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**Mindfulness and Identity Awareness: Tools to Support Teachers and Leaders Towards  
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Practices in Schools**

Joslyn Williams

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Education at Seattle University 2023

Joslyn Williams 2023

### **Abstract**

Black women are too often at the assault of policies that inflict harm and often forced to seek legal redress after exhausting *all* nonlegal avenues available that are *supposed* to ensure that learning occurs in harm-free spaces (Ward, Hardaway, and Njoku, 2022). The examination of the place and work of spirituality, reflection, and the power of remembering (Dillard, 2019) is explored through narratives of Black women, highlighting two case studies of educators from perspectives within private and public institutions.

A need exists to explore and describe the experiences of Black women teacher-leaders as they engage with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and explore mindfulness training as a tool to support students' and leaders' emotional capacities while stretching cognitive experiences. This study investigated the use of mindfulness practice to assist in deepening awareness as a tool to navigate and support DEI habits. Framing the study within a qualitative lens focuses individual perspectives on how mindfulness practices shape their awareness of the self and others, as well as their pedagogical lens.

Three findings emerged. First, the teachers engaged in a pause and pivot as a spiritual armor to center and feel whole in their school settings. Second, the teachers found an enhanced awareness after mindfulness practice that allowed for clarity and groundedness in their decision-making as teachers. And lastly, the teachers acknowledged an identified acceptance of self in the present moment, assisting with self-inquiry and further understanding. Implications suggest mindfulness aids in the ability to look beyond one's self to a higher power for fortification, demonstrating useful for students developing their identities, for teachers' awareness that it's not the title they hold but the convictions they have that gives the agency to step into their leadership in the classroom.

*Key words:* Mindfulness, Black women experiences, DEI, leadership, education

## Acknowledgments

To the courage holders, curiosity seekers, and all-season soldiers who step outside of comfort to walk with others, intimately learning and understanding new ways of doing, being, and thinking - a continued practice of humility. Humility allows you to acknowledge the pain in the now with the hope for a better tomorrow, providing courage in self-examination and bravery to color outside the lines, forging a path advocating for Black girls who will become Black women with opportunities and education that assist in the development, confidence, and safety to color their stories.

I carry the torch of my ancestors, standing upon the shoulders of those that laid the foundation. To my mother for her fortitude, and my father for his service. It is my family who taught me faith. I am grateful for the divine warrior Dr. Cynthia Dillard for her spiritual wisdom, leadership, and manifestation of *everything* wanted in a leader, educator, advisor, mentor, and unapologetic Black woman full of grace. Thank you for saving me, helping me to remember my spiritual and ancestral strengths igniting the fortitude to push through the darkness unto the light of all this Black girl magic. And to my committee, Dr. Charisse Cowan Pitre and Dr. Vong Ratts, an immense and sincere thank you for stepping in the gaps to secure a pathway for my completion.

### **Dedication**

Dedicated to my heavenly Father. It is solely with His grace and mercy that I am here today.

And to Beaux Darling, we are soul connected.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Many complex issues regarding racial and cultural differences remain unfinished because of low priority on understanding and resolving them (Cobbs, 1989). The pervasiveness of white privilege and the proliferation of white supremacist activities that dominate and construct class assignments and environments is present at all levels in education and academia, while there is a simultaneous unveiling of practices that contribute to racial inequality McNair et al. (2020). Although education leadership has evolved, increasingly reflective of changes within the social contexts, they often fail to incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in their conceptualizations even today (Gallegos, 2013; Williams, Burnett, Carroll, & Harris, 2018); Aaron, 2020; McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020; Bohonos & Sisco, 2021). Antonio et al. (2004) describe diversity, equity, and inclusion as strategic imperatives and drivers of academic excellence within the most diverse community educational spaces. They further note that diversity makes an organization more attractive to a broader array of which increases student innovation, creativity, and complex problem-solving. Therefore, emphasizing the understanding and use of inclusive leadership theory across multiple levels, including the individual, organizational, and the greater system dimension (Gallegos, 2013). This reinforces the priority of equality and social justice in schools. McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux (2020) call for a shift in language and behavior that places ‘equity-mindedness’ as the lens through which the development of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) beliefs, values, and practices can frame the mission of educational institutions in ways that trickle down to the reframing of classroom environments. A comprehensive and inclusive approach to the success of DEI populations must be explored and integrated into the systemic structure in order to rectify structural disparities (Yang et al., 2018). It is important to note the distinction between the use and understanding of equity and equality to negate distorting the support

needed (Hoffman et al., 2018) and to apply the appropriate strategy. While equality is synonymous with fairness, equity is synonymous with justice (Espinoza, 2007; Winters, 2020). Diversity emphasizes differences and commonalities among social identity groups based on cultural, religious, ethnic, gender, class, and other categories but does not necessarily include issues of inequality (Adams and Zuniga, 2018). The inequality and disparity within society are reflected in the curriculum, textbooks, teacher attitudes and expectations, instructional methodologies, student-teacher interactions, languages, dialects spoken and sanctioned in the schools, and school culture (Nieto and Bode, 2007).

As our society becomes more complex, organizations rely more on partnerships and decentralized practices to keep up with the diversified complexity and uncertainty companies face today. In addition, the world is rapidly changing face, requiring more adaptation, agility, and blurred boundaries to create interconnected systems that span roles, functions, and services where appropriate (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). The literature supports that when approaching the task of leadership with humility, courage, authenticity, and openness, the willingness to learn and engage is fostered (Gallegos, 2013). The theory of positive organizational change develops profound levels of relatedness through sharing of strengths, resources, values, and capacities, allowing a move towards accepting the whole and part of oneself (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Yang et al. (2018) assert mindfulness can aid in developing equity-mindedness through a learned practice of awakening the individual to threats to their own identity, such as stereotype threats, providing strategies to attend to the present moment with attention to regulation. Yang et al. (2018) further the practice of attention regulation that results in the use of cognitive processes to re-appraise the situation and inform decision-making based on critical thought.

As the designers of organizational culture, the critical role of education leaders is to be the voice of a unified meta-narrative that upholds a vision of an inclusive culture with an action-focused mission that embraces the organizational whole (Gallegos, 2013). Mindfulness practices can be used to connect to equity-mindedness by contributing to organizational health through increased awareness of one's own identity threats (closely synonymous with one's intersectional identities), observations of responses to those threats, and the ability to utilize cognitive processes that aid in the regulation and reassessment of context and environment when engaging in interdependence (Yang et al., 2018). The approach and application of equity-mindedness require both the honest assessment of self and that of structural barriers and biases that pervade school environments and classrooms that mitigate against equity goals for student success (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). When examining organizational environments, specifically classrooms, there is a narrow breadth of scholarship studying mindfulness as a mediating role between resilience and teachers' job-related stressors and teacher-student interactions that directly affect the classroom environment (Seo and Yuh, 2021) and the health of the organizational whole. The practicality behind mindfulness is the "perceptual and contextual processing and application of information or generic knowledge [producing] a proactive alertness to and consideration of context and perspective" (Capel, 2014, p.64). Mindfulness is defined as a practice focused on the present moment, "an intention-based process, emphasizing an observant and non-reactive stance toward one's thoughts, emotions, and body states" (Tarrasch, 2014, p. 1322). Mindfulness becomes essential to supporting individuals' cognitive abilities, attitudes, and behaviors, assisting them in identifying and utilizing creative solutions leading to concepts of sustainability and innovation in organizations (Siqueira and Pitassi, 2016). Thomas (2022) furthers, "as a society, we often forget

that [we as] humans are part of our global ecosystem and that we don't exist separately from nature, we coexist every day" (p.3).

When practicing mindfulness from the first-person perspective, meaning thinking of oneself only in relation to the external, one becomes aware of their stream of consciousness, and "this conscious awareness focuses on the sensory facts of the situation, returning from distracting thoughts, each time they are noticed, to the object of our mindfulness" (Molino et al., 2014, p.25). Stream of consciousness is a term used in the field of psychology that refers to the movement or course of thoughts through the conscious mind (Molino et al., 2014). Attention is the opening to awareness and meditation is a way to increase awareness and mindfulness by learning to hear internal and external sounds. Leaders have the opportunity to create the right conditions that can yield more effective and meaningful conversations that develop collaborative action (Winters, 2020). Various classroom-based studies (Bakosh, et. al. (2015); Sharp & Lawrence (2016); Solhaug, et.al. (2016); Tarrasch (2014) examine the mental and emotional well-being of students by facilitating meditation to identify stressors and the impact that mindfulness meditation has on increasing students' academic and social-emotional well-being. Students from the time they enter formal educational systems and environments at the prekindergarten and kindergarten grade levels throughout their college years are continuously exposed to new levels of stress and anxiety in relatively unfamiliar settings (Wick, 2013). Volanen (2016) stated, that in contemporary society [students] must deal with several stressors on daily basis ranging from family-system disturbances, school context, and socio-cultural challenges [regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion]. Caligiuri (2012) discusses diversity and inclusion - a concept of cultural competency requiring a tolerance for ambiguity, an appropriate level of self-efficacy, and curiosity and desire to learn. To add to unfamiliar settings and stressors for both students and teachers, over the course of the last years,

2019 to current, the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on mental health, creating a rippled imbalance in well-being (Vos, Habibovic, Nyklicek, Smeets, & Mertens, 2021). Having a tolerance for ambiguity reflects Weiss' (2006) willingness to take risks and resiliency in the face of uncertainty - demonstrating an ability "to disassociate one's worth from negativism" (p.479).

How one conceptualizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) determines what they practice and their support in the school setting. In the case of DEI in schools, the teachers' assumptions, attitudes, and approaches toward the challenges posed by any disparities as a result of any historical inequities are driven by their perceptions of these concepts in their educational spaces, and the materials schools provide to drive equity, diversity, and inclusion (Skiba, 2002). Vos et al. (2021) examine methods through which psychological well-being and awareness of one's positive personality traits like resilience and mindfulness can protect against negative mental health consequences (i.e., depression, fear, stress, and anxiety). Furthering, mindfulness practice is not the elimination of stressors but rather a method of developing the mind's innate capabilities, including abilities directly associated with leadership excellence such as compassion, clarity, creativity, and focus (Marturano, 2015). Sharp et al. (2016) add mindfulness and character strengths work together to cultivate well-being in a synchronous manner that results in the positivity that has the potential to multiply. Leaders and leadership scaffolded in mindfulness invites the practitioner to be more of who they are versus a focus to be different, creating an arena influencing authenticity and becoming fully aware of who you are, and then seeing what is around you (Marturano, 2015). Bell, Love, Washington, and Weinstein (2007) further how leaders inside and outside of the classroom often struggle with their own social identities and biases, challenging leaders to develop a willingness to examine and deal honestly with fears, assumptions, and emotional reactions to oppressive structures and social issues.

Kets de Vries & Engellau (2010) proclaim that to understand the human being, we must start with motivational needs that during maturation, mental schemas emerge in the unconscious mind that influence our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Exploring the language, reframing the narrative, constantly checking the temperature of the “room,” self-examining one’s perspective, behavior, feelings, and emotions. Persistence to move from the balcony to the dance floor. The modern organization establishes a dialogue between areas that otherwise function independently by blurring sectors (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). Ultimately, the understanding of “the human mind should be looked at as a dark sea swarming with strange forms of life, most of them unconscious and not illuminated. Unless we can understand how the motives that issue from this obscurity generate, we can hardly hope to foresee or control them” (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2010, p.186).

### *Agency and social justice*

According to Adams and Zuniga (2018), equity minded leadership requires a deep understanding of the role of social justice and social group differences in shaping an organization that holds equity at the center. Social justice requires recognizing social group differences and understanding how social differences connect to social group inequality. Meaning social justice education must embed in the curricula of education institutions, including higher education curricula, and its practice requires it to be a forefront topic for leaders and educators teaching in diverse classrooms.

Educational institutions have a legal responsibility to ensure equality of access opportunity. Furthermore, they have a moral and social responsibility to put just policies and practices that help achieve more equitable educational experiences and outcomes for all learners (Hoffman et al., 2018). For example, while teachers and parents want students to be successful and provided with the right tools and resources to succeed, students are sometimes not provided with what they need to

exploit their full potential. Hoffman et al. (2018) assert equality is concerned with giving everyone equal opportunity to access and participate in education at all levels; in contrast, equity is concerned with ensuring equitable educational participation and achievement by meeting the varied needs of all students. For this research, diversity is considered as being about representation. However, conscious that mere numerical representation, for instance of underrepresented groups and celebrating “difference,” does not mean there is “equity” (Castro, 2015). Instead, consider inclusion about involvement or participation and equity being about justice. As McCleary-Gaddy (2019) suggests, these three terms indicate that the presence of identity differences does not make us better by showing us how we are all dissimilar. Instead, it makes us smarter by thinking critically about how our identity differences can advantage (include) or disadvantage (exclude) specific groups of people—the conscious awareness of identity intersectionality. Intersectionality draws attention to the complexity of identities and facilitates the abandonment of dichotomous thought, whether one is simply oppressed or not (Collins, 2018). Understanding the parts to the whole and that each individual part is not only part (inclusion) of the whole but necessary (equity) for proper or healthy functioning.

Importance is relevant because teachers’ in-class and out-of-class practices influence how they perceive these concepts, impacting their support for teaching and learning purposes. Yang et al. (2018) assert social mobility, and economic prosperity are directly tied to the education of the workforce. Creating respectful and collaborative relationships changes the narrative, constructing a moral vision of the kind of society they want for themselves and all people across racial divides (Warren, 2018). Education institutions were once the welcoming space to radical ideas, the development of agency and training ground for theory and practice, of freedoms and liberties, that arguably also lack the framework to properly assess the environment and context with necessary

responsive actions that implement “structural competency pedagogy” (Punti & Dingel, 2021, 110). Creating culturally responsive pedagogy is not one more thing on an educator’s or leader’s plate but rather the plate upon which all else is placed. Leadership is about the pre-work, the steps to understand one’s own positionality. Cognitive thinking is a chance to expose implicit bias, a mental shift to decouple deficit from difference. Wisner (2014) supports the notion that mindfulness and learning go hand-in-hand, and school professionals incorporating alternative methods to promote student success find that mindfulness meditation helps students focus on strengths, fosters self-regulation, as well as nurtures flexibility of cognition.

The Department of Education, under the Obama Administration (as cited in Yang et al. 2018), called for leaders’ commitment to diversity and equity [mindedness] as a centered value across all levels of the education system. Collins (2018) suggests using intersectionality as categories of connection that builds empathy – learning to talk to one another and not assume understanding. Intersectionality highlights the multitude of a person that does not fall within a dichotomous understanding. Dichotomous language dilutes identities and the cultural legacies coupled with those identities. Intersectionality connotes the possibility of multiple identities and cultural traditions that fall within one individual (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Adams (2007) infers the importance of teachers considering the distinction between how one teaches from what one teaches and examines the foundations for what we believe. Furthermore, it examines how classroom practices foster environments where educators engage student participation in cognitive and social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is grounded on the understanding that the best knowledge emerges in enriched environments with supportive relationships that make learning relevant, engaging, and meaningful (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.).

### **Background of the Problem**



The Ignatian notion of *Cura Personalis*, having concern for the individual person, looks beyond intellectual learning to the development of the whole person (Geger, 2014). *Teachers* are more than educational guides; they are leaders who take a personal interest in every student's intellectual and affective development (Geger, 2014). How people grow, cope, survive, and develop personal mastery in the face of fears, overcoming doubt, and realizing dreams and joys (Cobbs, 1989) is nothing new. Solhaug et al. (2016) refer to mindfulness as the arena for coping with challenges and improving life quality. Deepening relationships reduce unreliable information as trust and respect are present and increase collaboration among members to reach critical decisions (Solhaug et al., 2016). The dynamics now, in comparison to previous periods that examine how policies, economics, and changing demographics affect power and resource distribution (Cobbs, 1989), have paid little attention to how leaders cope in environmental contexts charged with systemic oppression issues (Bell, Love, Washington, and Weinstein, 2007). Mindfulness helps to develop the capacity for relaxed, choiceless awareness [the intention not to choose, but rather stay aware of where attention resides] illuminating a broader range, providing the opportunity to experience disciplined introspection to learn how one's mind works and the systematic observation of its contents, one at a time (Germer, Siegel, and Fulton, 2005).

Since the ethnic revitalization movements of the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic groups have articulated their grievances and pushed for equality and structural inclusion (Banks, 2004; Paris and Alim, 2014; Singh, 2019; McNair et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In the ethnic movements, the people demanded that the institutions within their nation-states – such as schools, colleges, and universities – become more responsive to their needs, hopes, and dreams (Nieto and Bode, 2007). [Equity-minded] leaders have the influence and positionality to enable people from all groups to

develop an awareness and understanding of racism that foster strategies for working in coalitions to engage in equity work (Bell, Love, and Roberts, 2007). Zuniga (2018) articulates,

The courage needed to question and engage in coalition and collaboration across differences. It takes effort to *get ready* for reading, talking, feeling, healing, and learning from people from all walks of life, engaging in dialogue to ensure our vision of hope for a more inclusive and just democracy is shaped by the voices and experiences of all the people involved (p.601).

One of the ways educational institutions responded was by implementing multicultural education intended to be culturally responsive to the needs of those who felt disenfranchised. But as Love (2018) infers, all members of society play a role in keeping inequitable systems in place through learned socialization preparing the individual “to play roles of dominant or subordinate in systems of oppression” (p.611).

Multicultural education tries to provide students with educational experiences that enable them to maintain commitments to their community cultures and acquire the knowledge, skills, and cultural capital needed to function in the national civic culture and community (Banks, 2007). The implication is that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in educational spaces should acknowledge differences instead of sweeping them under the carpet. In a society where the common good prevails, diversity is a positive element and leads to harmony. When the common good is ignored, diversity turns the community into a battlefield where everyone defends that for which they stand. Love (2018) suggests,

A liberatory consciousness enables the maintained awareness of the dynamics of oppression without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition,

acknowledging the role played by the self and others, without blame, and at the same time practicing intentionality about changing inequitable structures (p.611).

Given that all children come to school with cultural capital and intelligence, despite their variety, the teachers' work is to build students' academic mindset by recognizing and cultivating the gifts and strengths of every student and getting each student to believe in themselves, deconstructing any of their own internalized stereotypes. Pervasive roots of self-hatred become the lens through which one judges the world (Coates, 2015). Differences in power limit our ability to connect with one another. Feelings of fit are not necessarily the person's problem but the awareness of the system that gives way for feelings of confusion and politics over policy (Bolman & Deal, 2006). To minimize such difficulty is to realign societal systems that reinforce the experiences by realigning roles and relationships and anticipating structural issues (Bolman & Deal, 2006). The structure provides clarity and security, where change disrupts it all by undermining existing arrangements (Bolman & Deal, 2006). Shifting the mindset is a practice of patience and compassion that nurtures the self.

### **Statement of the Problem**

For decades, the U.S. has been a multicultural community focusing on addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the school curriculum. However, despite educational institutions' best efforts to DEI, students of color continue to feel marginalized, not heard, and not able to feel psychologically safe (Lo, et al., 2017). The national rhetoric at the forefront today has fostered a new structure encouraging discriminatory speech and actions that for a period prior to, the past five decades (Lo, et al., 2017) would be condemned [but now is cloaked under the clause of free speech], "simultaneously unveiling underlying policies and practices that contribute to the persistence of racial inequality in the classroom and beyond" (McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-

Piqueux, 2020). Deficit approaches to teaching and learning bolstered across the education landscape that “view the cultural way of being for many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome in order to learn (Paris and Alim, 2014). In districts serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, schools are more likely to have underprepared, less experienced, or unqualified teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Teachers haven’t focused on the students, just as schools haven’t focused on the teachers bringing so many experiences to the curriculum and classroom. For most faculty [and many leaders], the professional training has not prepared them adequately to deal with emotionally and socially charged issues (Bell, Love, Washington, and Weinstein, 2007).

Part of the educational environment is creating a space (the classroom) where students can feel safe and brave and included. Lo, et al. (2017) suggest the first step is to understand current racial differences in students’ assessment of race relations in the classroom, campus, and beyond. Students of color must constantly read the room or environment, adapt to rules and regulations, and continuously find integration paths in a society exclusive to them. Thurston (2019) stated, “I’m here because I was loved, invested in, went to the right schools, but I live [constantly counteracting] fear.” To democratically empower marginalized students, it is essential to create a collaborative environment where knowledge is created, biases and stereotypes are deconstructed, and students engage in sensemaking that they can apply to their own lives (Hooks, 1989, 1994; Bell, Love, and Roberts, 2007; McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2021) calls for a reset of education pedagogy with a culturally relevant lens – rests on three tenants inclusive of student learning, cultural competence [“students are secure in their knowledge and understanding of their own culture and are developing fluency and facility in at least one other culture” (p.71)], and

socio-political consciousness [providing students with the intellectual tools to be able to address present-day concerns.

Because of the slow pace of change, it is important to address students' needs now with tools like mindfulness to support students through the identity development process. From personal experience as a Black woman and doctoral student, the feelings of isolation, distrust, powerlessness, and pain when ambition is stifled, and needs are circumscribed in an emotionally damaging way from faculty who were trusted to offer guidance and help. Dillard (2006) asserts, far too often scholars of color experience harsh censorship, gatekeeping, and [policing of behavior] with an underlying basis in discrimination and forms of exclusion. From 1999 to 2010, Black students represented forty-seven percent of doctoral enrollments in higher education institutions, sixty-five percent of those degrees were awarded to Black women, yet the remnants of systemic racism, discrimination, and exclusion continue impact educational achievement on all levels (Williams, et al., 2016). The work of Peters and Nash (2021) is critical in acknowledging the existence of [many] Black women's educational leadership practice rooted in resistance via creating spaces to challenge racist structures and discrimination. Mindfulness supports leaders' equity-mindedness fostering present-centered, compassionate acceptance "focusing on our direct experiences of life that assists us in self-inquiry and understanding" (Mapel, 2012).

Although efficacies of mindfulness practice have shown to reduce stressors, mindfulness in the context of education is an emerging field (Seo and Yuh, 2021; Mapel, 2012), with little emphasis on the development of leaders' equity-mindedness. Utilizing mindfulness practices in the classroom can be an effective method to increase success by promoting focused awareness while fostering a better understanding of oneself and the relationship to the environment (Thomas, 2022; Seo and Yuh, 2021; Yang et al., 2017). A study conducted by Mapel (2012) reported students found

mindfulness assisted in increased focus, centering and increased self-management in stressful situations, and helpful in their personal lives that in turn enhanced their educational experience. Inclusion reaches deeper, beyond merely developing compassion and caring, but having the courage to be brave while engaging in critical conversations and tough decision-making (Gallegos, 2013).

The field of education, educators, and leadership have recently considered the value of mindfulness in the pedagogical context, where studies indicate positive results from mindfulness practice in the classroom (Mapel, 2012). In a time of blatant discrimination, this is the moment for the emergence of new diverse, multicultural leadership incorporating practices of diverse cultures in a respectable manner that encourages various people to draw on their potential (Bordas, 2012). There is a call, a need to rethink critical pedagogies and multicultural teacher education (Ladson-Billings, 2021) through fundamental shifts in the epistemological level of understanding the nature of knowledge itself (Dillard, 2006). It is more important than ever that education leaders exercise racial equity with vigor and conviction to mobilize the power of knowledge to combat inequitable structures and prepare the next generation of leaders to not repeat the continual cycle of harm and trauma experienced today (McNair et al., 2020). As a start, higher levels of mindfulness practice have shown to be associated with a more enriched quality of relationships with students – less conflicts and increased teacher engagement (Seo and Yuh, 2021). While there is a growing body of literature across fields of study indicating the benefits of incorporating mindfulness into the educational setting (Mapel, 2012; Seo and Yuh, 2021), very little has been written about leadership experience with mindfulness in the classroom as a means toward the development of equity-minded leadership.

Unfortunately, current research suggests students of historically oppressed groups remain marginalized in school. Black, Latino, and Indigenous students perform worse on nearly every

educational measure-valued by U.S. schools (Khalifa et al., 2016). As Diversi and Moreira (in Kimmel & Ferber, 2018) assert, we cannot erase the oppression in the marked body. But we can allow the wounds to speak up in their bodies. Winters (2020) states that research shows that women and people of color are more often penalized for speaking up for inclusion, suggesting a lack of safety. Ensuring a safe classroom space to self-actualize and engage in dialogue allows students to find creative problem-solving techniques. These techniques address the multifaceted issues of their community by naming and framing their identity and alliance - which may have never been possible for them outside of the classroom. When schools provide equitable access to education and support tolerance of those who look different or have special needs, it positively affects learning (UNESCO, 2017). To achieve a balanced, diverse education experience, all learners, particularly those from underrepresented groups, need to get appropriate instructional experiences – a safe space to share from lived experiences that encourages engagement and learning in the context of information that assists in the understanding of how these experiences are shaped by systemic patterns of oppression issues (Bell, Love, And Roberts, 2007) - from teachers using tools - mindfulness helps to more skillfully respond to uncertainty, and allows for the development of insight into thoughts and behaviors (Germer, et al., 2005) that create an equal chance for all learners to achieve their educational goals. Mindfulness gives one permission to not only become aware of thoughts and emotions but to feel them, making one less likely to turn to distractions that are unhealthy – mindfulness allows one to see other choices (Marturano, 2015). A practice equally beneficial to students as well as teachers and leaders.

Although educational institutions have programs and policies that have been in place for a long time, there remains confusion about what DEI efforts should look like or reflect. Lo, et al. (2017) infer the confusion is due to differences in students perceptions of the role of racism in

campus race relations coupled with institutional policies that obscure support for diversity. When leadership practices that fail to adopt a critical perspective on race's impact on education achievement [and the health of the whole person], students still grapple with inequities in education (Yull, 2014). Exposing students to activities that demonstrate respect for diversity in the classroom can create classroom atmospheres that hold respect for others in high esteem, leaving no room for intolerance, and many school leaders know this. A measure of effectiveness demonstrates the capacity to engage in the demands and challenges of the role. Marturano (2015) considers capacity as bandwidth – having the mental and emotional space "to see, feel, hear, and reflect on what is in front of us and what is inside of us" (p. x). Still, few provide such spaces that demonstrate their commitment to advocating diversity, equity, and inclusion (UNESCO, 2017). Mindfulness practice is considered an effective method to shift thoughts from wrong to strong rather than what is necessarily right. This notion was furthered by considering "perceptions of ability and readiness are social constructs" (Hatt, 2012, p.439), and therefore methods like mindfulness can be used to redesign constructs.

Some factors that work against a prosperous, equitable educational experience for learners are social-emotional stressors and the inability to cope, coupled with the unawareness of the identity development stage that diminishes the ability to not only academically perform but to understand and process internal feelings and external stressors. Studies (Bakosh et al. (2015); Sharp & Lawrence (2016); Solhaug et al. (2016); Tarrasch (2014) show a perceived improvement in stress coping, better awareness of thoughts and feelings, increased self-efficacy, and improved academic performance from pre-intervention to post-intervention mindfulness practice. In other words, before we can translate *what* we do into practice, we have to understand *who* we are and the extent of our capacities. Consciousness is always changing as bits and pieces of new information and new



realities are gathered. Within consciousness is a strong vision (Dillard, 2006) that includes elements of “awareness, analysis, action and accountability/ally-ship (Love, 2018, p.611). Senge et al. (1994) discuss intrapersonal mastery and the ascension to interdependence, a depth of developmental awareness “in which you and the world are intimately interrelated” (p.227). Singh (2019) discusses collective healing, requiring an ongoing commitment to knowing and living the truth of one’s racialized experiences of privilege and oppression that entails an ongoing practice of love, care, and advocacy as we build coalitions of social justice allies to develop a more just world (p. 187).

It behooves leaders and teachers to move away from identity as an expertise of knowledge and closer to identity as a spiritual connector of humanity and compassion to move beyond the words to understanding the relationships of those speaking and listening (Dillard, 2006). Furthering, “identity of the spirit moves beyond theorizing it: it requires compassionate engagement” (Dillard, 2006, p.106). To better understand how you see yourself equipped with the mobility to shift from one course to another. There is a critical importance in understanding the unconscious foundations that permeate and often supersede conscious intent.

The adaptive work of DEI needs to develop strategies and practices that challenge dominant organizational paradigms (Gallegos, 2013). Therefore, examining identity development coupled with mindfulness practices is critical to establish an infrastructure to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in school settings. A qualitative research study will help the researcher develop this.

### **Rationale for the Study**

A liberatory consciousness enables the ability to live in oppressive systems with awareness and intentionality rather than the basis of socialization subjected (Love, 2018). Changing a system

in which one dominant group is the beneficiary requires a change of attitude of teachers, students, and leaders towards the systems of oppression, encouraging active participation in the deconstruction of oppressive ideologies. Brain science and mindfulness in the field of neuroplasticity showed our intention to act is formulated in the brain before we become aware of it, suggesting through mindfulness practice – a momentary disengagement to gather our attention – individuals may be able to change the brain to better control behavior through increased awareness of brain activity and intention (Germer et al., 2005). A liberatory consciousness lives outside the patterns learned through socialization that perpetuate inequitable systems (Love, 2018).

In recognition of the importance of education and the cultivation of all minds (Lo et al., 2017; Singh, 2019; McNair et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021), we can begin to equip students with “the ability to refrain from turning away from unpleasant experiences, maintain an open, compassionate attitude” (Tarrasch, 2014, p.1322) that help nourish their learning experience by reducing stress and anxiety, increasing focus and awareness, and creating an equal and inclusive environment. Adams and Zuniga (2018) argue education through the lens of social justice focuses attention on how social group differences interact with systems of power, bringing awareness and understanding of oppression, acknowledging one’s role [privileged or disadvantaged group member], and sharing the commitment for lasting change. Mindfulness practice as a tool embraces an alternative method to approaching student challenges and promoting success in and out of the classroom.

Educators must nurture equality and inclusion within the classroom and school environment to celebrate this diversity and cultivate harmony and respect for all people. There are studies using mindfulness as a moderator in the relationship between stress and anxiety (Vos et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), but very few studies examine mindfulness specifically as a tool for the leaders’

development of mindfulness as a means for increased resiliency (Seo and Yuh, 2021). There is a lack of scholarship, of which this paper aims to begin, that focuses on mindfulness as a critical practice and methodology for educators and leaders to increase awareness, engagement, and commitment to the continuous efforts towards equity-mindedness as a leadership practice and enmeshed in leader development. The exact role of mindfulness is less clear, but what is known are the observed benefits of reframing mindsets that are more resilient (Vos et al., 2021). Seo and Yuh (2021) define resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p.1).

Students enter the classroom carrying an assortment of beliefs. These beliefs may include racial and cultural prejudices picked up from their neighborhoods, pop culture, and families. Educators can help combat discord by supporting positive behaviors among students, fostering a sense of belonging for all students and their families, and instilling respect for all people (Warren, 2018). Many public schools, including universities, claim to focus on ensuring racial equity in the educational system by addressing the needs of students of color who are furthest from educational justice. Educational institutions are working to undo the legacies of racism in the educational system by allocating resources strategically through a racial equity framework, creating healthy, supportive, culturally responsive environments to eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps among students. Sometimes, educational institutions have good policies for supporting students’ learning techniques and climate. Still, they remain on paper, rarely implemented—a performative act impeding momentum for authentic action-based change, given their lack of a clear equity focus and mindfulness framework.

Finding out whether schools have been able to ‘walk the talk’ becomes very critical because we expend a lot of energy on things that are not meaningful but little on beneficial things. When

considering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), mindfulness helps us become more aware of habits that increase our success and patterns that should and can be changed (Thierry et al., 2016). The ways that we understand meditation and mindfulness efficacies are largely due to significant contributions from the neuroscience field (Smith, 2013). For example, brain scanning showed physical alterations in the brain associated with movement and learning in areas successful for knowledge retention (Ramsburg & Youmans, 2014). Smith (2013) discusses functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) on a group of students practicing meditation resulting in increased activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex. Bostic et al. (2015) illustrate meditation efficacies decreasing hyperactivity in emotional regions of the brain and reducing the stress hormone cortisol. Mindfulness is remembering what it is that we should be doing, and “this mindful position is always the position of the therapist and, when appropriate, also the position of the one who sits in the opposite chair.” (Molino et al. 2014, p. 25). Whatever we do is preceded by a thought, whether we are aware of it or not. Our habits lead to actions that seem outside our control, but all behaviors can be recognized and changed (Wisner, 2014). The practice of meditation can help offer a varied perspective on analyzing texts and material, understanding cultural diversity, and embracing cross-cultural practices (Solhaug et al., 2016).

Utilizing mindfulness practices in the classroom can effectively increase success by promoting self-control, respect for self and classmates, awareness, concentration and focus, and balance, which Sharp et al. (2016) say will bridge the gap between personal development and talent development. The improved implementation of mindfulness programs in schools are essential steps to address academic decline and foster a healthy learning environment. With a healthier climate within educational arenas and improved attitudes from students, faculty, staff, and leaders, the opportunity for success is more realistically and practically attainable. In recognizing the

importance of mindfulness meditation as a learning tool, we can better understand how educators can equip students with tools that help nourish their learning experience.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

How can mindfulness practice be used as a tool to assist leaders in creating an organizational culture scaffolded in conscious awareness?

- A. What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' and leaders' well-being?
- B. How do mindfulness practices in the classroom promote equity-mindedness and support DEI efforts?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance and intellectual merit of the study lie in the sustainable development and implementation of mindfulness practice, encouraging the education of the whole person. The classroom is an excellent space to make sense of experiences, beliefs, and questions. The educational process is when students explore and try to find answers or explanations. Mindfulness practices help to support the ability to manage and cope with stressors by bringing one's attention to the present moment without judgment (Vos et al., 2021), being beneficial for students, teachers, and schoolwide leadership experiencing, engaging, discussing social justice tenets regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion through an awareness of one's own intersectional identities. Furthermore, this study seeks to open leaders' eyes to the importance of utilizing mindful practices that reduce stress and increase focus, motivation, classroom engagement, and mental and cognitive well-being for students, staff, and teachers in schools. As a leader, hope, the participatory action for influencing in an authentic way begins with the willingness to become fully aware of who you are, then opening to

observations of what is around you, developing the ability to change your relationship with the external environment, creating limitless potential for positive impact (Marturano, 2015).

Agard (2020) asks an important question - Are we honest with ourselves when we feel emotions – jealousy, fear, anger – do we stop to reflect and ask why we feel the way we feel, or do we just act out our feelings? Bringing awareness of intersectional identities allows for the opportunity for all organizational members, from students to faculty and professional staff, to examine and understand identity development. The ability to be present and manifest leadership presence is critical for the individual, “but also has a ripple effect on those around us, and potentially the world at large” (Maturano, 2015, p.13). Consciousness is a continuous and lived process that includes active participation in breaking down the structures that perpetuate injustice, with the increased awareness that privilege is the ability to opt-in and out of the conversation of social justice. For matters of the classroom, awareness and understanding identities provides the mindful attention to curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Vos et al. (2021) suggest that being aware of one’s experiences and accepting negative thoughts and feelings is related to lower psychological distress during stressful life events. The constant and continuous psychological trauma experienced by isolation, rejection, and marginalization as a result of the lack of DEI practices is something that needs to be eliminated in order to reach more optimal conditions for diverse students. In a study conducted by Vos et al. (2021), results found mindfulness significantly moderated the relationship between fear, anxiety, and stress, buffering against the negative impact of unavoidable events and socially structured oppressions. There are exploratory and interactive forms of teaching and leading that enrich the

curriculum through DEI practices and a social justice lens that enhances every student's learning and cultivates respect and equity for all.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Bias:** Refers to any attitude, belief, or feeling that results in, and helps to justify, unfair treatment of an individual because of their identity (Gutierrez-Gomez and Pauly, 2006).

**Diversity:** In North America, "diversity" is strongly associated with racial diversity. However, as researchers have found out, that is just one dimension of human reality. Washington (2008) advances conceptualized diversity as representing many individual differences and similarities among people. Thus, diversity can encompass various human characteristics such as race, age, creed, national origin, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

**Equity:** Is creating fair access to opportunities. Equity is defined as "the idea that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized and minoritized communities have access to what they need to be successful" (Castro, 2015, p. 6). In addition, equity is centered on just treatment within the educational process (i.e., everyone is entitled to be treated fairly as a matter of social justice). So, whereas equality is concerned with giving everyone an equal opportunity to access and participate in education at all levels, equity is concerned with ensuring equitable educational participation and achievement by meeting the varied needs of all students (Hoffman et al., 2018).

**Inclusion:** UNESCO (2009) defines inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. Concerning education, we take inclusion to entail a right to access learning opportunities and

participate fully in the learning process. We look at it to create an environment where diverse groups are accepted, appreciated, and involved in the teaching and learning process.

**Intersectionality:** Are intersecting forms of oppression and other facets of a person's identity, including race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and others (Aaron, 2019).

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is a practice focused on the present moment, "an intention-based process, emphasizing an observant and non-reactive stance toward one's thoughts, emotions, and body states" (Tarrasch, 2014, p. 1322). The idea is to direct the capable learner towards academic success by training the mind through various techniques to calm amidst the crisis or trauma and home-in on the present moment, acknowledging, accepting, and letting go. Meditation physically reinforces mindfulness training.

**Social-emotional Learning:** SEL is the process of attending to the disequilibrium [students] experience from pervasive social oppression that, through supportive learning environments, gives [students] the opportunity to make sense of social reality (Bell and Griffin, 2007).

**Social Justice:** Bell (2007) suggests that social justice is both a process and a goal to full and equal participation of all societal groups, with an equal distribution of resources. The visionary goal is of a society where all members feel physically and psychologically safe and individuals are both self-determining beings able to develop full capabilities and interdependent with the ability to interact democratically (Bell, 2007).



## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, social ills such as poverty, ineffective social policies, and inequitable access to resources affect people of color most severely (Guinier & Torres, 2002). This is no less true in the nation's public schools, where the effects of poverty and insufficient and inequitably allocated resources particularly hinder the academic success of students of color (Blaisdell, 2016). Whitaker and Valtierra (2019) contend that multicultural education research from the last three decades consistently demonstrates that students from disenfranchised social groups, such as students of color, receive subpar education in U.S. public schools compared to their wealthier, White peers. Whitaker and Valtierra (2019) continue to note that the everchanging exhaustive, and exhausting list of policies, coupled with the discouraging data about the glaring achievement gaps between White students and Black or Brown students, makes it clear that we have not dealt well with diversity in our schools. The pace of systemic change in organizations and society (climate change, racial justice, and the many inequalities experienced) is frustrating, recognizing that we need to address root problems rather than focus on tackling symptoms. The acknowledgment of history assists in tracing the design's foundation to racism and oppression (Bell, 2007). Rayner and Bonnici (2021) further state that the future demands a new type of leadership that values the process as much as the results, a kind of leadership coupling transformative and technical approaches to social change.

It is the ability of the leader to put the needs of others first, as a mission tenet that values the individuals that make up the whole. Systems thinking is to consider the implications of actions over broader space and time dimensions while intimately mindful of the humility within the present moment. Senge et al. (1994) add that "you can't practice systems thinking as an individual" (p.92).

Systems approaches find new ways to understand the broader picture beyond the divide, understanding the role and purpose of importance from the smallest bolts required to hold together the screws that connect the parts of the machine. Winters (2020) states that learning how to dialogue about systems is to take a systematic approach to understanding the elements that make up the whole. In other words, the relevance of systems thinking and application is minimizing unintended consequences. According to Lash (2021), critical multicultural education and culturally responsive civic education can develop students' consciousness.

The problems and solutions concerning DEI in educational environments are not solely increasing diversity, implementing equitable policies through a social justice lens, or fostering the inclusion and voice of difference. Organizational effectiveness requires the efforts of many across levels. Thus, trying to enact one "without the others is like a three-legged stool missing a leg – inevitably, it will fall" (Merron, 2006, p.381). Systems thinking is a critical asset to bringing a shared vision to fruition by widening and deepening (Senge et al., 1994) the inclusive process of understanding and implementing the shared vision plan. The energy and movement created through collective aspirations is team learning, the next step from the shared vision efforts (Senge et al., 1994).

In order to engage a systems approach, all members of the organization must be equipped with the social-emotional support to develop the capacity needed to strengthen self-efficacy and social justice agency. The practice of mindfulness is certainly no flip of the switch but rather coupling the movement and levels of identity development and the transformational mind that yields the cognitive capacity to process societal injustices concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion. Kegan and Lahey (2010) suggest that the trajectory of mental development in adulthood

has discernibly distinct levels where movement, reaching higher levels of cognitive complexity is not arbitrary. Each level enables a vastly different view of the world and one's place in it. Identity transition is the bridge between the old and new selves (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010).

It is important to recognize that identity development is an evolutionary process (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010), having various stages of transformation and complexity from “established identities, transition, and integration of new self-conceptions” (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010, p.665). The established identity is the personal narrative we carry with us as we develop into adulthood. As we begin to transition, we can learn through experiences and or interventions of sorts to identify the strengths and areas of the self to hold onto as we integrate new identity perspectives, creating a new narrative. The shadows from maturation unknowingly create mental schemas that must come to light. Mindfulness is listening to those mental schemas with curiosity, being courageous, and leading by collaboration in a way that empowers those who will follow. Knowing the self is critical for any person at any stage in their lives, particularly in the classroom, where learning, exploration, and critical examination should be a safe and brave space.

The unilluminated unconscious mind leaves shadows of ourselves that make their way to the light, where many well-thought-out strategies completely break down because of out-of-awareness forces of the unconscious that influence behavior (Kets de Vries & Engellau, 2010). Rayner and Bonnici (2021) note that when we examine the ways that crisis demonstrates the ability to both keep individuals and communities apart and then create ideal conditions to become more aware of what binds us together as human beings across boundaries, systems are at play. For clarity's sake, I make the distinction between conflict and crisis, where conflict is something you have the ability to resolve, and crisis is something you have to weather the storm. In a crisis, you can control *how* you weather the storm (I.e. using mindfulness practices as a tool to increase

awareness of thoughts and feelings, providing insight into one's actions and behaviors). A crisis calls for a reset (new ways of thinking and doing) versus a conflict resolution being a mediated result. Amidst crisis is the opportunity to rethink [oppressive structures] and the purposes of education in a multicultural society, providing a reset to reconsider new ways of thinking, being, and doing (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Approaches to confronting the status quo within individuals and group underlying assumptions is the practice of mindfulness as a means to increase capacity and influence inclusion, collaboration, and curiosity to question and learn. Aspects of identities intersect and influence thoughts, feelings, and actions, calling for a deeper understanding of how experiences shape behaviors (Aaron, 2019). Thus, mindfulness supports the identity framework and social-emotional capacity to participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. The social-emotional well-being of the whole person is achieved through active engagement with the ABCs (Ehret, 2020)– *autonomy* having a sense of control over oneself, *belonging* and the ability to connect, and *competence* and data gathering for the purposes of intrapersonal mastery (Caliguri, 2012; Senge et al., 1994). The following sections outline these important notions more fully.

### **Autonomy**

#### ***Agency and social justice***

Change agents engage a creative orientation, creating their futures unbounded by the current reality. They do not blame but rather ask what is needed to change. (Senge et al., 1994). Change agents are everyday people thinking of ideas and ways to improve people's lives and well-being by reducing carbon footprint and nurturing mind-body connections between others and the environment. Thomas (2022) adds we cannot save our [societal environment] without uplifting the voices of its inhabitants, especially those most often silenced or unheard. Change agents look

beyond their scope of causal linear relationships to the broader system. To be an effective change agent is to understand that change creates conflict and sometimes change even creates division.

An effective change agent prepares for obstacles by empowering a coalition of people holding a shared vision, with a degree of urgency to motivate, strategize, and communicate conviction that nurtures and supports new innovative ways of thinking. In organizational dynamics, hierarchy, human interaction, and class systems would tell us that even though one has agency, that does not mean that society recognizes that you exist. Conger (2010) states that finding one's voice is only of value if being heard by those other than the self. The African call 'I see you' (*sawu bona*) and response 'I am here' (*sikhona*); there is acknowledgment and respect as being and thinking; therefore, one is here. I draw upon African concepts and language as a spiritual ancestral connection and recognition of the rhetorical beauty in conveying meaning and values deeper than the extent of a word choice. The spiritual nature of our academic work lies in the unity of mind, body, and spirit, giving homage to the deeper guidance and energies influenced through experiences both ancestral and lived (Dillard, 2006).

In a societal dynamic that uses discrimination as an invisibility cloak over marginalized groups, especially Black women at the intersection of race and gender, the notion of being seen and valued carries critical importance for organizational health, identity development of the whole person, and personal convictions as a Black woman, leader, and educator engaged and navigating that space. Invisibility refers to the condition in which an individual is not fully recognized and valued (Buchanan, N.T. and Settles, I.H., 2018). McCluney and Rabelo (2019) further, "conditions of visibility dictate and distort how marginalized [groups] are perceived, evaluated, and relegated (p.144). The conditions of visibility (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019) create imbalanced dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility (Buchanan, N.T. and Settles, I.H., 2018; Dickens et al., 2019), where

Black women and marginalized individuals are prevented from accurate representation and authentic selves [identity impression], therefore needing to implement code-switching to downplay stereotypes (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019). Code-switching or identity shifting refers to the “conscious or unconscious process of shifting one’s language, and/or cultural behaviors (Dickens et al., 2019).

Bordas (2012) asserts the West African principles of Sankofa represent the notion of *never forgetting*. Sankofa, the mythical bird that looks backward, a reminder of our legacy, with its feet facing forward, symbolizing the past, is a pathway to creating a formidable future (Bordas, 2012). Although there lies a vast distance and mysticism between myself and Africa, there is a desire to reconnect to what feels like home, where I am seen and valued.

In order to be mindful, as a leader and educator in the classroom, is to understand cultural and historical origins and the ways identities are enduring, have not left Black people [with recognition to the degrees of enduring identities of all students of color]. With a healthier climate of awareness within classroom leadership and organizational culture, improved relationships, productivity, and embraced change, the opportunity for increased capacity to learn new ways of thinking and doing is more realistically and practically attainable.

The resistance to change is rooted in the unknown. People will resist or sabotage change waiting for the old way of doing things to return (Bolman & Deal, 2006). A commitment to social justice creates a bridge for others not gatekeepers (Aaron, 2019). The practice of bridge-building is an extension of passing the ancestral torch. For those who have been marginalized and furthest from justice, it embodies the duty to create opportunities and to dismantle systems of oppression for generations after us. Paying it forward, any identity and societal advancements that support the growth and development of diverse peoples. Bolman and Deal (2006) suggest psychological

support, training, and participation increase the likelihood that people will understand and feel more comfortable with the new direction. Changing the mindset to systems thinking is not a matter of evolution or death, but rather an expansion of horizons (personal growth) versus atrophy. To atrophy is a result "of doing more of what worked in the past" (Senge et al., 1994, p.132): These are crippling skillsets versus expanding horizons that prepare one for more complex challenges and interactions.

For people of color to be seen is a question of hypervisibility or invisibility (Buchanan, N.T. and Settles, I.H., 2018). Coates (2015) reminds us that we, as Black people, have been enslaved longer in this country than we have been free, therefore emphasizing the depth and breadth of generational narratives of oppression we seek to dismantle (p.70). Navigating through society requires the ability to code-switch (Winters, 2020) by observing and understanding the dominant societal norms and assumptions. Kim et al. (2019), discusses the [hyper]visibility of certain nonnative accents in the workplace that connote a lack of intelligence and status. Buchanan & Settles (2019) discuss the invisibility of Black women and the hypervisibility of Black men.

Crenshaw (2016) discusses the double bind of Black women having no frames to see or remember them (Evans-Winters and Hines, 2022). Left out of antiracism and violence against Black [men] and removed from the discussion regarding the rights of women [white] (Crenshaw, 1989). It's a power tug of war, and Black women are not even in the game - ignored or made invisible (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019; Dickens et al., 2019; Buchanan and Settles, 2019; Evans-Winters and Hines, 2022; Dillard, 2022). There is a critical need for a narrative reframe to create space for intersectional identities (Lane, 2022). Within the social justice lens, Black women practice servant leadership, perceiving leadership as communal, not individualistic, to further transform their classrooms, schools, and communities into places of hope, not deficit (Aaron, 2019). Black

leadership is grounded in the collective interests and concerns focused on conquering social, political, and economic barriers (Bordas, 2012). Commitment to social justice requires a belief in the capacity of people as agents who can transform their worlds (Bell, 2007).

When considering the breadth and scope of societal marginalization, there is a tendency to shift the blame or *shift the burden* (Senge et al., 1994). The symptom of the problem is societal, the solutions are apparent – system change to equity and inclusion, but quick fixes are used that don't address the root problems. The blame is shifted to the marginalized for feeling like an imposter in a system exclusive of their needs. The blurring of boundaries promotes awareness and consciousness of the internal and external environment, awareness of one's vantage point, and the options or possibilities to gain a better perspective (Daft, 2016). Feeling as an imposter is not the person's problem but the awareness of the system that gives way for feelings of confusion (Bolman & Deal, 2006). The structure provides clarity and security, where change disrupts it all by undermining existing arrangements (Bolman & Deal, 2006). Consequently, the lack of capacity developed to successfully manage confusion, experienced as stress, leads to a snowball of physical and psychological health problems that diminish the social-emotional ability to cope. To minimize such difficulty is to reinforce positive experiences through co-constructed classroom environments that realign relationships.

Experiencing positive emotions “coupled with the use and development of positive language” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, p.230) can help stimulate and broaden resources needed to motivate and transform living human systems to overcome adversity. When considering the interrelated nature of systems, the theory of positive organizational change deepens the intimacies through sharing of strengths, resources, values, and capacities; individuals move to accept the whole and part of oneself (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). The precursor to positive organizational change



theory is Lewin's *3-step model* – *unfreezing, moving, refreezing* (Burnes, 2006). I see this model as a technique to prepare individuals for the process of disruption (unfreeze) needed to reframe (move) and learn (freeze) new behaviors. Those new behaviors are the positive thoughts and language developed within the organization. Specifically for Black women, leaders, and teachers, Lewin's model represents an engagement in a deeper spirituality of (re)cognizing and (re)membering who we are and that "relationship to our authentic selves and stories" (Dillard, 2022, p. xvii). To unfreeze is to (re)member, "how we are the Black girl magic that our students and others deserve" (Dillard, 2022, p. xvii) is the movement required to unlearn deficit and invisibility, freezing in the humanity, creativity, and brilliance of the Black body, mind, and spirit - "that the ancestors prayed for, and the future for which they survived" (Dillard, 2022, p. xvii).

An effective method growing attention from the scientific, medical, and behavioral fields, is the use of mindfulness practice to increase capacity and gain clarity so that time is spent on more focused efforts that aid in the conscious implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices (Shearer et al., 2016). Valuing increased cultural competence is to learn more about others' cultural frameworks and norms as a means for fostering belongingness and inclusion (Winters, 2020). Ferdman and Roberts (2013) further the common understanding of inclusion focusing on what organizations, schools, and classrooms must do to be inclusive or how each individual can be more inclusive of others. Yet, on the contrary, inclusion starts with oneself, knowing, being, and expressing the authentic self that creates a platform for self-inclusion or belonging (Ferdman and Roberts, 2013). Knowing and being utilizes intersectionality to conceptualize the relationship between marginalized experiences and the presuppositions of identity (Carastathis, 2008). In the next section, the importance of understanding how the awareness and recognition of intersectionality and identity development works together, "providing a window into the

perspectives and consciousness of Black women” students, teachers, and leaders (Cannon, 2022, p. 192) will be discussed.

## **Belonging**

### ***Intersectionality and identity development***

Over the past three decades, scholars have examined issues surrounding race and gender; however, a narrowed body of literature has expounded upon the experiences of intersectional identities (Aaron, 2019). Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a term to focus attention on the dynamics of difference and solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). The conceptual definition of intersectionality examines the subjects of interlocking systems of oppression versus the systems themselves (Caraststhis, 2008), therefore emphasizing the experiences and development of the people. Intersectional work has identified various layers of society ranging from the individual to institutional, revealing differing sensibilities regarding how to address marginalized communities and other manifestations of social power, aside from the centrality focus of American Black women and Black feminism (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). As intersectionality has traveled over the decades, its relevance today continues to build on discussions surrounding intersectional praxis making visible the dynamics at play (Crenshaw, 1989) and identity development of the subjects that center the discourse (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013).

Awareness of intersectionality examines the privilege and oppression that resides within an individual, leading one to feel humbled and angered (Nordmarken, 2018). Changing a system of which one dominant group is the beneficiary requires a change of attitude towards the systems of oppression and active participation in the deconstruction of oppressive ideologies. I argue the efficacy of mindfulness practice as the social emotional support needed to couple the process of

narrative deconstruction and construction with identity development. Mindfulness calls for proactive alertness to perceptual and contextual processing and application of information and knowledge (Capel, 2014). Intersectional awareness is garnered through cultural intelligence having a multifaceted competency of [cultural] knowledge, engaged practice of mindfulness, and behavioral repertoire (Crowne, 2013).

Our society needs leaders change agents from all walks of life to guide us by transforming thought patterns, creating new ways of thinking and understanding. In my leadership practice, I use my experiences, wisdom carried from the past, and self-examination, coupled with scholarship and theory to inform the decisions I make and how I interact with the world. Systemic racism can be challenged through education, community building, empowerment, and dialogue that deconstructs the narratives of oppression. The key to that process is providing a starting point for the reconstruction of language that narrates the reality in which we all have equal opportunity on a leveled foundation. Intersectionality highlights the fullness of a whole person that does not fall within a dichotomous understanding. Dichotomous language dilutes identities and the cultural legacies coupled with those identities. I like to frame identity like it's one of many languages (Zheng, 2023). Intersectionality connotes the possibility of multiple identities and cultural traditions that fall within one individual (Mukhopadhyay, 2018).

Becoming aware of the paths of least resistance can be daunting as it's a path that is unknown and often counter to the status quo. We can only begin to think about deconstructing racism and classism by acknowledging the power and dominance at play. A constructivist approach to the co-creation of reality allows the change of the language that frames the narrative that fuels action towards participatory change. Intersectionality helps shape the reality of oppression and privilege by

calling attention to the interaction of multiple social identities, leading to examining social problems and effective social responses (Ferber, 2018).

It is understanding our role as self and as leaders, the students and their relation to others, and the environment that we can witness how there is not one great wo/man but an orchestra of many who create harmony. We all need each other to thrive and grow, as we are all connected in some way, some form. It's so important to keep the dialogue moving and engaged. It's an opportunity to cross boundaries and learn from one another. How we categorize and classify can thwart opportunities to connect. The boundaries between people diminish the possibility of a genuine shared vision and connection (Senge et al., 1994). Acknowledging the *who* and the *what*, we can begin to wrap our minds around *how* to move forward.

For Black women teachers and leaders, understanding the deeper meaning of belonging enables one to draw on a sense of “consciousness of who we are in our bodies, minds, and spirits” (Dillard, 2022, p. 13). The attitude and emotions delivered in both verbal and nonverbal methods vary. But the language, which shapes our narrative, can bring us together versus apart. Values and faith systems run deeper than the fear that paralyzes (Mabille and Steenkamp, 2021). We do not have to uphold the social constructs that force dichotomous language. We can choose the language that respects and values all identities and spiritual exploration. Patterns of language choice “can be interpreted to reveal aspects of speakers’ consciousness, and how they understand their historical position and identity” (Gal, 1987, p.637). There lies more than “the words and the concepts but, what is within the words, the ways that the words help us to be with others in mutually beneficial and loving ways” (Dillard, 2006, p. 106). Interfaith, multiracial, and intersectionality are more than simply language choices but broaden the scope of experiences.

My own vision embodies the creation of a culture that values and respects the interconnected essence of life. Racial injustice hurts us all because it is part of a more extensive system of oppression that includes a multitude of intersectional identities. In some ways, we all are the oppressed or the oppressor. It's not the individual that reproduces oppression but complex structures (Nordmarken, 2018).

Systems thinking establishes an openness to varied truths, building theories of how the world works through scientific inquiry and methodology and using a variety of resources to expand your view of the situation. It is not the easiest way fast, but rather the process to gain the most value from feedback loops (Senge et al., 1994) and reinforcing loops (Senge et al., 1994) to reach a collective understanding with confidence and compassion, and respect. Leadership is the co-constructed development (Mabille and Steenkamp, 2021) of the collective team. Successful teams are considered by Useem (2010) as those being overseen by leaders who build relations within the team and with outside constituents that yield critical information that benefits the team's effectiveness and efficiency. The measure of effectiveness demonstrates the competence to engage in the demands and challenges of the leadership role. Weisbord (2006) discusses the commitment to learning over time, and the pitfalls of developmental tension between knowledge had and knowledge learned. Black people have a long history of educational inequity, where generations have learned to navigate through oppressive structures, finding ways to resist educational exclusion as the means for upward mobility (Jenkins and Anderson, 2022). The critical player in learning from experience is the person developed (McCall Jr., 2010). For Black women [and the larger community of people of color], their experiences are not a monolith but rather a spectrum of identities that differ in the meaning-making experiences depending on factors of socialization, development, and upbringing (Byrd and Porter, 2022).

Change is contingent upon personal development stages (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010), signaling a developmental readiness and capability of higher cognitive complexities. The following section will deepen the discussion of mindfulness as a tool to assist personal mastery through developmental stages of the leader, teacher, and student scaffolded by a comprehensive understanding of social justice practices and multicultural education.

## **Competence**

### ***Mindfulness and personal mastery***

Caliguiri (2012) defines self-efficacy as having confidence in one's skills and ability. Compared to Weiss' (2006) high self-esteem to be able "to disassociate one's worth from negativism" (p.479) illustrates a desire to learn and form deeper understanding. A commitment to the-generation of new ideas to better the lives of others. Mindfulness practice is personal mastery in action.

Consciousness is a continuous and lived process that includes active participation in breaking down the structures that perpetuate racism and injustice, where privilege is the ability to opt-in and out of the conversation of racism (Kimmel, 2018). Racism is a social construct "devoid of any biological premise" (Patton et al., 2016, p.93) designed to classify and exploit. It takes work and effort to maintain the inequities race dictates. Race and racism can be seen infused within our governmental, political, and social spheres that create double standards that perpetuate white supremacy and oppress everyone else. Knowledge is power, and it provides a voice for those disenfranchised by race to participate in collective action. For Black girls to be able to thrive "in their schools and in society, they need to be able to recognize and communicate their feelings to those who will support and protect them" (Jacobs, 2022, p.59). Creating respectful and collaborative relationships changes the narrative, constructing a moral vision of the kind of society wanted for

themselves (Warren, 2018). A constructivist approach to the co-creation of reality allows the change of the language that frames the narrative that fuels action towards participatory change. The attitude and emotions delivered in both verbal and nonverbal methods vary.

Teachers play a vital role in allowing their students to recognize and see their own potential and implementing classroom dynamics and curriculum and best practices that are invested in student's voice (student's input, opinions, expertise, cultural capital, and values) Patton et al., 2016). Cultural capital refers to an internal disposition toward cultural knowledge as a societal resource and power, further "institutionalized through symbols such as academic degrees" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 251). Without the support from or trust in adults, teachers, and peers, children may enter early adulthood lacking the necessary tools to develop a strong sense of self (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quayle, 2016). The psychological and social aspects of education are intrinsically related and facilitate the consideration and sensitivity to difference leading to dialogue and understanding. It is this relationship that stimulates understanding and learning (Flinders & Thornton, 2013) to better become a proxy for change or better understand your role as a participant and the ways you can contribute to critical pedagogical frameworks and multicultural teacher education (Dillard, 2006), "the commitment required to teach Black students [inclusive of the larger community of peoples of color] in their wholeness – mind, body, and spirit" (Dillard, 2022, p. xvii), and policy formation as a "catalyst in (re)shaping educational environments that support [Black women and students of color in their] educational pursuits (Ward, Hardaway, and Njoku, 2022, p.128). Bordas (2012) explains that understanding history is the most challenging part of transforming leaders and their leadership practice to an inclusive form, acknowledging multicultural voices. For leaders who hold the positions to lead, it is a critical time to self-examine their purpose and the greater good.

In a time of acknowledged diversity, equity, and inclusion, this is the moment for the emergence of new diverse, multicultural leadership incorporating practices of diverse cultures in a respectable manner that encourages various people to draw on their potential (Bordas, 2012). Highlighting the best of oneself requires a deeper intrapersonal examination that influences interpersonal relations, which widens the reach collectively – external environment. In other words, taking all your “equity” – your strengths – and leading with those qualities, rather than leading with deficits and weaknesses to be addressed or strengthened. Not to say weaknesses are to be ignored but being mindful of them – acknowledging weaknesses with compassion allowing a positive approach versus avoidance or deficit-approach (Oades, Steger, Fave, & Passmore, 2017). Hazari, Sadler, and Sonnert (2013) note that students form their identity in relation to their social and academic performance rather than their unique individual being. Mindfulness is a practice that supports the process or journey to deeper and greater discoveries, both intra and interpersonally, bringing one closer to balance. Bostic et al. (2015) analyze previous research that regards mindfulness practice as an effective technique that addresses cognitive performance, stress, and resilience, making one aware of thoughts and feelings to better understand the brain’s habitual patterns and providing the necessary structure to develop a strong sense of self. Implementation of mindfulness practice and techniques helps students focus on strengths, fosters self-regulation, nurtures flexibility of cognition, and increases confidence in abilities and self-efficacy (Wisner, 2014).

Contrary to what some may think the benefits of mindfulness are, it is not just to relax, although that may be an outcome. But more so, it is a mental exercise that promotes focused awareness and an understanding of balance and mechanism for gaining a deeper insight and cultivating mental and emotional states with reduced judgment (Bostic et al., 2015; Sharp et al.,



2016; Solhaug et al., 2016). Mindfulness, therefore, is the mental process of taking the meditated or trained mind to attend to the thoughts that arise. It is my desire for my scholarship to illuminate what is needed to be put in place for [Black] students, teachers, and leaders to thrive psychologically and emotionally (Jacobs, 2022) within their full authentic selves. The skills gained or acquired through mindfulness practice can be applied to the many stressors that affect students today, in and out of the learning environment.

Recognizing the importance of education and the cultivation of all minds, we can begin to equip students with skills and tools that help nourish their learning experience. Bostic et al. (2015) illustrate mindfulness [practice] efficacies in decreasing hyperactivity in emotional regions of the brain, as well as the reduction in the stress hormone cortisol. School can be overwhelming at any age as it consists of a lot of new information, navigating socially, and finding the right balance between the two (Wisner, 2014). Students come into the classroom carrying various social, personal, and/or family strains that create stress and anxiety which perpetuate distractions that break attention (Shearer, Hunt, Chowdhury, & Nicol, 2016; Wilson, et al., 2014; Tarrasch, 2014; Volanen, et al., 2016). Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, and Barbosa-Leiker (2015), support the claim that intense stress could be the result of various factors including test pressure, peer pressure, violence, bullying, and poverty, may cause children to ignore what they may know intellectually and instead resort to habitual patterns of emotional reactivity rather logical response. As leaders, we must acknowledge the challenges facing students, particularly students of color, that go beyond the classroom and that directly impact their abilities inside the classroom as well. This inclusive stance reinforces the necessity of integrated efforts or interventions that develop students' social and emotional skills.

Mindfulness can be seen as a best practice to create classroom environments that invite [the student] to pay attention requiring reflection both in action and in stillness “from a place of heart-centeredness and noticing what happens” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 99). To nurture and inspire student voice is to invest in curriculum with student input, student-centered learning, and the cultural capital of their student body (Patton et al., 2016). Education should be inclusive of, and value differences, resulting in opportunities for learning and demonstrations of empathy (Jacobs, 2022), emphasizing the importance of nurturing the whole person through emotional and cognitive support (Dillard, 2022; Hughes et al., 2011). Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction discusses habitus, or one’s ability to define and represent the tacit norms that govern people’s actions, including that of cultural capital, or having a disposition that is predicated on what is acquired during a child’s upbringing and social class (Patton, et al., 2016). Social learning theory emphasizes role models, stating that children observe and imitate people who play key roles in their lives like authority figures, peer leaders, and TV/film heroes and heroines (Newman and Newman, 2016). Black women’s social location has been predicated by the exploitation of their experiences and “status of being invisible yet hypervisible with little concern given to how they make meaning of, heal from and develop despite these circumstances” (Byrd & Porter, 2022, p. 176). Students flourish in student-centered environments, motivating learning and acquiring valuable skills that will build a strong foundation for their future (Bell, 2010). Gross, Iverson, Willett, and Manduca (2015) state that cultivating supportive learning communities, and facilitating faculty and staff mentoring, are beneficial to increasing students’ sense of belonging, academic performance, and a more accurate perception of preparedness and applicability of abilities. There is an urgent need to magnify pedagogical practices that affirm [multicultural] intersectional identities and facilitate nurturing schooling practices (Lane, 2022). Tomasko, Ridgway, Waller, and Olesik, (2016) express that when

students are learning in a supportive environment, they can develop self-efficacy that facilitates increased possibility for success.

Mindfulness seeks to bridge the gap between personal development and talent development by training the mind to diminish wandering and adding an increased level of focus (Sharp, Niemiec, & Lawrence, 2016). Caliguiri (2012) adds “the way we as humans make sense of unfamiliar situations is often through the relationships we forge with others who can guide us” (p.53)—providing an opportunity to see situations from multiple vantage points and an interest in connecting with others on a personal level. Relationships and narratives change, slowly changing the role of our identity that challenges who or what one wants to become or one’s possible self (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010). Senge et al. (1994) further that “as people develop more open knowledge of each other’s drives, preferences, and sensitivities, their ability to diagnose problems increase (p.416).

### **Conclusion**

The everyday adversities facing students today require the actions of not just parents and family but by administrators and faculty to design methods to assist students who need a way to cope (Wisner, 2014). Bostic et al. (2015) indicate stress and anxiety are often contributing factors that diminish mental and emotional well-being, limit cognitive abilities to focus, and inhibit academic performance. “The collective consequences of these concerns directly influence [Black] students’ academic and identity development” (Byrd and Porter, 2022, p. 175). Volanen (2016) states, “in contemporary society, children and adolescents have to deal with several stressors on a daily basis. Stressors may arise from family-system disturbances, peer conflicts, school conflicts, socio-cultural challenges, vulnerabilities to physical and mental health problems, or from living in the fast-paced, media-saturated, and multi-tasking world that sets high demands for performance,

success, and competition” (p.2). It is not uncommon for students, especially in higher education, to experience psychological stressors, however; Black women [students] “face culturally specific mental health concerns beyond the common issues to include, but not limited to, gendered racism and trauma” (Byrd and Porter, 2022, p. 174). Education and learning should be inclusive to all as the core of education should be maintained by wisdom and kindness/compassion. The pedagogical philosophy of the awakened mind is an inclusive and attainable goal for anyone, as “it is wise to be kind and kind to wise” (Smith, 2013, p.163).

Leadership is knowing when your capacity is reached, to have the courage to engage the system for resources that can redirect one’s mindset. Taoism uses paradoxes to illustrate principles of teaching and learning without providing answers. I find enlightening *the paradox of letting go*, which suggests when you let go of what you have, you receive what you need. Therefore, by yielding, you endure (Heider, 1985). The [wholeness of the] change agent, motivated by the awareness of what is happening externally, must take the time to do personal work (Hughes, et al., 2011). Wholeness is knowing that being balanced or well is the “complementary side of the coin of being sick or unbalanced (Dillard, 2022, p. 9). It’s about letting go of control, and understanding that in a system, you are one part of a larger working body.

The engagement and practice of mindfulness are moments to consider the interconnectedness of body movements, breath in relation to the environment, and sense of self in relation to the larger societal context. Thomas (2022) furthers, “we all have parts of our identities that shape how we relate to the world and how the world relates to us” (p.62). Individuals, just as organizational collectives, do not function in a silo but rather a much larger system. Rayner and Bonnici (2021) explain that in the face of challenges, the default reaction is our traditional leadership mentality of us-and-them, strong bravado power stances, and top-down decision-making.

Rayner and Bonnici (2021) add that social challenges arise from deeply rooted beliefs, values, and assumptions that no longer serve the greater society well. They further state that these norms manifest in systemic power structures that influence relationships, information sharing, and resources that directly impact an individual or community's agency to direct their own futures. Systems focus on the process of change, including our day-to-day actions and how we build relationships (people management) (Rayner and Bonnici, 2021). One component of building relationships with others is examining and understanding the self through maturation and identity development phases.

Unless we, as leaders, teachers, and students, grow our capacity to invite difference, “we are likely to repeat patterns that contribute to the very issues we wish to address” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 95).

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The following chapter discusses my theoretical position situated within the transformative paradigm, followed by my positionality as a researcher studying the content and context of experiences of Black women, education, and spiritual whole person wellness through mindfulness practice. Research methodology is presented through a qualitative lens and the data collection methods used, followed by a discussion of the planned analysis of the data.

What is important to note is that we construct meaning from our reality. Oyewumi (1997) purports that in societies where there is division, is typically coupled with an ideology that seeks to restrict each to its own lane or arena, signifying the importance of the African Yoruba notion of world sense, “where no such ideologies” exist (p. 69). Recognizing that our backgrounds influence our interpretations makes it critical to know ourselves and acknowledge how we interpret our experiences, especially as leaders. Oyewumi (1997) asserts, “there is an unquestionable reality to language” (p. 161) with hierarchical structures that create “obstacles to the pursuit of knowledge, having further ramifications for policy formation” (p. 176). Language represents “a major source of information in constituting world-sense; a mapping of historical changes, and interpreting the social structure” (Oyewumi, 1997, p.32). As human beings, we seek to understand the world in which we live, constructing our subjective meaning to our experiences based on our historical and social experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I position myself within a community of Black women leaders committed to transformational changes, “expanded politics and spiritual consciousness - through a sense of wholeness – mind, body, and spirit, for the self and others at all levels of the educational experience (Dillard, 2022, p. xiii). Oyewumi (1997) proposes the need for a new set of constructs free of hierarchical connotations that personifies [the African] world sense that makes it possible to “acknowledge distinctions without inherently projecting a hierarchy” (p.34). I hold a

constructivist worldview that seeks to include as many participant views as possible to understand the context and setting (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). However, a transformative worldview takes the constructivist stance by “advocating for an action agenda” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.9), making the transformative worldview participatory action for both the leader and students.

### **Transformational frameworks**

The transformative paradigm is a worldview that brings together many dimensions of understanding concerning discrimination and oppression that needs to be recognized to address human rights and social justice (SAGE, 2017). The notion of world sense moves away from the “Western obsession with measurement and the preoccupation with evidence that we can see” for an analysis view that realizes additional categories may be at work (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 77). Through the axiological (nature of ethics) lens, a transformative paradigm looks at cultural issues, promotes social justice and human rights, and addresses inequities (SAGE, 2017) at all levels occurred (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Through the ontological (nature of reality) lens, the transformative paradigm looks at the multifaceted versions of reality that stem from different social positionalities and how and by whom truth is decided, and for which version of reality is used (SAGE, 2017). The awareness of intersectionality is the multifaceted versions of reality individuals carry with them from experience to experience, context to context.

Learning more about your own identity and what the influences are in your life expands your consciousness about identity [and the diverse intersections] of the self and others by expanding knowledge (Singh, 2019), increasing awareness and equity-mindedness. A process of mapping cultural meaning with the intent “ultimately to understand the world-sense that emerges from the whole,” allowing for analysis and comprehension of the whole and the parts rooted in a self-referent context (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 39). Intersectionality carries the stance for “examining and interpreting

complex relationships, cultural artifacts, social contexts, and researcher reflexivity” – being aware of one’s own values with purposeful examination of one’s feelings, actions, and motives (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 21).

This study sought to thoughtfully consider how interlocking systems weigh equally or differently for research participants’ identity development and how the role of mindfulness can increase “self-aware[ness] as a survival strategy” (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 17) for navigating and dismantling systems of oppression. Any analysis that does not consider intersectionality cannot adequately address the manner in which Black women in particular are excluded from discourse used as the basis for understanding race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). For clarity, I am making a distinction between interlocking and intersectional, where the former concerns “systems [that] need one another and the complex ways in which they help to secure one another” (i.e. race and class), whereas the latter centers on the complex roles of identity within social-political structures (Carastathis, 2008, p. 4). Crenshaw (1989) furthers the analysis of intersectional experiences of Black women being obscured from antidiscrimination discourse within the larger classes of women and Black men, where the “unique compoundedness of their situation is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different (p. 150). Therefore, Black women fall between the cracks of an interlocking dominant system where explicit disadvantage operates through the privileging of whiteness or maleness that is implicit, ensuring “their needs will seldom be met”, when failing to recognize the intersectional experiences are “not simply the sum of double-discrimination (race and sex), but as Black women” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). The interlocking system is designed to protect the possessive investment in White supremacy through systematic political, economic, educational, and judicial structures that oppress non-whites (Adams et al., 2018) and “reflects an uncritical acceptance of dominant ways of thinking”



(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150). This study seeks to propose examining beyond the individual, to focus instead on the larger systems (Zheng, 2023), highlighting two case studies of Black women educators from perspectives within private and public institutions. Intersectional awareness shifts conversations beyond singular identities toward new considerations for thinking, being, and doing “bringing forth one’s true power” (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 21) in becoming change agents.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My grandfather taught me to invest in people, holding a strong value for social and civil justice, community engagement, and diversity. He always said, “if you invest in people when they win you win.” My grandfather was denied a formal education due to his race but persevered staying true and committed to service and strong faith. My upbringing was one of promise and value, centered on faith that if I tried hard enough, dreamed big enough, and above all never waver from prayer, I could make an impact in my community as my grandfather did for many years. I was encouraged to explore and seek excellence as a tact to deter or minimize inevitable racism and sexism. I was strengthened to learn more as knowledge has influential power, “a kind of agency-taking (Dillard, 2019, p. 1182), given the historical legacy and context of Black women and girls using “education as a cornerstone of liberation, community, survival, and identity formation” (Jacobs, 2022, p. 59).

Knowing I wanted to be part of the change from a policy perspective, I decided to explore a degree in law, and later shifted my energy toward a cultivated hobby in architectural structure and design, examining how to enhance and develop environments and relationships within the physical context. With what felt like the Greek Myth of Sisyphus – condemned to ceaselessly pushing a boulder up a mountain only to watch it tumble back down, Architecture, like Law, was not my

medium towards meaningful change. My inner quest acknowledged spirituality as “a tool of survival, and self-definition against enduring anti-Black oppressions and structures” (Dillard and Neal, 2021, p. 1182). My research interests developed into the examination of the place and work of spirituality, reflection, and the power of remembering (Dillard, 2019) and the strength and perseverance of Black ancestral lineage specifically in the lives of Black girls and their educational journeys in becoming Black women. This undulating ride for a curiosity to learn and find my purpose, led me to a point of needing to re-center and return to a place of solace in my faith, using mindfulness as the conduit in embracing the stillness, the quiet moments of which I reflected upon my grandfather, African ancestors and their strength, courage, humility, and incredible will to not only survive, but to live.

As a researcher, a conscientious reflection of my value system, cultural upbringing, and experiences with unequal power dynamics as a Black woman makes me cognizant of how interlocking systems of oppression, culture, and context have shaped my “identity, research interests, and interpretations of the social world” (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 18). The visceral experiences of Black girls in schools, in the educational system in context, is nuanced beyond achievement and behavior but require the intimate, personal examination of agency that Black girls have employed to strategically navigate the educational environment (Jacobs, 2022). The hate, discrimination, and evil I experienced pursuing the completion of this dissertation is a living testament to the resilience of my spirit and the transformation of my mind to persevere through the flood to get to the harvest. The agency, armoring, and empowerment of my emotional literacy to counter biases and discriminatory practices by leaders, teachers, and those in authority positions who were entrusted and paid to guide, in turn, instill fear and anger in Black girls just like me.

I learned firsthand in my doctoral experience, that the same skin folk is not always kin folk, and therefore armoring as a political strategy for self-protection (Jacobs, 2022) was necessary and even critical in the educational environment. Black girls (who later grow and develop into Black women) are too often at the assault of curricula and policies that inflict harm are often forced to seek legal redress after exhausting *all* nonlegal avenues available that are *supposed* to ensure that learning occurs in harm-free spaces (Ward, Hardaway, and Njoku, 2022). Ward et al. (2022) further “how policy formation and legal interpretations should be the catalyst in re(shaping) educational environments that support Black girls and Black women in their educational pursuits” (p. 128). I wholeheartedly agree. Being mindful, I know to recognize what is in my control now, with my faith in spirituality to know when I need to step out of my own way and let go in order to let God. It is the tangible tools of mindfulness practice that have given me the spiritual maturity to center myself, render my mind and body visible and valued, and helped me to affirm Black girls and Black women in their joy and pursuit of education in a hostile-free environment.

Although I was pushed to achieve educational excellence in a societal structure not designed for me as a Black girl, nor provided with the “tools for combating the societal ills that shaped [my] life (Dillard and Neal, 2021, p. 1184), I was not prepared when entering the space of higher education in pursuit of a terminal degree for the harmful and painful experiences of [discrimination], barriers that perpetuate the cognitive and emotional dissonance created by contradictory armoring to either self-silence or appear as the stoic, strong Black woman in the face of struggle (Jacobs, 2022). Mindfulness created the stillness required for reflection, quieting the chatter or identity dissonance - “the mismatch between our idea of the people we want to be and our idea of the people we see ourselves as” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 42).

Mindfulness practice became my tool for creating an emotional and psychological arena for coping, for transforming my thought processes and outlook regarding my understanding of who I am, and for remembering the well of strength from which I draw for resilience and perseverance. Black women, we are magic, but we are also human (Thomas, 2022). I learned to face with the same grace the loss as I do the win. Mindfulness is where my intersectional and spiritual identities were affirmed (Dillard and Neal, 2021). Transformations are personal and intimate, occurring in the mind. Romans 12:2 says, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (The Gideons International, n.d., p.296).

Transformative practices release knowledge and beliefs that dishonor the spirit. The misogynoir – an examination of “how race compounds the impact of sexism and misogyny” showed up in the form of ‘the angry Black woman stereotype’ asserting the perception of Black women as threatening when they voice emotion (Thomas, 2022, p.18). My doctoral schooling experiences established an identity dissonance, that as a Black woman, my behavior was policed, and my sense of self was silenced in fear of labels of aggression, rather the liberation of asserting myself a place in society in a fashion that “engages body, mind, and spirit, bringing all to bear to the communities (Dillard, 2006, p. 82) of which I dwell and equally serve. My faith teaches me to bless those that persecute me, without the need to curse, because I need not avenge myself, but rather give place in knowing that vengeance is not mine but that of the Lord (Romans 12:14-19) (The Gideons International, n.d., p.297). I can work within a paradigm that, “explores a methodology of surrender, one that seeks to embrace an intimate research space that is both meditative (that listens and heeds the wisdom of ancestors) and faith-filled (prayerfully attentive and grateful to the spirits)” (Dillard, 2006, p.82). Spirituality as a basis for the courage to lean into meditative spaces and mindfulness practices to better understand myself birthed the emotional literacy required to “balance

acknowledging [my] own feelings as valid while at the same time fighting the internalization of deficit-oriented messages” (Jacobs, 2022, p. 68) of the ‘angry Black woman.’

### **Methodology**

This study investigated the use of mindfulness practice to assist in deepening the awareness of the self and others as a tool to navigate and support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. Framing the study within a qualitative lens focusing on Black women leaders in the education context - two case studies of the teachers’ perspectives on how mindfulness practices shaped their own pedagogical practices allowed for the collection of multiple forms of data. A case study is most effective in understanding the context in which Black women educators experience life (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022).

Data collection methods included mindfulness practice with instructors, instructor interviews, and document reviews that highlight the experiences of students engaging in multicultural pedagogy and DEI content while identifying if mindfulness acts as a mediator in “cultivating conscious awareness in the present moment increasing the ability to recognize and respond to moods” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 47; Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022; Mills and Gay, 2019; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). My goal was to deep dive into Black women educators’ experiences, perspectives, and stories that could help me best understand relationships among various forms of data collected.

The ways that “scientific research has been implicated remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” therefore, it is not without gall to assume to know all that is possible of another experience within my community of shared identity or not (Smith, 2012, p. 30). Taking a closer look at historical and current events, at patterns, listening to stories “helps shed light on the nuances of inequality that have long existed beneath the surface”

and, in many ways, taken new shape today (Thomas, 2022, p.33). Qualitative methods utilize various approaches to provide the best understanding of the problem (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

### *Context for the study*

The experiences of students of color (especially those of Black girls) are not a monolith but rather diverse identities and experiences that provide a different understanding of these identities within systems of oppression (Byrd and Porter, 2022). A need exists to explore and describe the experiences of Black women educators as they engage with DEI while developing identities within a multicultural environment. There is also a need to explore mindfulness practice as a tool to support students' and leaders' emotional capacities while stretching cognitive experiences. Mindfulness practice increases mental flexibility so that new options open to you, "helping [us] get back in touch with the full range of our inner and outer resources for learning, growing, and healing" (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, and Kabat-Zinn, 2007, p. 6).

Various classroom-based studies (Bakosh et. Al. (2015); Sharp & Lawrence (2016); Solhaug et al. (2016); Tarrasch (2014); Mapel (2012) examine the mental and emotional well-being of all students by facilitating meditation to identify stressors and the impact that mindfulness meditation has on increasing students' academic and social-emotional well-being. These studies (Bakosh, et al., 2015; Sharp & Lawrence, 2016; Solhaug, et al., 2016; Tarrasch, 2014) show a perceived improvement in stress coping, better awareness of thoughts and feelings, increased self-efficacy, and improved academic performance from pre-intervention to post-intervention mindfulness practice. There are studies using mindfulness as a moderator in the relationship between stress and anxiety (Vos et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), but very few studies examine mindfulness as a tool for the leaders' development of resiliency to manage their own job-related stressors and effect on teacher-student interactions (Seo and Yuh, 2021). Fewer studies look at mindfulness as a coping

tool to support identity development (Yang et al., 2017), and even fewer explore if mindfulness can enhance ethnic identity (Yang et al., 2018).

With all these elements (identity development, conscious awareness, increased multicultural diversity, DEI engagement) happening within the classroom environment, there is a need to explore how Black women teachers cope while engaging with diversity-conscious materials, texts, and discussions, while exploring meditative practices to guide new ways of thinking, being and doing; becoming agents in leading the charge of equity-minded interactions. “There is a need to understand who students are [culturally and ethnically] and how they identify and see themselves,” inclusive of simultaneously understanding the positionality of Black women leaders sharing the same context and environment, in order to create spaces that facilitate success (Yang et al., 2018, p. 67). Lee and Maynard (2019) suggest [teachers] are important sources of connection for students crucial to academic and social integration, especially for those “holding particular demographic traits that are minoritized within specific educational contexts” (i.e., predominantly white institutions) (p.107).

Thus the focus of this study explores the connection between how one conceptualizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and what practices Black women teachers engage in their classrooms and leadership and support in the school setting. Two Black women and classroom teachers illustrate how they explore and use mindfulness for the self and share it with their students. The significance of this work “resides in its possibilities for replication and experimentation – the *how*” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.179). In the case of DEI in schools, the teachers’ assumptions, attitudes, and approaches toward the challenges posed by historical inequities are too often driven by their perceptions of these concepts in their educational spaces, and the materials schools provide to drive equity, diversity, and inclusion (Skiba, 2002). Mindfulness practice can be seen as tools to nurture psychological well-being and protect against negative mental health consequences (i.e.,

depression, fear, stress, and anxiety) as a result of these historical inequities. It is important to note that mindfulness practice is not the elimination of these stressors but a method of developing the mind's innate capabilities, including abilities directly associated with leadership excellence, such as compassion, clarity, creativity, and focus (Marturano, 2015). Like in leadership practice, a process requires adaptability and constantly seeking ways to differentiate and find alternative paths to growth (Daft, 2016; Caligiuri, 2012; Schein, 2010).

A qualitative design best addressed the research questions posed, exploring mindfulness practices in the classroom as a tool to cultivate equity-minded awareness that “involves the kind of in-depth, ongoing [up-close in the natural setting] observations that allow a researcher to understand the patterns and routines of the classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 179). The characteristic of qualitative research is that it requires trust-building to gain entry into the authentic personal experiences of participants, providing the opportunity to “analyze and interpret the data and work together to understand their collective expertise” and to identify patterns and themes (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 179).

In the following sections, I will more carefully articulate the focus of my study, guided by my research questions, followed by the data collection methods and analysis that were used in this qualitative study. I conclude with some of the considerations and limitations related to my work.

The following research questions guide this qualitative study:

*RQ1: How do mindfulness practices in the classroom promote equity-mindedness and support DEI efforts?*

I conducted observations of teacher engagement with mindfulness practice, their interactions with students, and syllabus content relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging outlined in RQ1. Constructed interviews were also held with the teachers to reconstruct



experiences within the classroom context and provide deeper participant thoughts and feelings about how mindfulness practices help them promote DEI efforts in the classroom (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

*RQ2: How can mindfulness practice be used as a tool to assist leaders in creating an organizational culture scaffolded in conscious awareness?*

For RQ2, I conducted a thorough review of documents of the organizational culture through classroom artifacts related to how mindfulness practice is implemented in ways that aim to foster [intersectional] identity consciousness. The document review of course content (*Afrofuturism*) and classroom artifacts “are more than information or textbook knowledge about Africans and African Americans, [but] represents the building of a new scholarly tradition that is consistent in the ways in which people of African descent see and experience the world” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180). The approach throughout the instructor interviews sought to discern “what could be learned from African American [leaders] teachers that maintain the integrity of their culture and their world view” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180). As a researcher, I observed the instructor’s degree of conscious awareness of the self (expressed awareness of positionality and biases) and other moments of engagement for how mindfulness was being used to create an organizational culture towards DEI (or not): Inclusion needs to be authentic, with “the expectation that you are really listening and care about others’ dignity” (Gist, 2020, p.86).

*RQ3: What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' and leaders' identity consciousness?*

Instructor interviews and observations addressed RQ3 in a true [qualitative] collaborative style, reflecting the interpretations and analyses of classroom observations and the instructor as the facilitator of pedagogical activity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This departure from traditional modes of

inquiry where objectivity is priority, moves toward the authenticity and reality of teachers' [and students'] experiences as priority (Ladson-Billings, 2009). My role as a researcher was "to represent those experiences as accurately as possible" while realizing that personal biases were never absent from the inquiry process and that awareness is critical to data analysis (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180).

The following section describes in greater detail the data collection methods used to triangulate data providing three points of contact between teachers, the educational environment, and situational context to bring cultural awareness to the research process. More specifically, these methods helped me to describe "how we make meaning out of our own and others' identity [consciousness]" (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 86).

### **Methods of Study**

Two English instructors and educational leaders, who share the intersectional identities of being Black and woman were the subjects of this study. The following methods of the study are outlined, including the specifics of how each were conducted.

#### ***Instructor Observations***

Participant observations were conducted, where the researcher comes to the observations with prior questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In this case, I came with questions rooted in my own belief that the degree of active engagement necessary to practice mindfulness. That is, to do DEI work is the result of an expansive, developed identity. In other words, someone who can do and "be" DEI is also someone who embodies a sense of being a whole person. My observations then were a systematic study of the teacher with minimal deviation from daily routines during observation (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022). Observations serve as an opportunity,

“to shift from traditional ways of engaging marginalized communities with [conscious reflection] how interlocking systems of oppression shape how they engage in environments and choices – observations and analysis focus on both resilience [recover from falls] and resistance [to quit], vulnerability [openness] and agency [participatory action in intersectional identity awareness and social justice endeavors] (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 103).

Observing how the instructor engaged in mindfulness practice to situate the environment demonstrated *how* mindfulness is used to increase consciousness and equity-mindedness. The importance of including observations of instructor responses allowed me as the researcher to code the language and words used by participants as well as highlight data the participants gave attention to (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Further observing teachers gave me the opportunity to better understand participant meaning and personal values they brought into the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

In addition to observations, each week, for 15 minutes, I observed the instructor engaging in mindfulness practice (seated meditation, morning yoga salutation, body scan meditation) before engaging in classroom discussions, an opportunity to pause and reflect, and situate themselves and their environment in conscious awareness. Over the course of three weeks, I observed a total of nine mindfulness practices (three times per week) on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for 15 minutes, allowing for each of the mindfulness practices below to be repeated. This also offered me opportunities to observe each of the meditation forms below:

**1. Body scan meditation.** This mindfulness practice guides one to pay attention to each part of the body, encouraging increased interest and a “friendly relationship to the body in the present moment” using the breath to awaken awareness into each part (Williams et al., 2007, p. 103). Body

scan trains us “to bring wise and openhearted attention to the body even when the site of intensely [at times unpleasant] uncomfortable sensations” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 113). This exercise is important to the study, emphasizing conscious awareness of the self, and how the practice of mindfulness guides the individual to become more in tune (aware) with the physiological effects in the body and how/when they are triggered, to learn how to control the effects through acts of calming the mind.

- Stand tall (in mountain pose), the teacher asks students to become aware of their breath and how air is an actual thing that fills the lungs to bring happiness and energy to the body. Students take 3 breaths. On the final round, the teacher instructs students to place their hands on their heads for a breath. The teacher instructs students to answer these next questions silently in their minds. “Check-in. How does your head feel today?” The teacher instructs students to place their hands on their hearts for one breath, “How does your heart feel today?” The teacher instructs students to put their hands on their bellies, “How does your belly feel today?” The teacher instructs students to place their hands on their hips, “How do your hips feel today?” The teacher instructs students to put their hands on their knees, “How do your legs feel today?” The teacher instructs students to put their hands on their feet, “How do your feet feel today?” The teacher instructs students to put their hands to the sky - big deep breath. The teacher instructs students to bring their hands to their hearts. “Bring this happiness into your day! Let us have a mindful day today. This is how we check in on any day to notice how we are feeling.”

**2. Sitting meditation.** In this mindfulness practice, a natural tendency is for humans to go into autopilot or wandering of the mind, resulting in being trapped in thoughts and decreasing our ability to direct our actions where we want them to go, rendering ineffective problem-solving (Williams et

al., 2007). This exercise is important to the study by practicing the power of the pause, to assess and recalibrate by redirecting one's attention to the breath and then to the body before acting.

- The three-minute breathing space (Williams et al., 2007).
  - Becoming aware: Bringing awareness to the present moment asking *what is my experience right now?*
  - Gathering: Redirect attention to focus on the breath and breathing itself, feeling sensations of the belly, expanding the lungs following the breath all the way in and as the breath flows out, “to anchor yourself in the present” (p. 183).
  - Expanding: Extending awareness beyond breathing to the body as a whole (posture, facial tensions, clenching in the body), from the internal to the external environment, “bringing this expanded awareness into the next moments of the day” (p. 184).

**3. Standing meditation.** A continuation of body scan and bodily awareness brings attention to the range of sensations and feelings arising in our bodies when engaging in a “sequence of gentle standing yoga stretches” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 125). Meditative wisdom suggests that when we try to suppress negative thoughts, feelings, and sensations for some time may keep those thoughts, feelings, and sensations at bay, but not a sustainable way to stabilize and clear our minds (Williams et al., 2007). Williams et al. (2007) further discusses the harnessing of the mind’s natural capacity for calm and clarity captured by the image of a glass of muddy water. As long as one continues to stir the water, the water will remain cloudy. But with the patience to simply pause, eventually, the mud will settle to the bottom of the glass, leaving the clear water above. Like the practice of body scan, yoga brings movement into focus. The awakened awareness (Williams et al., 2007) in movement together as a class ushers increased empathy, defined “as an accurate understanding of another’s world as seen from the inside” (Shapiro and Izett, 2008, p. 161).

- Sun salutation yoga movement. Yoga as a therapy “enhances awareness in everyday life being present with sensations in the body, and then expanding this to emotions and thoughts” (Hick, 2008, p.8).
  - Twist to squeeze out sleep (stagnation), stand tall to greet the sun, stretch arms up, and then bring them together in prayer (hands on the heart space) to draw in the day’s energy, fold forward, flowing like a river, roll up to stand tall like a tree, be a lightning bolt (chair pose). Stand tall like a tree. Raise your arms as high as possible, fingers spread really wide, and breathe in deeply. Hold your breath! Bend forward, breathe out, and say, “Ahhhhh!” Swing your arms down by your sides. Breathe in and imagine scooping up the sky into your arms and over your head, as you stand up again. With eyes closed, take three deep breaths. Reopen your eyes, taking the energy and light of the sun with you.

The practice of mindfulness can be explored through different forms, like the variations selected for this study, encouraging a loving-kindness connection with the self in the present moment (Williams et al., 2007), providing a centering balance, and allowing for increased clarity. The importance lies in the increased practice of conscious awareness of the self. The data collected through teacher observations and interviews provided insight into the role (or absence of a role) mindfulness plays in centering focus and identity awareness in a multicultural classroom setting or other DEI contexts.

### ***Purposeful Teacher Interviews***

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) assert that semi-structured interviews allow for the addition of historical context to experiences, thoughts, and beliefs [about DEI, identity, and mindfulness understanding]. A virtual setting will be used as a backup to in-person on-site if

schedules do not permit. The drawbacks to conducting a virtual interview are potential connectivity issues, difficulty building rapport and trust, and the setting for the participant may be at home, where attention may be pulled, or not being at home, making divulging sensitive information difficult (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022). The interviews were not merely a method of gathering information but a process of producing a holistic picture about the self that teaches and informs the larger society (Denzin, 2001) and elicited perceptions of what participant teachers thought was happening or the impact they thought mindfulness practices had on their students. They clearly knew their students better than I, as the researcher/outsider.

The classroom environment presented three contact points – teacher, environment, and context/content. Therefore, the inclusion of the experiences of the teacher is necessary for “learning the meaning that participants hold about” DEI engagement and the role mindfulness practice plays in their conscious awareness (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 182). Toward this end, a culminating post-study interview was conducted with the two teachers, providing a narrative of the process of working with mindfulness as a Black woman educator, increasing equity-minded awareness of the self and others.

See Appendix A for the teacher interview protocol.

### ***Document Selection***

Lastly, a document review of the course syllabus, materials, and assigned texts was undertaken to gain insight into the instructor's thought process, language, and intent when designing the curriculum and what content was given attention (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In addition, a review was completed of the course content, texts selected to support the curriculum, assignments designed, and classroom artifacts on display. This data provides insight into the learning environment and how multicultural pedagogy is presented and guided through the learning process.

## **Study Population**

Two English teachers, one from an independent, predominantly white private school in the Seattle area and the other from a public school in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of greater Seattle, were purposefully selected, meaning participants were invited to the study based on a list of explicitly deliberate criteria (Black woman, classroom teacher) (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022). The private independent institution was chosen for practical reasons of accessibility and familiarity, as well as the inclusion of the only Black woman upper school faculty in the centennial history of the school. The inclusion of both faculty members was critical through the lens of my own positionality as a Black woman, educator, and leader, examining how each instructor guided their students through multicultural literature and critical conversations concerning diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, using mindfulness as an instrument to cultivate conscious thought. In addition, the selection of the instructors helped in gaining insight into how Black women leaders can nurture their own sense of self while giving to their students and community at large.

**Background of the teachers.** A pseudonym of the participants choosing was provided to protect their identity and to ensure they remain humanized. Identifying as an African American Black woman, Elizabeth is the private independent schoolteacher in this study. Elizabeth brings ten years of teaching experience grounded by twelve years of meditation, yoga, and other forms of mindfulness practice, using the environment as a conduit for the sustainability of the self and the communities which she serves. A poet by passion, her work is invested in the diaspora of Black Americans in various historical contexts and eras. Exploring ethnic roots, identity, and sustainability as a community and global system, nature plays a critical role in centering the spirit for this instructor, assisting in developing the courage to move into meditative spaces that allow for more than survival but the clarity to live. One text selected for her course is *The Intersectional*



*Environmentalist* (Thomas, 2022), examining the inextricable link between environmentalism, racism, and privilege, serving as a call-to-action guiding students toward a collective consciousness and pledge to work towards the empowerment of all people and the betterment of the planet.

Identifying as a bi-racial Black woman, the public school teacher, Marie, is an educational leadership researcher holding an Education Doctorate (Ed.D.) and over five years of teaching experience. As part of her body of research exploring teacher retention of Black women, mindfulness practices are utilized to understand self-care and the conscious awareness of the hypervisibility and invisibility afflicting the reality and perspective of Black women. From the perspective of a researcher and classroom instructor, she offered an alternative insight into how mindfulness is used for self-reflection as well as a sounding board for understanding others. Gast, Matthews, and Brooms (2019) suggest that “instructors need to balance the variety of ideologies and assumptions, as well as the tensions and apprehensions, which are sure to play out” when engaging in DEI content and classroom discussions (p.156). The ability to pause and reflect can have an influence on how students are guided to navigate the context and content exposed to through course curriculum.

**Sample criteria.** Quota sampling (Mills and Gay, 2019) was used to identify the instructor dictated by criteria of being a Black woman leader, and educator, examining multicultural education, synonymous with my own *Cura Personalis* but from the perspective of the insider, where I, as the researcher am an outsider of the classroom.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the private independent school elective English course, *Black Voices: Afrofuturism*. It is purposeful because the course not only amplifies the voices of a marginalized community but creates a counter-narrative to what knowledge is and who has value. The advantage of this type of sampling is that it is done ‘on purpose’ to help the researcher

answer questions guiding the study by directly selecting a context where we may be able to most clearly see the ways that mindfulness, identity, and teacher leadership intersect can be structured and demonstrated.

The importance of the courses being led by Black women provides the context to examine how mindfulness can be used as a tool to assist Black woman educators in protecting and nurturing their identity and sense of self when guiding students through multicultural frameworks and DEI engagement.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze data. This approach also sought to provide a picture of the process of gaining or increasing consciousness and equity-mindedness. By using these approaches, I was able to engage “an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants” (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 9). Utilizing action-oriented research "encourages contributions from different points of view" (Raelin, 2006, p.211) to confront conflicting values (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Positive organizational change theory examines “what contributes to the best of organizational life” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006, p.223) by asking questions (appreciative inquiry) versus providing answers to what is assumed to be wrong (deficit inquiry) (Hammond, 2013).

Analyzing data through the lens of more appreciative inquiry makes us reflect, introspectively challenging our ideas, values, and perspective with compassion and loving-kindness to identify blind spots or shadows of the self that can be brought to light – conscious awareness. With an increased presence in the moment, consciously aware of the self in relation to others (the environment) contributions towards positive organizational relationships of inquiry and empathy, diversity, equity, and inclusion are behooved. I liken action research to the practice of mindfulness

in that both are grounded in transformational approaches to collaborate, offering the opportunity to ask questions that invite cultural competence. Action research centers on democratic change and examining power dynamics through deepening observations of the self and the system (Dickens & Watkins, 2006). Action learning is awareness of the self in real-time, requiring you to “stop and reflect” (Raelin, 2006, p.211).

Analyzing observations provides an opportunity for me to look deeply into these teachers’ DEI experiences, their levels of awareness of intersectional identities, and how mindfulness influenced their ability to manage feelings and emotions. The addition of instructor interviews and document review as a third point of contact allowed me to triangulate different data sources to construct a coherent justification for themes and add to the study's validity (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The triangulation of data gathered illuminated individual understanding of challenges that students and leaders experience. By triangulating data, I was able to examine “a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis plan followed the steps of analyzing qualitative interview data as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018). First, I organized and prepared the data for interpretation. This included transcribing recorded interviews, typing interview notes and reflections. After initial sorting and organizing, I read through the data to get a general sense of the information collected. This included general thoughts and impressions of the data and identification preliminary themes. In particular, I attempted to notice similarities as well as differences between the general tone of the interviewees' statements and how the concepts of identity, DEI, intersectionality, and mindfulness were at play in the interviewees' stories.

Next, I coded the data. Coding included organizing the data by themes that were constructed from the researcher's relationship to the data and thoughts/reflections about the data (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022) using a word to describe the category. I chose to use descriptive coding, attributing a particular noun to the event or reflection described by the participants. This coding method was particularly useful when analyzing multiple data sources such as transcripts, field notes, and interviews collected from different sources. Part of the coding process involved developing an interpretation of findings and relating those findings to the literature (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022). Although preliminary codes are identified based on the topics throughout the literature review, this study "involve[d] inductive analysis which assumes the researcher is not beginning analysis with any preconceptions that will be placed on the data (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022, p.113). I used coding as a process and went through two cycles, increasing my focus through recoding and managing filters that highlight salient features of the qualitative data for generating themes and grasping meaning (Saldana, 2016).

After identifying descriptive codes, I then clustered the codes into similar categories to identify patterns and relationships. In particular, I wanted to identify the language/words used, reflections using concepts – identity, intersectionality, mindfulness, articulation of the practice, and role of mindfulness interpreted or understood by participants. Comparing these clusters or themes helped to reveal the role mindfulness practice played in identity development, mediating anxieties regarding DEI engagement, and fostering conscious awareness that can promote positive organizational relationships. Once the themes and patterns were identified, they were represented in a narrative that convey the findings of the analysis. In the narrative passages, experiences are described in rich detail to support the study's credibility and transferability. The narrative passages were also shared with the instructor to ensure the description of their experience was representative

and accurate. Depending on the participant's response to this member check, the narrative passages were revised to ensure accuracy.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative case study. This study investigated the use of mindfulness practice to assist in deepening the awareness of the self and others as a tool to navigate and support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. Framing the study within a qualitative lens, I focused on two Black women educators: One teaching at a private high school (Elizabeth) and the other at a public middle school (Marie). The two case studies are not a quantitative compare and contrast but a presentation of two different contexts where these Black women educators experienced their teaching lives. These case studies also highlighted the teachers' perspectives on how mindfulness practices shape their pedagogical practices and awareness of the self.

This study examined mindfulness practices as a tool to support the whole spirit wellness of educational leaders of color navigating oppressive contexts while designing pedagogical approaches that foster multicultural learning and safe/brave spaces for students to cognitively and emotionally develop the self as part of the whole.

This chapter provides an overview of themes that emerged from the data and study findings guided by the research questions. Findings were interpreted after organizing interview notes, observations, documents, and reflections, engaging the coding process. I have identified three overarching themes or findings from this analysis:

1. The teachers engaged in a pause and pivot towards a spiritual armor to center and feel whole in their school settings.
2. The teachers found an enhanced awareness after mindfulness practice that allowed a clarity and groundedness in their decision-making as teachers.

3. The teachers acknowledged an identified acceptance of self in the present moment, assisting with self-inquiry and further understanding.

I began the coding process by organizing the data by themes constructed from my relationship to the data and thoughts/reflections about the data (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022). In this process, I used a word to describe the category centered on the concepts of identity, DEI, intersectionality, and mindfulness that were at play in the interviewees' stories. An inductive analysis further helped me to generate themes and codes.

The following sections present direct quotes in a narrative form to convey these themes and represent the findings of the analysis. In the narrative passages, experiences are described in rich detail to support the study's credibility and transferability.

**FINDING #1: The teachers engaged in a pause and pivot towards a spiritual armor to center and feel whole in their school settings.**

Meditation was important in the ability of the participating teachers to pause and pivot between activities throughout their day. However, when and how they did so differed, as did the way they invited their students into their meditation practice. Purposeful pauses help you see how your mind and body respond to stimuli and the insights you gather that better inform decision-making (Marturano, 2015). The context is not changing enough, requiring Black women to have to pivot to spiritual armament to center and feel whole.

Marie said the best time to engage in mindfulness practices was after school when there was a distinct moment of transition from the end of the school day before getting in the car to head home. This transition moment was described as an "ability to switch modes." Marie made a concerted effort to not only "switch modes" but to give herself the grace and time for that. "In the morning, I am rushing at times or simply have a procedure in place that allows for coffee and a

couple of minutes at my desk before students enter the space. My attempt to create extra time in the morning for meditation increased my anxiety, and I wasn't really present as I anticipated students to enter. The same anxiousness occurred in the afternoon, during breaks or lunch." I wondered then asked if leaving the classroom and going on a short walk to find a space for meditation was possible during the day. Marie held a brief contemplation but ultimately stated that time was a pressure preventing afternoon times for personal reflection. But, the morning was a prime time for Marie to engage in mindfulness practices with her students as part of the pedagogical whole-person learning environment she worked to create. "The moments of mindful engagement are worthwhile. The students initially complain they are bored, but there is a visible shift, a sweet spot after a few minutes of practice when the chatter calms and the focus is centered. After we complete a meditative video or exercise, the students are more zeroed in, waiting for the transition into the day's work" (Marie).

Discussing the most appropriate or preferred time of day for her to meditate, Elizabeth stated during lunch was most beneficial, where it was more than a pause to nourish and eat:

It's different to carve out the space than to settle into the space, per se, going on a walk or exercise or seated meditation that could take longer than you have at the moment. Before class was not the best because, at times, clothing worn may dictate the ability to move or potentially sit comfortably for extended periods. Being a yoga practitioner and now formally obtaining a professional 200-hour certification, I have a more internalized practice that I do not share with my students. But I do carve out general mindfulness practices for my students as part of my curriculum development to maintain an open space, heart, and mind to be open to the material that, at times, can challenge identity, perspective, and the lens of which we view the world and ourselves.



This kind of awareness is necessary for Black people, especially Black women, as mindfulness seems also to be a tool for safety and for survival for these Black women, one which is practiced regularly in a sustained way.

However, orienting members of an organization (in this case, the school setting) into the space of learning requires a time to pause and pivot, to move from one level of consciousness to another that grounds the mind and opens the heart before [critical] conversations. Mindfulness develops the self-awareness of how you enter into a space and how you enter into conversations allowing for the opportunity to reflect on what you are holding or carrying from one context to another. Negating the development of capacity to manage confusion successfully is experienced as stress, leading to a snowball of physical and psychological health problems that diminish the social-emotional ability to cope. To minimize such difficulty is to reinforce positive experiences through co-constructed [classroom] environments that realign relationships.

Elizabeth discussed giving her students the space to check in about what they are feeling and carrying that best sets up the learning environment for open-ended communication. As the students engage in critical conversations in an environment that is co-constructed by students who set the rules regarding how we respond and react to stimuli. The students are learning to state when they are feeling hurt or offended and when they are feeling seen and heard as a way to address wrongs and reinforce positive interactions. Talusan (2022) furthers how educators create conditions in the classroom and educational context that leave the door to difficult conversations open or barely ajar, creating or negating opportunities for students to talk about identity based on the educators' ability and willingness to engage in difficult conversations about identity. Marie echoed the reinforcement of positive experiences by pausing when difficulty arises and engaging in mindful breathing, reminding students of alternative ways to pivot to help manage in the context.

**FINDING #2: The teachers found an enhanced awareness after mindfulness practice that allowed a clarity and groundedness in their decision-making as teachers.**

The expansion of consciousness, widening the awareness to what is around, inclusive of the whole self (Williams et al., 2007), mind, body, and spirit. Consciousness is always changing as bits and pieces of new information and new realities are gathered. Within consciousness is a strong vision (Dillard, 2006) that includes elements of “awareness, analysis, action and accountability/allyship (Love, 2018, p.611). These teachers described enhanced awareness of their students, colleagues, and self.

Education shifts require a concerted effort to understand positionality in the classroom, the positionality of the teacher, and that of many students. It's about knowing who you are as a cultural being—knowing the limitations of your lens, which can be seen as a closed door to students. Understanding positionality coupled with developing trust between students and the teacher is a chance to expose implicit bias. As a mindfulness practice, we ask students to think hard about their go-to disposition when their backs are against the wall and must engage in problem-solving. Educators are the designers of those learning opportunities. As leaders, these teachers took the time to be mindful of learning about the students in their classrooms and the colleagues they work beside. For example, on the walls in Marie’s classroom, students designed profiles for themselves in the form of ven diagrams that indicated how they see themselves (intersections of identity), how society views them (i.e., honoring or dishonoring the use of their preferred pronouns) and areas of their identity that are reconciled in the middle between the two (in some ways opposing) sides. Elizabeth uses her own vulnerability to create safe spaces for her colleagues to get to know her by inviting them to her poetry reads throughout the Seattle area, exposing her colleagues to her most intimate self, with the intent that the exchange would become reciprocal.

Furthermore, understanding safety and fears is critical for Black women navigating spaces not designed for them. The suppression of the ideas of Black women in research and epistemological knowledge remains a force that undermines [our] value, purpose, and potential (Peters and Nash, 2021). Both faculty members in this study reported feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility at work. Buchanan and Settles (2019) add, "the devaluation of those rendered invisible or hypervisible reflects the social boundaries already established between privileged and marginalized groups, ensuring the social hierarchy across groups is maintained" (p. 3). This is illustrated in the following statement by Marie:

Constant discussions and meetings emphasize building restorative justice policies, but the culture remains punitive in practice. On paper, artifacts on walls lend one to believe the school functions under principles of what they consider restorative justice, but leaders (administration) are performative, jumping on trends but rarely incorporating restorative justice into policies, or if they are policies, they will rarely be enforced. Knowing the performative nature of the administration, I do not feel supported. If anything, I feel defensive, with no trust in my administration, making it difficult for me to leave my classroom to find spaces on campus to meditate. I felt guilty at times, not grading or closing my door with a sign saying 'Do Not Disturb' when seeking to carve out time to meditate because I feel I have a duty to my students that I've realized over the past weeks supersedes my own attention to self.

Elizabeth echoes this point:

I am the only Black teacher in the upper [high] school, the first Black woman in the school's centennial history. I can walk through the halls, attend the all-staff or divisional meetings and hold this feeling of invisibility until representation is needed for the next campaign or

marketing poster to tokenize my presence in the community. That feeling of invisibility is hyper-visualized as I am surveilled for the tokenized opportunity and used when best suited for the organization.

Diversity is not just race but representation. Representation is simply numerical numbers without being coupled with belonging. Buchanan and Settles (2019) purport that "differential power is a precursor for invisibility and hypervisibility given that those with status and power have the authority to render others visible, invisible, or hypervisible" (p.2). Being numerically underrepresented can also contribute to invisibility and hypervisibility concerning members that are numerical tokens experiencing increased vulnerability to both invisibility and hypervisibility.

Mindfulness fosters enhanced awareness to embrace new opportunities using every tool at one's disposal to understand and analyze systems, structures, cultures, identities, policies, and practices from a DEI lens, a heart-centered lens to identify foundations to build on, and gaps to fill (Zheng, 2023). This goes for the organization as a whole and individuals as parts. Marie discussed creating safe spaces outside of school to meet up with the Black women at her job that spans departments, to create unstructured social time (Zaugg et al., 2015) where they can get to know each other, building level two and three relationships - like friends and family (Schein & Schein, 2019) to understand the values and what is at stake for each side. Enhanced awareness is knowing "every single person is responsible for creating positive outcomes and reducing or eliminating harm by acknowledging the responsibility to rectify the parts of the inequity they own" (Zheng, 2023, p.162).

**FINDING #3: The teachers acknowledged an identified acceptance of self in the present moment, assisting in self-inquiry and further understanding.**

Acceptance is acknowledging “all moments operate in the present,” where the co-creation of what knowledge is, what it should be, and for whom (Denzin, 2001, p. 25). Acceptance is moving toward the whole and part of oneself (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006), fostering a present-centered stance focused on direct experiences that assists us in self-inquiry and understanding (Mapel, 2012). These women provided examples of how they sat with the present moments when engaged in mindfulness practice that extended their awareness to a self-reflective stance, a meditative reflection on the present moment, the only moment we can control (Marturano, 2015).

Marie provides a brilliant example of how acceptance is central to her work as a teacher:

As a middle school teacher, I find it essential to teach grace and compassion. So often, the students can be so hard on themselves. As I reflect on the past few weeks of meditation practices, first, I've never consistently meditated, so to have three days each week, for three weeks, to meditate, I did not notice how I felt before participating in this study, but I do know I feel better after. Initially, getting comfortable focusing on my body, breath, and movement; the physiology was rough. I was anxious as I experienced how stiff I was going through the standing meditation. When doing the breathing meditation, I could not believe I was hearing the birds chirping outside the window, then thought, what else am I missing? Since COVID, the day-to-day has become physically sedentary and complacent. My workplace environment is not one of support and can cause varying anxiety levels. But after a week or two of meditation, I found that when in practice, when I allowed myself to calm and focus on my breath, there was an acceptance of what I could control, an acceptance that I was enough.

Again, we hear echoes from Elizabeth about compassion, intentionality and acceptance in the work of teaching:

I am intentional in the ways that I observe things, noticing how my body feels. As a poet, it is about peeling back, creating connections, and being honest to ourselves and authentic to our opinions about things. Mindfulness allows me to dig deeper beyond a surface level and observe how I feel in certain situations. Mindfulness has taught me to sit with myself, using information – maybe something I said that didn't land or an activity that wasn't quite the right fix for that lesson. Thinking about how mindfulness helps the creative practice, the development of the mind, body, spirit to foster acceptance of the present moment and what you can control. There is power in regulation. As a person with neurodiversity, mindfulness can be very effective in creating neuro-pathways that incorporate new ways of thinking, being, and doing because that's how we grow and evolve – increasing cognition and emotional intelligence that spans beyond boundaries, societal boxes, and linear thinking. The biggest battle is being honest with ourselves and where we are so that we can acquire the appropriate tools. The acceptance part is critical in knowing where your knowledge ends and where knowledge acquisition begins because that is the point or space of growth opportunities. The fake it to you make it approach is not applicable when it comes to emotional intelligence.

Mendenhall et al. (2018) would argue that emotional intelligence influences behavior.

Therefore, emotional intelligence is the precursor to generating cultural competence - a willingness and ability to suspend one's schemas to incorporate other ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling - that has been shown to provide the best foundation for multicultural interaction. The practicality behind mindfulness is the "perceptual and contextual processing and application of information" (Capel, 2014, p.64). Mindfulness becomes essential to supporting individuals' ability to identify and utilize creative solutions (Siqueira and Pitassi, 2016).

The teacher's words above demonstrate the processing and application of information using mindfulness as the creator of space to tune into your awareness about how you feel before and after meditation, the physical sensations, the physiological changes before and after mindfulness practice, awareness of day-to-day stagnation and how that lack of movement, flow translates into the body and out of the body in our actions and reactions, increasing consciousness to become in tune with external sounds (i.e., birds chirping), to what we may be missing elsewhere. The urgency in these teacher's voices also points to a kind of necessity as Black women working in the contexts they work in as a survival mechanism to feel whole, seen, and valued for their contributions. Thomas (2022) supports the sentiment of the teachers asserting, "Black women deserve both protection and appreciation. Protect and respect their theories and their profound resiliency; know that even in their struggle, Black women have given their knowledge to us to grow and advance society" (p.16).

### **Analysis of Findings and Research Questions**

In speaking about acceptance, I return very particularly to a key research question: *How do mindfulness practices in the classroom promote equity-mindedness and support DEI efforts?* Talusan (2022) argues teachers who engage in mindfulness practices and self-reflection with their students both accept and model a process of growth that couples cognitive understanding and affective dispositions by scaffolding their identities in ways that benefit students, as they witness their teachers not "striving" to be steps ahead of others but who demonstrate working through tough challenges, understanding, and learning about [equity-mindedness] identity in a collective way. Marie provides a powerful example of that modeling in her response:

Mindfulness was recently particularly useful in one of my classes when I consider promoting equity-mindedness – providing tools that allow for equal opportunity to achieve success. I completed the body scan meditation you assigned in the morning, so it was fresh on my mind. I

have a student terrified of public speaking, but part of the course requirements include article presentations. This student would refuse to stand to present, or if I were able to encourage presenting at the front of the room, she would stand there and begin to shake or cry, at which point I had her sit, and we later worked out a time where she would present to me during lunch. Although I play weekly videos (Monday's mindful reflection and Wednesday's breathing exercise) on meditation that teaches us to breathe and refocus to calm our minds, something wasn't connecting for this student, and she needed a different approach and a different resource to achieve success. So, this time, I did the body scan meditation with the student and guided her through her presentation, connecting how she was feeling in her body to the breathing meditation. Later that week, as we concluded class presentations, the student decided to present and successfully delivered her first presentation in front of the class the entire year! I was ecstatic to see how the student visibly took moments to control her breath and stood with her feet grounded in a strong "tree" stance, using the body scan techniques. But then I felt saddened; there goes that increased awareness that it wasn't until these past few weeks of practicing consistent mindfulness with this study that I thought to share my practice with my students. This really helped her reframe her thinking, and in many ways, mindfulness also helped to reframe my thinking.

It was also the case for Elizabeth, that engaging mindfulness practice with her students and modeling it provided ways to see limiting patterns in her own and her students' teaching, learning and leading:

Using the practice of mindfulness allows me to recognize certain patterns. Mindfulness brings me back to center when I am creating, particularly when it comes to my creative outlets when engaging in curriculum design. I curate all my classes, select texts, and come up with the



essential questions that link to activities. Mindfulness allows me, when teaching to identify necessary pivots. When I notice after a class that perhaps didn't go well, either based on student reactions or my own perceptions of how my lecture was received or executed, I have learned to give myself grace and be honest with my students so they learn to be honest and open with me. In my classes, we do 'CCC,' caring, celebrating, and capacity – I want my students to get in the habit of checking in with themselves. We forget to drink water, are tired, have stressors outside of the classroom, and have major assignment deliverables, tests, etc., that impact our thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In my classes, we often talk about challenging topics that can create a kind of secondary trauma for students. Mindfulness equips them with the awareness to know when they are feeling flooded and need to step back or don't have the capacity to engage. Body scan is critical to my own mindfulness practice and a tool I repeat with my students persistently because that increased awareness of the self spills over into an awareness of others. That awareness of others lends to a space of compassion. When developing a curriculum, I incorporate mindfulness tools as a practice for talking about critical conversations, particularly social identities, understanding that dissonance can arise when challenging single-story narratives students may have about another.

When considering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), mindfulness helps us become more aware of habits that increase our success and patterns that should and can be changed (Thierry et al., 2016). The "practice of talking about identity in everyday conversations is helpful in challenging the single-story narratives through complex, contextual, and accurate portraits" of the identity spectrum (Talusán, 2022, p.45). It is critical to examine identity development coupled with mindfulness practices to establish an infrastructure to support DEI and belonging efforts in school settings. This is the moment for the emergence of new diverse, multicultural leadership

incorporating practices of diverse cultures in a respectable manner that encourages various people to draw on their potential (Bordas, 2012).

As a doctoral candidate in Leadership, I see teachers (and students) as leaders, especially in classroom and school organizations. Hence my research question: *How can mindfulness practice be used to assist leaders in creating an organizational culture scaffolded in conscious awareness?*

Marie described the organizational relations at her middle school as a very hostile place for Black staff:

[It's] probably the most racist school I've ever worked at. It's very devious. The administration and majority of the senior leadership team, all white and Asian persons of color, comprised the principal, vice principal, and senior administrator. The team is described as passive-aggressive, sneaky, and notorious for passing the blame. In addition, the lack of accountability is displayed in targeting the Black staff, creating a hostile work environment governed by punitive policy enforced arbitrarily and designed to intimidate.

Buchanan and Settles (2019) suggest that "the power differentials across privileged and marginalized groups result in asymmetry around who controls their own visibility and that of others" (p. 2). Dominant groups manipulate the visibility conditions of marginalized groups to sustain established power, such as the surveillance and intimidation of Black staff at the public school and arbitrary enforcement of policies that reinforce distorted perceptions of Black people and stereotypes that perpetuate harm. When Black staff seeks to address policy enforcement and imbalances, they may experience backlash or retaliation through silencing, delegitimization, and other forms of control that ensure members remain in the peripheral.

Being consciously aware of the self in relation to others (the environment) contributes to positive [organizational] relationships through a practice of inquiry and empathy, particularly within

a multicultural context where diversity, equity, and inclusion are behooved. Elizabeth describes the ways that she engages and develops that consciousness as a way to support her own presence as a Black woman within the school organization:

Movement meditation [yoga] teaches you to pay attention to what you hold in your body and how that shows up in your outward stance – actions, reactions, emotions, and behaviors. I think mindfulness practice before all staff meetings or departmental meetings when conflicts, collaborations, contingencies, and ideas (at times competing) are discussed. I ask my students how they prime the space before entering into critical conversations. I hold the same expectations, if not more, for my colleagues and the greater organization to develop the practice of checking in, body scanning, and conscious, vigilant awareness of the self in relation to the context/environment. Especially after COVID, we are carrying a lot of trauma in our bodies. So, recognizing in your body what you physically carry that can manifest into outward emotions, behaviors, and reactions – am I clenching my jaw, am I feeling sweaty, hot – asking ourselves to honestly check in and be mindful as we enter spaces and conversations can go a long way in building a foundation for trust and engagement in critical conversations. Now, I think it's critical to make the distinction that someone can have a strong mindfulness practice, but that in and of itself doesn't deconstruct racism or oppressive experiences and systems, especially if that person is marginalized or not in a position of power. But, a strong mindfulness practice can equip to self-soothe, spiritually armor, and physically train to manipulate one's energy."

When we are on auto-pilot, we miss the nuances that fill in the picture. Using mindfulness allows leaders to accept our place in current realities, manage and extend our awareness in order to

fulfill our responsibility as leaders to eliminate harm and make [the school or educational] environments more diverse, equitable, and inclusive (Zheng, 2023).

Finally, in terms of acceptance and responsibility to work toward greater diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' and leaders' identity consciousness?*

Cultural humility and the appreciation of the other is a journey, a self-examining process challenging the self in relation to the context and environment, making the process continual (Chavez, 2012). To develop cultural humility requires authentic and intimate immersive experiences that carry the potential to activate an appreciation for others' experiences (Caligiuri, 2012).

Mindfulness supports the process of awareness in creating a climate where all members feel brave to be their authentic selves. The teachers provide commanding narratives how mindfulness practices impact their identity consciousness as a reminder of purpose and who they are - a kind of spiritual armament. The narratives include observations of how the teachers saw mindfulness practices having an impact on their students' development of capacity to sit with discomfort and move through it with compassion.

Elizabeth states:

I am always aware of how I present myself but have struggled to ensure how I present myself is aligned with who I am, how I identify at my core – mind, body, spirit authenticity. When I practice mindfulness with my students, I seek to use the practice to orient the students in the space together while encouraging each individual to tune into the self via body scan meditation or reflective writing, encouraging a stream-of-consciousness approach to not filter thoughts. My goal is to continually emphasize the self in relation to the environment, considering the far reach of our actions in the context of environmental sustainability. Being aware is tangible just

as much as consciousness is theoretical or spiritual. I have my students stand up and stretch, check in with how they are feeling, what they are feeling, and the gentle tools to stimulate or activate movement and attention to what needs nurturing.

Marie states the usefulness of mindfulness not only as a tool for herself and her identities but for her students as they engage events current to their lives as young people:

Mindfulness practices on identity consciousness in my classroom is learning to create a mental and emotional space to engage in sensitive or critical topics and practicing how to utilize tools that develop courage, empathy, compassion, and openness and supports the development of the mental and emotional capacity [arena] to cope. My students have a script to go to when faced with uncertainty or fear. When we discuss as a class current events and identity development concerning the societal climate today, my students understand the shared rules we as a class have developed through our compassion for self and others practices [mindfulness meditation] that create a foundation for trust so we are not bound by language, feelings, emotions shared that may differ from how we feel. We learn to be in the moment together, giving value to each part of the whole.

Peters and Nash (2021) purport that intersectionality permeates the lived experiences of Black women educators. Cultural responsiveness is rooted in your beliefs about the self and others. Equity is moving the obstacles from the conditions and realities of those who express their beliefs, particularly if different or contrary to that of the mainstream society. Elizabeth adds how critical it is to accept oneself as part of these realities and developing the strategies to live within and against them:

A shift of assumptions will make one's life better by taking the time to be aware of the nuances – a move away from auto-pilot actions ad reactions." Practicing culturally responsive beliefs is

not one more thing on a leader's/teacher's plate; it is the plate. It's not being an expert on every culture of every student in your classroom; it's being mindful of allowing the students to leverage their own culture in the classroom - being cognizant of the barriers to remove them. It is about the self-awareness of the space, who is in it [students, colleagues], and potential obstacles preventing learning, relationship-building, communication, etc.

Talusan (2022) asserts that examining how identities intersect provides teachers with a more full-bodied understanding of students and their lives, fostering an essential ingredient for more inclusive schools and classrooms.

Making diversity and inclusion more effective requires, at its most fundamental, a more diverse organization. DEI is less valuable if there is no actual diversity. This means that organizations need to look critically at who they employ and how they hire individuals. It means that organizations need to support goals that add members of various target groups to their organizations in different roles. This also means that organizations need to support target groups by creating support systems inside the organization, such as mentorships to help those in the organization. Zheng (2022) adds that organizations must assess with unfiltered honesty how DEI and belonging efforts have gone to determine if and to what extent they have achieved what they intended and why. The voices of the Black women teachers in this study echo that sentiment. The process must be periodically repeated so the organization and its members of it can learn, grow, and adapt until DEI and belonging have been achieved within the organization and its members, built upon a strong foundation of trust and shared interest in maintaining the outcomes as the organization and members evolve. The organization and its members do not learn and grow in silos but organically evolve as a unit.

As we heard from the voices of these teacher-leaders, organizations scaffolded in mindfulness invite the practitioner to be more of who they are, creating an arena influencing authenticity, becoming fully aware of who you are, and then seeing what is around you (Marturano, 2015). But such practices also seem to support the students being able to do the same. Recognizing that our backgrounds influence our interpretations makes it critical to know ourselves and acknowledge how we interpret our experiences, especially as leaders. Oyewumi (1997) asserts, "there is an unquestionable reality to language" (p. 161) with hierarchical structures that create "obstacles to the pursuit of knowledge, having further ramifications for policy formation" (p. 176). Leaders inside and outside of the classroom often struggle with their own social identities and biases, challenging leaders to develop a willingness to examine and deal honestly with fears, assumptions, and emotional reactions to oppressive structures and social issues (Bell, Love, Washington, and Weinstein, 2007).

The possible alternative way of being embodied by the teachers of this study can become the motivation to acquire new ways of thinking and behaving, grounded in the themes and practice of pause and pivot, in awareness and in acceptance. Kegan and Lahey (2010) suggest the distinguished leader will have the ability to develop their people to grow into their future selves. As identities are historical constructs that are also future projections of the future self (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010), this study suggests that such leadership must be grounded and attentive to mindfulness, thoughtfulness, and awareness as the foundation for greater attention to and value of the whole teacher and the whole student.

## CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS

**Implications for teachers as leaders.** As a leader practicing leadership, I have learned through this study that leaders have the opportunity to transform diversity and inclusion within their context through education and counter-narrative language that assists in understanding the world around them. To begin to challenge oppression, one must acknowledge the way it manifests in the world (Gastfriend, as cited in Kimmel & Ferber, 2018). Examining historical events more closely helps shed light on the nuances of long existed inequality (Thomas, 2022). Being Black in America is like "a lifetime of learning how to hold burning candles" (Nordmarken, as cited in Kimmel & Ferber, 2018, p.104). To fully understand the ephemeral reality, one must walk in the experiences of Black women and listen deeply to their stories. Thomas (2022) assert, "Black women deserve both protection and appreciation. Protect and respect their theories and their profound resiliency; know that even in their struggle, Black women have given their knowledge to us to grow and advance society" (p.16). A characteristic of equity-minded leadership asks if one is courageous enough to abandon the path of least resistance.

The path of least resistance, going with the grain, is often the only one we know (Johnson, as cited in Kimmel & Ferber, 2018). The awareness of other paths that resist oppressive forces comes with education and acknowledgment. And the consciousness that arises from such education is a continuous and lived process. Singh (2019) asserts that learning more about your own identity and what influences in your life expands your consciousness about identity in general [and the diverse intersections]. It also expands your awareness and equity-mindedness. A deeper self-examination can lead to greater integrity and inclusion of one's intersectionality of identities and an even deeper level of awareness.



Leadership is a matter of systems thinking where decisions are made with consideration not only to their effects in the direct moment but how they ripple and influence larger groups of people. For example, the increased awareness described in Findings 2 illustrated how the teachers centered their focus in the present moment but also with considerations beyond what was in front of them and around them. Elizabeth and Marie shared examples of feeling hyper-visible and invisible in their respective organizations, using the increased awareness to identify what emotions were being held in the body that may impact their actions, reactions, and how they show up in the classroom. As cited in Mendenhall (2018), Osland discusses systems as a concept of openness – not only interested in others but also willing to engage and explore alternative methods of meaning held by others. They used that increased awareness to create support groups for other Black women to have a safe space to recenter and, in many ways, heal through the collective community.

To understand the practice of leadership, one must view it as going beyond the leader and focus on the process that the leader directs. You cannot have inclusive classrooms without inclusive planning: Our intentions mean nothing if we are not putting in the work to create the outcomes intended (Zheng, 2023). Leadership is about how to build relations and trust and how to develop people mind, body, and spirit. The attempt to create respectful and collaborative relationships changes the narrative, constructing a moral vision of the kind of society we want for ourselves and all people across racial divides (Warren, as cited in Kimmel & Ferber, 2018), one where we learn to talk, not assume. This was illustrated in my second finding. There, Elizabeth discusses how she builds connections by peeling back – observing what is around, noticing how her body feels, with conscious intent, being honest with ourselves, and being authentic to our opinions. [Mindfulness] builds the skills to expand your capacity to engage (Talusan, 2022). Developing [deeper]

relationships across the organization creates trusted avenues for collecting information about the goals, needs, and incentives necessary to motivate and develop people (Schein and Schein, 2018).

**Implications for myself as a leader.** Leadership practice is a process that unfolds in every aspect of my life, whether personal or professional. I have used this doctoral program, coupled with life experiences in my leadership practice, to remind myself of the need for head (self-efficacy and presence), heart (compassion and forgiveness) to be in balance in the face of uncertainty.

Scholarship, coupled with the powers of Sankofa – my ancestors, my faith, and a reconciliation of the past transgressions impeding inclusion and equity is my way of carrying the movement begun by my ancestors. The findings of this study suggest that mindfulness aids in the ability to look beyond one's self to a higher power for fortification. Yang et al. (2018) assert that mindfulness is the learned practice of awakening, providing strategies to attend to the present moment with attention to regulation. The implication is that such demonstrations of mindfulness are useful for developing students' ability to question and develop their identities. They are also useful for teachers' own awareness that it's not the title they hold but the convictions they have that gives them the agency to step into their leadership in the classroom.

My personal and professional interest in mindfulness efficacies to train the mind not to turn away from bad experiences but to acknowledge and move past them is connected to my own story. Although leadership is conceptualized as an individual endeavor, it is about finding one's voice in relation to others (Conger, 2010). The context of finding one's voice is only of value if being heard by others than the self. Caliguiri (2012) adds, "the way we as humans make sense of unfamiliar situations is often through the relationships we forge with others who can guide us" (p.53), in other words, providing an opportunity to see situations from multiple vantage points and having an interest in connecting with others on a personal level. It is having an awareness and passion about

being part of the link in the process (Weiss, 2006). As part of an interrelated system, I've become more aware of other's needs to understand better how best to be utilized. A critical skill for all leaders is the awareness of the conditions and the ever-changing relationships among them demands the leader's skilled awareness to anticipate and manipulate the configuration of the conditions to one's advantage to determine strategy and structure (Ames, 1993).

The world is rapidly changing face, requiring more adaptation, agility, and blurred boundaries to create interconnected systems that span across roles and functions (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). The theory of positive organizational change develops profound levels of relatedness through sharing of strengths, resources, values, and capacities, allowing a move toward the acceptance of the whole self (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). In my life and relationships, I proceed with flexibility and openness. From this study, I have learned just how powerful that openness is for teacher-leaders. I have become intimately familiar with intrapersonal mastery and the ascension to interdependence, where "you and the world are intimately interrelated" (Senge et al., 1994, p.227). I have become intimately familiar from observing both in my own being and from my participants. For example, Marie discussed the "sweet spot" she observes in her students after practicing meditation and how the afternoons are a particularly important time for this practice for her and her students after returning from lunch in the afternoon as a way to regulate their energized pace post-lunch and to refocus their attention to the classroom. I saw that happen.

It is the ability of the leader to put the needs of others first as a mission tenet that values the individuals that make up the whole, in this case, the classroom environment. This is an echo of what scholar Senge et al. (1994) suggest that "you can't practice systems thinking as an individual" (p.92). Systems represent parts of a whole that have interrelated functions but may require different leadership applications within the respective systems. Scholars working from the systems

perspective view all variables as being inseparable, having interdependence where distributed units are no longer isolated (Mendenhall, 2018). In the pursuit of my doctoral completion, I have been challenged to trust in the interdependence of my relationships, whether that be friends, family, colleagues, or therapists. As a Black woman, I have navigated a system never built for me. In the chaos and confusion, and the uncertainty I experienced, I was reminded of my leadership practice to not cower in the face of uncertainty but gather my self-efficacy, remembering the resiliency that burns from all the ancestors before me.

### ***Implications from findings***

*The teachers engaged in a pause and pivot towards a spiritual armor to center and feel whole in their school settings.*

The teacher-leaders created space to ask, “who are you?” In those intimate moments, it is somatic feelings that focus what you see, what you smell, what you physically feel (touch) that centers you. Understanding the power of those moments when engaging in critical conversations armors the spirit in compassion and humility.

The journey of completing this dissertation has produced work that is both useful and beautiful. Mindfulness aided in creating the space for spiritual remembering, where I learned to press on. Press through uncertainty and challenging times. Life does not stop because we get hurt or challenged. Mindfulness is a practice of impeccable humility – the grace to press on when all the odds may seem against you. It is a spiritual armament that opens a way to press through anyways.

*The teachers found an enhanced awareness after mindfulness practice that allowed clarity and groundedness in their decision-making as teachers.*

Mindfulness efficacies are not just for Black women but all classroom teachers. Discomfort and challenging experiences arise naturally. Mindfulness practices empower the individual with

resilience and self-efficacy in the face of adversity, helping individuals become more effective by deepening the learning of the self in relation to the interconnected external environment – the development of self-awareness.

Leadership, as is the language of mindfulness, is the goal for balance and courage. Everyone wants to feel whole. The care of the person is a necessary strategy to respond to oppression. The Black women in this study used the care of the person as an affirmation of their worth, a negation from a deficit or an imposter syndrome to affirm they, in their whole selves, are enough.

*The teachers acknowledged an identified acceptance of self in the present moment, assisting in self-inquiry and further understanding.*

Self reflection is critical for teachers, leaders, and organizational members because leadership requires examining the leader, as it is the personhood, the values and beliefs held that inevitably influence how one views the world. This study is an example of the active construction, learning, designing, building, and exploring of myself – a dedicated and committed journey of self-examination. Leadership requires a continuous search for information, with an informed and competent perspective that provides foundational tools to assist in the bravery needed to lead.

### **Encouraging Mindfulness in Schools**

Smith (2013) states the importance of a teacher induction programs to provide the initial introduction to meditation and mindfulness and how the two work together as one practice, as well as compatible teaching strategies. Teacher training in meditation strategies can provide firsthand the value which will be helpful when administering for their students (Smith, 2013; Bostic et al., 2015).

It is important to note that when discussing an introduction of new programs for teacher training inevitably will also introduce budgetary discussions for the private school in this study.

While the cost might be a barrier, the exchange may be beneficial. For the public school, Marie made it clear that budgets are tight and resources are hard to come by, creating a barrier preventing the acquisition of tools to support critical engagement. Talusan (2022) reiterates the importance of teachers not only developing the skills to engage but also to acquire the tools to support engaging in a critical way rather than avoid difficult conversations with our students and our colleagues.

In contrast, Burrows (2016) expresses the dangers in mindfulness practice for those with trauma, whether known or unknown. Because mindfulness meditation creates a platform for awareness, ensuring that students have a strong enough foundation to handle the flood of emotions that may arise from the mindfulness experience can be challenging. Burrows (2016) adds that the issues that could be triggered can create emotional flooding for students, a place of vulnerability when undergoing levels of stress and anxiety. Training of school staff (if funding for professional mindfulness meditation practitioners is not possible) is important in balancing the safety and emotional well-being of students and teachers, just as much as exploring methods for identity development.

Conscious and intentional implementation of mindfulness programs in schools is an important steps needed in addressing and fostering a healthy learning environment. With a healthier climate within educational arenas and improved attitudes from students and leaders, the opportunity for success is more realistically and practically attainable. In recognizing the importance of mindfulness meditation as a learning tool, we can better grasp as educators how we can equip students with tools that help nourish their learning experience by reducing stress and anxiety and increasing focus and awareness, which are beneficial and vital ingredients to a more productive and effective learning experience.

## Considerations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, I have an interest in creating a longitudinal study that follows Black women teacher-leaders over the course of their careers to see if/how their mindfulness practice continues and if/how their sense of agency and leadership identity develops. Also, I would very much like to expand the study beyond Black women to all types of diverse teacher-leaders. The significance of this study lies in the application of these methods and findings used to highlight the experiences of Black women educators to extend to understanding the larger body of educators and leaders. With that, a study investigating the experiences of BIPOC STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) teachers using mindfulness as a tool to support identity development and belonging is of particular interest. As this study focused solely on teacher-leaders, I am also curious about including the student perspective to highlight the other half of the teacher-student experience. With regard to this study, I intend to publish this dissertation, adding to the field of knowledge on mindfulness for practitioner scholars.

## A Final Note

Whitaker and Valtierra (2019) continue to note that the everchanging exhaustive, and exhausting list of policies and policing of behaviors stigmatizing Black girls and women suggests clearly that we have not dealt well with diversity in our schools and organizational practices. This study pointed to the power of creating safe spaces to share and engage in the process of relating to others, which helps participants generate synergistic energy (Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2006).

Being human is complex, making most people shy away from intimate vulnerability. The experiences, intersectional identities, and worldview examined in the process of this study have already impacted how I lead through a deeper awareness of my cultural values and attitudes about myself and others. I operate now from a philosophy of knowing, being, and doing, in that order. As a Black woman, I do not have safe spaces: I operate in *brave* spaces. As such, I have learned that

people develop, grow, and deepen their understanding of each other as they begin to see themselves in another person. Awareness of intersectionality promotes collectivism as an embrace of the many identities held within an individual that ultimately connect them to others. As an educator and leader (and proponent of collectivism), I seek to build trust as a crucial component for success in cross-cultural/diverse engagements.

Although leadership development is about the person, it is also about recognizing the critical need for others and the team to be successful. This study advances the need to create brave spaces for crucial conversations to identify intersectionality and discuss the identities and narratives, “valuing others with simple acts of caring” (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014, p. 353). Intersecting influences on social identity are how we, as Black women navigate society as an *insider within*, learning to code-switch from an *outsider in collaboration with an insider* (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As parts to the whole, members of organizations must engage in a concerted effort to build relations and foundations of trust, shifting the dynamic towards a sense of belonging. There can be inclusion through representation, but belonging is a deeper security.

The writing of this dissertation has been a cathartic way of weaving together years of experiences and learning that have shaped my schema and understanding of my place in this world at this time. What I have learned from this study, which is also beneficial to the field of education, is that for Black women, mindful work to spiritually recenter the mind, body, and soul is not optional. These women, Marie and Elizabeth, helped us to understand survival by having a spiritual center to fortify themselves. Their survival helped us to understand the power of mindfulness. Similar to Marie and Elizabeth, my experiences of loneliness as a new doctoral student and navigating the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic led me to mindful reflections. I used my writing to unpack and better understand thoughts, feelings, and emotions unlike any time before in my life.



The invisibility of thought but the hypervisibility of representation was a reality acknowledged but not accepted, especially in my classes. My survival through the hurt and pain at the might of school policy, procedure, and “kinfolk” through the journey of completing this dissertation illustrates the power of mindfulness as a conduit of spiritual armor in the face of adversity and challenge.

My spirituality and faith are what center me, the grace and joy that humbles me. I hold a high appreciation for excellence as a means for me to navigate the world, deterring degrees of oppression. Black women: We are magic; we are resilient. But as mindfulness reminds us, we are also human (Thomas, 2022). Spirituality reminds us we’re still here!

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## Appendix A

### Interview protocol

The following research questions guide the qualitative data collection process.

*RQ1: How do mindfulness practices in the classroom promote equity-mindedness and support DEI efforts?*

Observations of teacher engagement with mindfulness practices and interactions with students and syllabus content relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging will best address RQ1 by providing interpersonal insight reflecting individual experiences with mindfulness practice as a support tool when engaging in DEI. Observations followed by constructed interviews with the teacher provide a reconstruction of experiences within the context, providing deeper participant thoughts and feelings (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

*RQ2: How can mindfulness practice be used as a tool to assist leaders in creating an organizational culture scaffolded in conscious awareness?*

Observations, document reviews, and instructor interviews will best address RQ2 by identifying how mindfulness is enmeshed within the organizational culture through classroom artifacts and instructor articulations of how mindfulness practice is implemented in ways that aim to foster [intersectional] identity consciousness. The document review of course content (*Afrofuturism*) and classroom artifacts "are more than information or textbook knowledge about Africans and African Americans, [but] represents the building of a new scholarly tradition that is consistent in the ways in which people of African descent see and experience the world" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180). The approach throughout the instructor interviews will seek "what could be learned from African American [leaders] teachers that maintain the integrity of their culture and their world view" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180). As a researcher, I seek to observe the instructor's degree of

conscious awareness of the self (expressed awareness of positionality and biases) and the levels of interaction amongst students (degree of participation) during inquiry, discussions, and other moments of engagement for how mindfulness is being

<b>RQs</b>	<b>What do you want to know?</b>	<b>What Qs could generate the info you want to know?</b>
<p>RQ1 <i>How do mindfulness practices in the classroom promote equity-mindedness and support DEI efforts?</i></p>	<p><i>Promote equity-mindedness</i> – increases awareness and self-regulation of emotional responses.</p> <p><i>Foster compassion</i> – develops the capacity to regulate behavioral actions and reactions.</p> <p>Are these developments occurring based on observations and discussions?</p>	<p>Describe your feelings after engaging in mindfulness practice.</p> <p>When reflecting on the DEI discussions specifically, describe any moods, emotions, or reactions observed in students.</p> <p>Reflecting on the past (week, two weeks) three weeks, what observations did you note about the classroom environment and other students?</p>
<p>RQ2 <i>How can mindfulness practice be used as a tool to assist leaders in creating an organizational culture scaffolded in conscious awareness?</i></p>	<p>What can be learned from Black women teachers and leaders that maintain the integrity of their culture, identity, and worldview?</p>	<p>How do you see mindfulness playing a role in the classroom? Your lesson planning?</p> <p>In what ways do you observe mindfulness playing a role in student moods/behaviors/focus?</p> <p>In what ways does mindfulness play a role in your understanding of the self? How has an understanding of the self influenced identity awareness?</p>
<p>RQ3 <i>What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' and leaders' identity consciousness?</i></p>	<p>What is the internal discussion within each student and the instructor when engaging with mindfulness practice coupled</p>	<p>Reflecting upon the past study – six sessions of mindfulness and DEI...</p>



	<p>with critical topics concerning DEI?</p> <p>What language can be coded into patterns of shared/collective responses or reactions to the study?</p>	<p>In what ways has your students' identity been brought into focus?</p> <p>In what ways (language) do you describe your identity? What are the layers of your identity? (i.e., race, religion, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability) and how do they intersect?</p> <p>How has your understanding of your racial identity informed your perceptions, attitude, and response toward racial challenges and injustice?</p> <p>List the ways in which you believe society sees you. How do you see yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What differences exist between the two?</li> <li>• Can you explain the reasons why the differences may exist? (i.e., historical, cultural, religious influence).</li> </ul>
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used by the teacher and how it may, or may not, create an organizational culture towards DEI. Inclusion must be authentic, with "the expectation that you are really listening and care about others' dignity" (Gist, 2020, p.86).

*RQ3: What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' and leaders' identity consciousness?*

Instructor interviews and observations address RQ3 in a true [qualitative] collaborative style, reflecting the interpretations and analyses of classroom observations and the instructor as the facilitator of pedagogical activity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The departure from traditional modes of inquiry where objectivity is a priority moves toward the authenticity and reality of teachers' [and students'] experiences as a priority (Ladson-Billings, 2009). My role as a researcher is "to represent

those experiences as accurately as possible" while realizing that personal biases are never absent from the inquiry process and that awareness is critical to data analysis (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180).

**Interview duration:** Instructor interviews will occur twice after weeks one and week three as the final post-interview. Interviews will last approximately 20-30 minutes.