three major takeaways arose from our work. First, we observed alignment with our posited theoretical framework of Black leadership growth that can promote racial equity in leadership. Second, we noted programmatic strengths of the BNLP which promoted matriculation by recognizing the importance of the content learned as well as how students learn. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we learned the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in leadership development curricula. Guidance for the BNLP and other programs aiming to promote equity in leadership development work are integrated throughout our discussion below.

A supported framework of Black leadership growth

Informed by the framework of radical healing in communities of color (French *et al.*, 2020), our analyses confirmed and identified seven hypothesized factors contributing to Black leadership growth (see Figure 1). Such factors were observed across the curriculum and overarching BNLP structure and contributed to multiple BNLP retention elements and strengths. They include (1) strength and resistance when navigating systems of oppression, (2) critical consciousness about historical and current systemic racism, (3) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge in Black leadership practices, (4) creating systems of emotional and social support, (5) embracing radical hope that real change is possible to promote racial equity, (6) field knowledge and (7) leadership skills development. In our model, field knowledge and leadership skills development are a lighter shade and somewhat removed from the inner circle of key factors given that they are critical to Black leadership growth, but less centered around racism and equity (at least following our review of qualitative data from BNLP fellows and other leadership development programming to date). Programming specific to Black leadership development and growth – and programming for non-Black populations should review this framework and build upon it to work toward justice and liberation in leadership settings and to strengthen their program outcomes.

Meeting individualized needs of diverse Black fellows

This study offers ample evidence that Black emerging leaders desire training and are exemplary candidates for leadership development programs. Emerging community leaders that were drawn to the BNLP identified their race as Black, were mostly under the age of 40, had a college degree, had 3 or more years of experience working in communities, and have a deep sense of devotion and commitment to improving the lives of Black and other historically oppressed community members. They are also highly diverse in lived experience and in their backgrounds (e.g. family, sexual orientation). Fellows described the critical focus of the BNLP on instilling radical hope that long-term systemic change is possible and highlighted that

being among people who identify their race as Black was inspiring, special and critical for advancing notions of radical hope following the program.

One way that the BNLP successfully promoted Black leadership growth among fellows was by considering not only *what* fellows want to or need to learn but also *how* individuals learn. Participants' experiences of being in an all-Black group promoted their ability to infuse cultural authenticity into their leadership practice and allowed their particular realities to be fully appreciated (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). As illuminated by this study, the BNLP offers a case example of explicitly addressing the unique needs of Black emerging leaders. Leadership development programs can create safe spaces in which persons from such groups are able and – even encouraged – to disclose their vulnerability and receive validation and support from others with shared life experiences.

Measure and respond to fellow strengths and needs

Assessing for and responding to the strengths and needs of program participants was another takeaway from interviews. Fellows consistently brought up feelings of gratitude at being selected to serve as a BNLP fellow during interview discussions. Nevertheless, many fellows described entering the BNLP with limited hope about their ability to affect change, particularly in the face of multiple systems of oppression. In fact, their limited self-efficacy to create change and be a leader contributed to multiple fellows questioning whether they belonged in BNLP. Many of these exceptional leaders presented to the BNLP with imposter syndrome (“At first, I didn’t feel like I was worthy of such an opportunity”). Accordingly, defining and discussing (including normalizing the experience of) imposter syndrome during programming is advised, including preemptively addressing burnout and other contributing symptoms (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). And program leadership teams must ensure that psychometrically validated assessments provided to fellows in the beginning of trainings capture strengths and areas for growth (Crawford & Kelder, 2019). Indeed, in our study, participants simultaneously demonstrated clear grit during interviews and growth on survey measures and practical metrics (*citation redacted*). This finding suggests that once a program has established clear and desirable outcomes (and targeted the unique learning styles and needs of fellows), fellows’ self-efficacy increases. And alongside increased self-efficacy and reduced imposter syndrome, recruitment and retention of fellows will likely improve.

Responding to racism within leadership development programming

There is still room for improvement in the BNLP and other programs aiming to support Black community leadership. Several participants mentioned witnessed and experienced racism during individual interviews. More could be done to address interpersonal racism experienced by fellows within programming including targeted counseling and exercises throughout the program (Hargons *et al.*, 2022). Program leadership staff must make interruptions for justice as acts of racism are observed during programming, and could address race and racism through check-ins with participants about recent experiences with racism/racial discrimination. This practice would benefit Black community leaders and could also inform and potentially transform practice for non-Black leaders, as well (Saad, 2020; Singh, 2019). Further, anti-racism education targeting this reality is important for program staff, instructors, and fellows on the features and frequency of experiences of racism across settings while stressing how racism impacts Black leaders (Fix, Thurston, Johnson, & Andrisse, 2023). Naming and describing racism as a normative albeit unfortunate set of experiences that should be addressed while demonstrating empathy and recognition of the harm it engenders is critical (Hargons *et al.*, 2022; Williams & Mohammed, 2013).

White privilege was another concern raised in multiple interviews. It is likely okay for White instructors to teach some curricula content and to mentor fellows, but only if they have

a demonstrated record of engaging in justice and liberatory work and have completed an anti-racism training. It is also worth noting that instructors of color are enmeshed in and impacted by systems supporting racism (Jones, 2000). So, all instructors and leadership team members should be required to complete trainings and demonstrate humility in interacting with Black fellows (Fix *et al.*, 2023; Sowcik *et al.*, 2017).

Recommended programmatic practices aimed at equity in leadership development

Effective practices of the BNLN could be replicated within existing and new leadership development programs. The direct curricular focus on deconstructing racism and increasing recognition of systemic experiences of discrimination and racism among people who identify as Black appeared to fostered safety, camaraderie and a shared humanity among cohort members and across cohorts. Development of an environment in the BNLN that openly addressed issues perceived as relevant to the Black community impacted fellow experiences and improved fellows' learning and ability to network and connect with others through the BNLN (Caver & Livers, 2021; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019).

The critical role of small cohorts

Programs should ensure recruitment of small cohorts, as this was also tied to feelings of connectedness and engagement in programming within our evaluation. For example, the recruitment of a small cohort of six or seven BNLN fellows fostered perceptions of belonging to the BNLN family and appeared to promote learning and translation of knowledge into skill development. The small cohort also gave participants space to engage in self-reflection during exercises specific to cultural authenticity and self-knowledge. These findings align with recent literature which recognizes the importance of thoughtfully considering authenticity (Ladkin, 2021) as well as self-reflection and self-knowledge in leadership (Holt *et al.*, 2018). In considering authenticity in addition to multiple social identifiers, it is critical to keep in mind the double (or triple, quadruple, etc.) consciousness that can accompany multiple social identifiers (e.g. White genderqueer, gay, disabled man; Black and Indigenous biracial, heterosexual, cisgender woman with no disability; [see Ladkin, 2021 for more detail]). Cultural authenticity was a central focus for many BNLN participants, and should be separately considered in leadership development programs in addition to this nuanced perspective of authenticity in leadership bearing in mind the reality of multiple consciousness.

Ensure trainings are built upon a base of anti-racism practice

Ensure all leadership development administrators and staff have anti-racism training and implement systems of accountability to promote continued work and maintenance of skills (see STYLE framework as an example; Fix *et al.*, 2023). Some lessons learned through our study can offer strategies for administrators, instructors, and other staff working to promote racial equity in leadership development programs. One way to get strong applicants is to provide a leadership development training curriculum that explicitly addresses equity in leadership. And if equity in leadership is a major focus of one's training program, there is a need for the affiliated staff to be adequately and appropriately trained. Anti-racism knowledge and skills are a crucial aspect of any staff training to ensure administrators and people guiding programming are better equipped to lead the training. For example, those trained might be more likely to expect greatness from participants (as said by one fellow, "I had never been asked or pushed like that before." People who deliver and support the program should push Black fellows (who may be used to having lowered expectations of them due to racial bias (Redding, 2019; Starck, Riddle, Sinclair, & Warikoo, 2020) to succeed.

Provide flexible and responsive programming, consider self-care

Offering programming that is malleable and responsive is important in participant buy-in and retention (Schweiger *et al.*, 2020), and this aspect of the BNLP was highlighted in multiple interviews. Perhaps the most influential change made by BNLP leadership in tandem with fellows from the first cohort was adding a self-care component. The self-care component entailed (1) review of mental health assessment and associated coping skills, and (2) a dedicated therapist and covered expenses for one-on-one psychotherapy sessions for all fellows. Fellows spoke about how the self-care component strengthened their self-knowledge and promoted their individual leadership growth.

Moving forward (for BNLP and other programs), it is recommended that group discussions (and related check-ins) be expanded to focus on stress and support as fellows find their own strength and resistance in the face of systems of oppression. And fellows could benefit from therapeutic services specific to addressing racism and racial trauma both external to and within leadership spaces (Hargons *et al.*, 2022). Such services should be both preventive and respond to harm that has already occurred, acknowledging that structural racism is present and problematic across systems, including in leadership settings (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Liu & Baker, 2016). Finally, the more widely named approach of “rest as resistance” should be incorporated into leadership development curricula (Hersey, 2022). This notion is particularly important for leaders who identify as Black, given it centers Black liberation and encourages reflections to fight against feelings that productivity equates to worth (which stem from Whiteness).

Limitations and future directions

There were several methodological limitations of the current study that could be strengthened in future research to elucidate active ingredients of BNLP or similar programs, as well as strategies for engaging participants and program outcomes. Collection of mixed-methods longitudinal data could elucidate how programming changed knowledge and skills over time. For example, previous research used qualitative interviews including questions about colleagues’ leadership development skills (Newstead, Dawkins, Macklin, & Martin, 2020) to evaluate a leadership development program. A similar approach should be considered in future leadership development research including the use of the 360° assessment.

Data collection occurred online because data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although our team used best-practices in doing online interviews (Daniëls *et al.*, 2019), in-person interviews might have yielded different results or results that were easier to analyze. One difficulty our team encountered on occasion was with recording quality and transcription. Fortunately, the research assistants who conducted the interviews were able to listen to interviews while reviewing transcripts and fill in unclear phrases or statements, but this barrier may be lessened through in-person recordings of interviews.

Our team was able to collect data from fellows representing all three cohorts, and so could learn about how the BNLP leadership team continued to improve the program over time using fellow feedback. Still, some suggestions or other points raised by fellows in the 2017 (first) cohort were no longer relevant for the most recent 2019 cohort. Therefore, continuing to collect similar or consistent data within the BNLP and similar programs is an important practice for program improvement and understanding the dynamic needs of fellows that might change with community needs and the social climate.

Conclusion

During their interview, a fellow said, “Having that exposure and people pouring knowledge into you, it puts you in a different mindset.” The Bunting Neighborhood Leadership Program

(BNLP) provided a one-of-a-kind training opportunity, focusing predominantly on improving knowledge and skillsets of emerging Black community leaders. We found fellows were drawn to the BNLP to gain knowledge and connections in the community leadership network, and ultimately stayed in the program because they felt that their BNLP network was like a family. Fellows appreciated the integration of content and discussion focused on Blackness and racism. Still, there could be a greater emphasis on content and services specific to Black leaders to promote leadership development equity. For example, having multiple discussions with fellows about experiences of racism and racial discrimination and promoting mental health prevention and intervention in response to racism/racial discrimination.

“You know when you’re learning and having fun, it just doesn’t feel like you’ve been there for eight hours.” These words of one interviewed fellow encompass the general sentiment of all interviewed fellows when they described the BNLP. Yes – rigorous requirements of the fellowship included an investment in time and energy for the fellows. But success of BNLP fellows reflects more than just fellow dedication and work – it also represents an investment by the Bunting family, the BNLP instructors, and BNLP leadership team. The BNLP offers more than leadership development– it gives professionals a support system, opportunities to connect with others who will promote their success as community leaders, and an operational base from which fellows can launch the work of their dreams.

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Questions used during the semi-structured interview as a starting point.

Interview Part I: Bunting Program Content, Strengths, Weaknesses

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- (1) What initially drew you to the Bunting Program?
 - (2) What encouraged you to stick with the Bunting Program for the entire year?
 - (3) What Bunting Program curriculum content was most beneficial for you?
 - (4) How have you grown from your participation in Bunting Program?
 - (5) How has your participation impacted your work?
 - (6) Was there any content that seemed to be missing from the Bunting Program curriculum?
 - (7) What were the main strengths of the Bunting Program?
 - (8) The Bunting Program seems to help build connections between fellows and the community, other fellows, and members of the Bunting Program staff and faculty. Have those connections helped you?
 - *If yes*, please tell me how those connections helped you.
 - Do you think the Bunting Program curriculum, staff, and faculty could have capitalized on connections even more?
 - *Follow-up depending on response*: How has your involvement in Bunting Program impacted the communities you served?

Source(s): Content by authors

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