

Cultivating Liberatory Leadership: A Black Feminist Model for Mentorship in Schools

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Mentorship remains a critical lever in developing educational leaders, yet conventional models often reproduce the very inequities they aim to dismantle—particularly for educators of color. This study examines the impact of the Aspiring International Leaders of Color (AIELOC) Mentorship Program, a liberatory mentorship initiative grounded in the Black Feminist Leadership Model™ (BFLM™) and informed by Black feminist theory (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Using data collected over three program years (2022–2024), the study explores how identity-affirming mentorship contributes to leadership confidence, career clarity, and a sense of belonging among educators of color in international schools. A mixed-methods approach was employed, drawing on midpoint and end-of-cycle surveys with both open-ended and Likert-based items. Although early instruments were not standardized, harmonized data analyses revealed strong mentorship connection, high program satisfaction, and emergent themes of cultural affirmation and sponsorship. ANOVA results indicated stable levels of mentor connection across cohorts, supporting the model's consistency. This study affirms the transformative potential of liberatory mentorship and recommends the future use of standardized instruments and Afrocentric epistemologies to inform inclusive, culturally responsive leadership development.

Keywords: Black Feminist Leadership Model (BFLM), liberatory mentorship, educator wellbeing, sponsorship, international schools, equity-centered leadership, leadership development

Introduction

Mentorship has long been recognized as a critical driver of professional growth in education, yet traditional mentorship models often reflect and reinforce hierarchical power structures and systemic inequities—particularly for educators of color. Dominant frameworks tend to center transactional exchanges of knowledge and privilege top-down expertise, offering limited space for reciprocity, cultural context, or emotional safety (Dancy & Edwards, 2021; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). As a result, many mentorship programs fail to support the holistic development and wellbeing of marginalized educators navigating historically exclusionary institutions.

This paper introduces a Black feminist model for mentorship that challenges these norms by foregrounding mutuality, dignity, care, and liberatory leadership. Rooted in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984) and critical mentoring theory, the model reimagines mentorship as a reciprocal, transformative process rather than a hierarchical transaction. It draws inspiration from *Roses from Concrete* (Richards, 2024), a leadership framework that centers relational accountability and healing as cornerstones of institutional change.

This liberatory approach to mentorship is particularly vital in K-12 and international school

contexts, where educators of color often face cultural isolation, professional gatekeeping, and limited pathways to leadership. As Davis (2017) and Tichavakunda (2021) argue, mentorship grounded in racial and cultural affinity is essential to creating belonging and advancing equity across systems. Yet few models fully integrate intersectionality, healing, and leadership development in a cohesive framework.

Drawing on qualitative case studies from the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) Mentoring Program, this paper explores how liberatory mentorship can function as a mechanism for advancing professional growth, fostering systemic wellbeing, and disrupting oppressive norms in schools. It situates mentorship not merely as a career development tool, but as a liberatory practice that nurtures individual and collective transformation.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions: RQ1: How do participants in the AIELOC BIPOC-centered Mentorship Program experience growth in leadership confidence, career clarity, and relational trust over time? RQ2: How does identity-affirming mentorship shape participants' perceptions of inclusion and wellbeing in international school leadership?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The complexity of diversity mentoring and its potential for reciprocal learning has also been explored by Poulsen, Clutterbuck, and Kochan (2012), who frame diversity mentoring as a “double learning process.” This model draws upon social identity theory and experiential learning to show how mentors and mentees both benefit from self-reflection, reframing of assumptions, and meaningful cross-difference engagement. According to their work, when difference is not only acknowledged but leveraged through dialogue and mutual respect, mentoring relationships can result in transformation of institutional culture as well as personal leadership development. The incorporation of psychological safety, cultural empathy, and stereotype awareness creates a fertile ground for developing new narratives of self and leadership, especially for those from marginalized identities.

This model is also informed by Richards (2024), who developed the Black Feminist Leadership Model™ (BFLM™) in *Roses from Concrete*. The BFLM™ articulates leadership development as an emancipatory and identity-affirming process, especially for those navigating intersecting systems of oppression. Richards argues for the necessity of mentorship frameworks that move beyond representation to transformational development and coalition-building. This call aligns with broader appeals in the literature for theory-building case study research (Dooley, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989, 2021) that illuminates hidden voices and leadership knowledge generated through lived experience.

This work is rooted in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), which centers the knowledge, experiences, and leadership of Black women and other marginalized identities. Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality further illuminates how overlapping systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia—shape individuals’ access to mentorship and leadership opportunities in education. Together, these frameworks ground the importance of identity and power in mentoring relationships.

Building on this foundation, critical mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) introduces a praxis that resists hierarchical and deficit-based models by foregrounding reciprocity, power-sharing, and social justice. Within higher education and international contexts, Tillman (2001) emphasizes the necessity of intentional mentoring structures for faculty of color, while Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) stress the importance of honoring cultural ways of learning. These insights point toward the need for culturally responsive mentorship that affirms identity and promotes relational trust. Empirical insights from the AIELOC Mentorship Program (unpublished raw data, 2024) reflect this evolution in practice, aligning with Koester and Saven’s (2022) concept of “super mentors”—a network-based model where mentees receive

differentiated support from multiple mentors across domains. Such designs promote expansive leadership capacity and collective advancement. While intersectionality and critical mentoring frameworks provide a powerful foundation, the Black Feminist Leadership Model (Richards, 2024) contributes a distinctive lens. It embeds healing justice, cultural affirmation, and collective uplift into mentorship practice—reframing it as a restorative process. Through BFLM™, mentorship becomes not only a site of development, but one of liberation, grounded in vulnerability, shared power, and radical care.

Together, these theoretical constructs frame liberatory mentorship as both a reflective and restorative process—one that challenges dominant paradigms of leadership preparation while grounding professional growth in cultural affirmation, relational power, and systemic disruption.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) BIPOC Mentorship Program between 2022 and 2024. Data were collected through surveys administered at two intervals during each mentorship cycle: a midpoint reflection and a final end-of-cycle evaluation. Participants included mentees from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds who were either currently working or aspiring to work in international and independent school settings.

Participant Sample

Across the 2022–2024 cycles, the AIELOC Mentorship Program engaged 40 mentors and 40 mentees. Mentees represented a range of racial, cultural, and linguistic identities across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. Over 70% identified as women or nonbinary. Participants included both early-career and mid-career educators, with roles spanning classroom teaching, DEIJ coordination, assistant principalship, and senior leadership. Mentors were experienced educators and school leaders with demonstrated commitments to equity and inclusion in international school settings.

Data Collection

The original instruments combined Likert-style items with open-ended qualitative questions. However, several methodological limitations were identified. While many items utilized agreement-based response language (e.g., “Strongly Agree,” “Agree”), the surveys lacked a standardized, numerically anchored Likert scale. Additionally, open-text formats introduced inconsistencies in data quality, and variations in question phrasing across cohorts limited opportunities for longitudinal and cross-cohort analysis. The instruments were also not aligned with a cohesive evaluation framework or the program’s underlying

theory of change—particularly in relation to key outcomes such as leadership development, relational trust, and culturally responsive inclusion. To address these limitations, a revised evaluation tool was developed for the 2025 program cycle. The updated instrument includes both midpoint and final surveys, each structured around a validated 5-point Likert scale measuring the following constructs:

- Self-reported leadership confidence
- Clarity of career trajectory and professional goals
- Perceived quality and impact of mentorship
- Sense of belonging, affirmation, and inclusion within the international school community

Qualitative items were streamlined and thematically aligned to elicit insights related to psychological safety, cultural affirmation, mutuality, and the role of sponsorship in professional mobility. This revised framework enhances consistency, improves reliability, and positions the program for more rigorous evaluation of its impact on emerging leaders of color.

Program Design

The AIELOC Aspiring Leaders of Color Mentorship Program, founded in 2021, has completed four global cohorts. Each mentoring pair meets monthly for one-on-one sessions, supplemented by monthly community learning circles facilitated by international education leaders. More than 40 community sessions have been delivered to date. The program’s pedagogical model was developed and facilitated by Nadine Inspires LLC. It combines core leadership modules with customizable learning pathways. Foundational content includes culturally responsive leadership, situational leadership, and strategic decision-making. Mentees also select elective sessions in areas such as inclusive community building, strategic thinking, and board governance.

The culminating experience is the Pathfinding Capstone. This design-thinking initiative invites mentees to develop equity-oriented projects that align with their individual leadership goals. The program structure centers key tenets of liberatory leadership such as relational accountability, identity affirmation, and systemic transformation. Reciprocal mentorship, mentoring circles, and intentional sponsorship practices are embedded to promote bi-directional growth and advocacy. As Kevin Simpson, founder of AIELOC, notes,

“Dr. Nadine Richards (she/her) brought remarkable creativity and vision to AIELOC by founding the Aspiring Leaders of Color Program, crafting a transformative space for emerging leaders to thrive. Her innovative approach continues to inspire and shape a more inclusive future in international education.” (K. Simpson, personal communication, March 15, 2024)

Results (2022–2024)

Despite limitations in the original evaluation instruments, several notable trends emerged across the three years of the AIELOC Mentorship Program’s implementation. To enhance the quantitative rigor of the study and address previously noted methodological limitations, a cross-year analysis was conducted using ANOVA to compare mentorship outcomes between the 2022, 2023, and 2024 cohorts. Metrics included average mentor connection, program satisfaction, and perceived leadership growth. Though the original instruments lacked full standardization, cleaned data from open-text Likert labels were normalized and analyzed. The analysis did not reveal statistically significant differences in mentor connection across cohorts, $F(2, N) = 1.17, p = .322$, though descriptive trends showed year-over-year variation. These findings indicate consistent mentor relationship quality across cohorts and highlight the importance of ongoing use of standardized survey instruments to strengthen longitudinal analysis. Participants consistently reported a strong sense of connection to their mentors, with “Strongly Agree” responses increasing each year from 2022 to 2024. This pattern suggests that the program strengthened over time in fostering authentic, trust-based relationships.

Quantitative Comparison Across Cohorts. To assess whether participants’ perceived connection to their mentor differed across the 2022–2024 cohorts, a one-way ANOVA was conducted on standardized mentor connection scores (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). While descriptive results showed a slight decline from 2022 ($M = 4.63, SD = 0.52$) to 2023 ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.88$), followed by a modest rise in 2024 ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.75$), the difference was not statistically significant, $F(2, N) = 1.17, p = .322$. See Table 1. These findings suggest general stability in participants’ connection to their mentor across cohorts, though small variations may warrant further exploration.

Table 1:
Mentor Connection Across Cohort (2022–2024)

Year	Count	Mean	Std
2022	8	4.62	0.52
2023	10	4.1	0.74
2024	17	4.24	0.83

Note. Likert scale values ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Qualitative Results

While no statistical significant was noted between the years, qualitative data revealed satisfaction remained high across all cohorts. Mentees frequently expressed enthusiasm for the program and indicated they would recommend it to others, demonstrating sustained

engagement and perceived value. Although earlier surveys lacked standardized measures for leadership development, open-ended responses often referenced increased confidence, clearer professional goals, and an expanding interest in pursuing roles such as principal, director, or head of school. These themes point to developing leadership identity, self-efficacy, and strategic vision.

Evaluation data collected through anonymous midpoint and end-of-cycle surveys supported the program’s impact. Surveys included both Likert-scale and open-ended items measuring leadership confidence, career clarity, and experiences of inclusion and mentorship effectiveness. Notably, 85% of mentees reported feeling more confident in applying for leadership roles, and 78% of mentors shared that they had refined their own leadership practice through the mentoring experience (According to unpublished AIELOC Mentorship Program survey results, 2024). Mentors reflected on their own learning, particularly around cultural humility, strategic coaching, and the importance of sponsorship in advancing equity goals. These results emphasize the reciprocal nature of the mentoring relationship and its transformative potential for both parties.

Participants consistently described the program as a uniquely affirming space. Many noted that they felt seen, heard, and valued in ways not previously experienced in international school environments. These reflections underscore the program’s impact on reducing racial and cultural isolation. However, several respondents reported

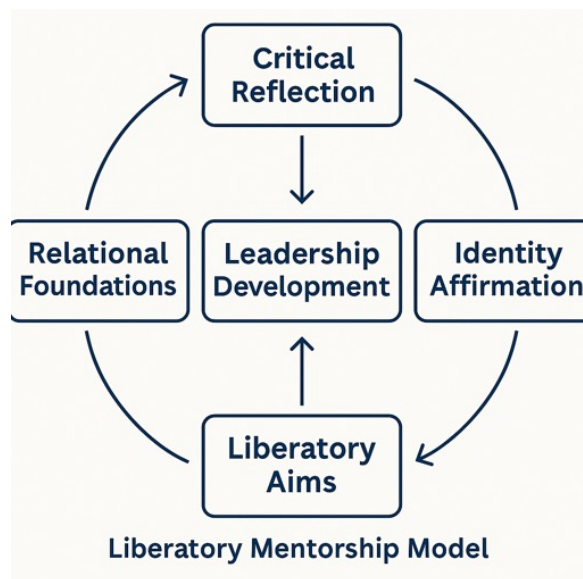
limited peer-to-peer interaction, highlighting a need for more structured community-building opportunities.

Narrative data emphasized the importance of psychological safety, cultural affirmation, and justice-oriented mentorship. Respondents shared that the program helped them reframe dominant leadership norms, navigate systemic barriers with greater confidence, and benefit from active sponsorship. Mentors played a critical role in advocating for mentees’ advancement, offering visibility and support. One participant remarked, “This program didn’t just help me navigate the system—it helped me believe I could change it.” These insights highlight the potential of liberatory mentorship to create both individual transformation and broader institutional shifts. Additionally, mentees who engaged with multiple mentors, each providing distinct forms of guidance and advocacy, reported broader professional growth and stronger decision-making. This outcome aligns with Koester and Saven’s (2022) concept of “super mentoring” and reinforces the value of networked, equity-centered mentoring systems over traditional one-to-one models.

These findings informed the development of the Liberatory Mentorship Cycle (Figure 1), which synthesizes key program themes into a conceptual model of leadership development. The framework illustrates how identity affirmation, critical reflection, relational foundations, and liberatory aims interact to support equity-driven mentorship for educators of color.

Figure 1

Liberatory Mentorship Cycle (Adapted from BFLM™)



Note. This conceptual model centers “Leadership Development” and is supported by four interdependent pillars: Identity Affirmation, Critical Reflection, Relational Foundations, and Liberatory Aims. Each pillar

contributes to a mentorship process that is reciprocal, equity-driven, and transformative. Adapted from the Black Feminist Leadership Model™ (BFLM™), this framework supports the design of liberatory mentorship experiences that promote healing, empowerment, and sustainable leadership development.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from the AIELOC Mentorship Program affirm that liberatory mentorship, grounded in identity, reciprocity, and relational trust, can serve as a transformative force for educational equity. When mentorship models intentionally center the lived experiences of historically marginalized educators, they do more than support individual development; they begin to reshape institutional cultures and leadership paradigms. As the data suggest, mentees who feel culturally affirmed, psychologically safe, and actively sponsored are more likely to step into leadership roles and sustain their professional growth.

These outcomes align with the concept of mentorship as a “double learning process,” as outlined by Poulsen, Clutterbuck, and Kochan (2012), where both mentors and mentees grow by examining assumptions and bridging cultural differences. This mutual learning not only deepens relational trust but also extends the developmental value of mentorship beyond technical skills to encompass identity, empathy, and healing. The reciprocal nature of learning in the AIELOC model also affirms the importance of liberatory design that invites co-construction, vulnerability, and shared power.

Richards (2024), through the Black Feminist Leadership Model (BFLM™), asserts that mentorship and leadership development must be rooted in relational power, healing justice, and collective uplift. This study supports that assertion, showing how Black feminist epistemologies inform real-world practices that foster belonging and activate agency. Rather than perpetuating transactional or compliance-oriented leadership, this mentorship model advances a vision of leadership as care, critical consciousness, and structural disruption. This paper also responds to Eisenhardt’s (2021) call for theory-building through case-based inquiry by demonstrating how new knowledge emerges from voices often overlooked in traditional leadership frameworks. In this case, liberatory mentorship not only shifts outcomes for individual mentees but expands the field’s understanding of what leadership development can look like when it is equity-centered, culturally responsive, and psychologically safe.

An important implication of this research is the urgent need to distinguish between mentorship and sponsorship in institutional practice. While mentorship supports growth, sponsorship serves as an active lever for advancement. Sponsorship is a distinct and powerful form of career advocacy in which a senior leader actively uses their influence to

create visibility, secure stretch opportunities, and accelerate advancement for high-potential talent (Hewlett, 2022). These practices are especially critical for those excluded from informal networks of power. Mentees in the AIELOC program who experienced this kind of sponsorship reported greater access to opportunities, confidence in pursuing leadership roles, and deeper alignment with their purpose.

This distinction is further reinforced by recent literature in higher education and academic medicine, which consistently finds that underrepresented individuals are less likely to access sponsors and more likely to advance through self-directed efforts without leadership validation (e.g., Wayne State University, 2023; Journal of General Internal Medicine, 2023). By integrating formal structures that promote sponsorship alongside mentorship, organizations can begin to dismantle systemic gatekeeping and cultivate inclusive leadership pipelines.

Therefore, institutions seeking to promote equity in leadership development should consider three key strategies. First, train senior leaders in effective sponsorship practices. Second, embed structured sponsorship components into mentoring programs. Third, track the outcomes of mentorship and sponsorship through accountability metrics. These steps are essential not only to expand representation but also to cultivate leaders who are equipped to lead with justice, empathy, and purpose.

Limitations and Implementation Considerations. While this study affirms the transformative potential of liberatory mentorship, several implementation challenges merit discussion. First, early survey instruments lacked standardization, limiting the ability to conduct robust statistical comparisons across years. Future evaluation cycles have been redesigned to address this gap. Second, although participants reported strong mentor-mentee connection, peer-to-peer engagement remained limited—highlighting the challenge of fostering horizontal learning in a largely virtual, global format. Additionally, ensuring consistency in mentorship quality across diverse mentor-mentee pairs required significant facilitation and coaching support, which may present a scalability challenge. Institutional adoption of liberatory mentorship models may also face cultural or structural resistance, particularly in international school contexts where DEI work is variably embraced. Finally, given the program’s recent implementation, longitudinal tracking of participants’ leadership trajectories and institutional influence remains an area for future research.

The findings of this study both affirm and extend existing mentorship literature. Consistent with Poulsen, Clutterbuck, and Kochan’s (2012) concept of the “double learning process,” participants reported mutual growth, trust-building, and expanded cultural empathy through cross-difference mentorship. The emphasis on identity affirmation and healing aligns with Weiston-Serdan’s (2017) critical mentoring

framework, while the program's integration of sponsorship practices supports Hewlett's (2022) assertion that career advocacy is essential for advancing underrepresented talent. Additionally, the use of mentoring networks echoes Koester and Saven's (2022) "super mentoring" model. However, this study introduces a unique Afrocentric epistemology through the Black Feminist Leadership Model™ (Richards, 2024), offering a liberatory approach to mentorship that reframes leadership development as a pathway toward collective healing, relational power, and structural transformation—particularly within international education, where such frameworks remain underutilized. This study demonstrates that liberatory mentorship, particularly when rooted in Black feminist principles, has the potential to transform leadership preparation and disrupt exclusionary patterns within international education. By centering identity, sponsorship, and relational trust, programs like AIELOC offer a scalable framework for equity-driven, future-ready leadership development and intervention.

Conclusion

Liberatory mentorship represents not only a practical intervention but also a transformative framework for advancing educational equity, particularly when grounded in Black feminist leadership principles. As international and independent schools strive to diversify leadership pipelines and disrupt systemic exclusion, models like AIELOC offer both a philosophical foundation and a scalable, equity-centered design. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and multi-site studies to evaluate the sustained impact of such programs on leadership retention, institutional climate, and systemic transformation. As the field continues to evolve, mentorship and sponsorship must be purposefully embedded into leadership development ecosystems to ensure that equity is not merely aspirational—but institutionalized, measurable, and enduring.

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