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A Qualitative Study of Lived Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions in K-12 Educational Settings

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A Qualitative Study of Lived Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions in K-12
Educational Settings

Shukri Olow

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

2021

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Abstract

Women, particularly African American women, have continued to obtain certifications and fulfill degree requirements, yet are underrepresented in K–12 leadership positions (e.g., administrators, principals, and positions of superintendency; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). This qualitative research study focused on lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership positions in school districts in the region of King County, Washington. Three research questions guided the study and centered around participants' lived experience in K–12 leadership positions, factors that contributed to the continued engagement of African American/Black women in K–12 leadership roles, and the extent to which an organization's culture and espoused values impacted the career progression of African American/Black women. Critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and representative bureaucracy were used as frameworks to better understand participants' lived experiences as principals and administrators.

Keywords: African American/Black women, leadership pipeline, K–12, lived experiences

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for Dr. Colette Taylor for her mentorship, guidance, and care throughout this doctoral journey. I realize I stand on shoulders of giants, African American/Black women who came before me—like Dr. Taylor—who continue to pave the way for all of us to fulfill our potential. I am also thankful to the dissertation committee members, including Dr. Keisha Scarlett and Dr. Carlyn Ferrari, for their time, love and wisdom.

Dedication

The dissertation is dedicated to Amino Aden Shire, my mother, who believed in my wild dreams and aspirations, even when she did not understand them. I am grateful for her support and consistent encouragement and love. I am also thankful to my sister and brother, Mohamed and Zamzam Olow, and my two children, Amani and Khalid, who have been my guides and anchor for the last 3 years and beyond.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

During the spring of 2020, in the throes of a global pandemic and polarizing acts of bias and discrimination, groups of Americans banded together to demand justice for oppressed Black and brown communities. Despite mandatory stay-at-home orders, activists and ordinary people rallied to protest increased incidents of workplace gender harassment. Movements like #MeToo and Time's Up, which advocated against gender violence, joined forces with Black Lives Matter, a global movement demanding justice and freedom for the African and Black diaspora. Responding to calls for social justice, certain organizations and corporations made commitments to diversify hiring and to address issues of inequity in the workplace (Monahan, 2021).

Though there has been some acknowledgement of deep inequities in U.S. society, data has indicated these injustices disproportionately impact people of color. Some inequities are present in the workforce and education systems. In the past 25 years, the U.S. labor force and school system have diversified to include more gender and ethnically diverse individuals, and this trajectory is projected to continue for the next 30 years. Although this is a critical shift, leadership roles in K–12 education (e.g., administrator, principal), continue to be predominately held by white men. Thus, despite efforts to diversity educational leadership, the gap remains.

About race and gender in educational leadership, Tillman and Cochran (2000) noted 82% of K–12 public school principals are white, but only 11% are Black. Furthermore, of the 11% of Black principals, only 4% are Black women. White men continue to dominate educational leadership even though student populations of public schools are becoming increasingly diverse. In a country with one of the most ethnically diverse education systems in the world, it is unclear why there is less racial and gender diversity in top leadership roles (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), with Black women rarely occupying leadership roles in K–12 educational settings. This study

focused on the lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership roles shedding light on challenges they navigate. By highlighting experiences of Black women, one can develop strategies to better support this demographic in the K–12 setting.

Background of the Problem

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s (1996, 2016) National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, African Americans represented 6.7% of associate’s degree holders, 9.5% of bachelor’s degree holders, 3.0% of master’s degree holders, 0.5% of professional degree holders, and 0.3% of doctoral degree recipients in 1996. In 2017, “African American women represented 11.2% of associate degree holders, 15.4% of bachelor’s degree holders, 8.3% of master’s degree holders, 0.9% of professional degree holders, and 1.1% of doctoral degree recipients” (Espinosa et al., 2019, p. 8). Although there has been an increase in both higher education enrollment and degree attainment, this has not translated into a similar increase in administrator, and principal roles for Black women in K–12 education settings.

African American women continue to be underrepresented as principals and other leadership positions although qualified candidates are available (Kowalski, 2006). Glass and Franceschini (2007) determined, in 2007, 21.7% of 14,063 superintendents in the United States were women, and only 2% were African American. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008) indicated a high percentage of U.S. teachers are women, but a low percentage of female teachers become superintendents.

Women, and particularly African American women, have worked in education and obtained certifications to become principals and superintendents but nonetheless represent only a small minority of people in administrator, principal, and superintendency roles (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Implications of a research study that engages African American/Black

women in an investigation on their lived experiences has the potential to provide strategies and increase the level of representation consistent with changing U.S. demographics.

Public School Enrollment

Although Black women are underrepresented in K–12 leadership roles, student demographics continues to diversify. In 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau reported K–12 public school enrollment included 53.1 million students divided into the following racial and ethnic categories: 52% non-Hispanic white, 24% Hispanic, 15% African American, 9% Asian. Notably, “By 2050, students categorized as members of races/ethnicities other than European American are projected to comprise 56% of the public-school population” (Truscott et al., 2014, p. 366). This shift in student composition is not aligned with workforce data. The 2017–2018 *Characteristics of U.S. School Principals* survey indicated the racial/ethnic demographics of 90,900 public school principals as 78% white, 11% Black, 9% Hispanic, Asian, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and less than 1% Pacific Islander (NCES, 2017, Table 306.10). Edwards (2016) and others suggested lack of representation has negative implications for all students, both culturally and academically. In the absence of representation, students lose access to valuable insights and perspectives that can dramatically decrease bias and prejudice. Additionally, among the benefits, direct results can be seen for students of color, including lower dropout rates, a more positive view of schooling, fewer disciplinary issues, and better test scores. A diverse and inclusive education workforce can play a critical role in ensuring students receive a robust, quality educational experience.

U.S. Labor Force

Overall, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in the U.S. labor force (Enchautegui-de-Jesús et al., 2006).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), African American growth in the workforce is projected to be 4 times that of white Americans (.08% compared to .02%) between 2018–2028. Currently, African American women hold only 6% of managerial roles (Beckwith et al., 2016). Even as African Americans increase in population size and workforce representation, roles making organizational decisions—such as principals and superintendents in K–12 settings—have been meager and disproportionate to the student population. There also continues to be a gap in leadership roles that reflects representation of the growth in the population of African American/Black people in the U.S. workforce (Edwards, 2016).

Problem Statement

Between 1997 and 2017, the U.S. population has increased by 20%, from 267 million to 320 million (Espinosa et al., 2019). Although white Americans have continued to represent the largest racial and ethnic group in the United States, their share of the overall population has decreased as the country has become more diverse (71.9% in 1997 down to 61% in 2017; Espinosa et al., 2019). Since 2014, African Americans have accounted for 13.2% of the U.S. population and are estimated to double in size by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). As demographics shift in schools, it is critical to create an equitable education system with diverse racial representation at all levels, particularly in terms of leadership roles for Black women. For schools with majority of students of color that are underfunded in K-12 education settings, there are vast benefits to seeing role models of their race and ethnicity in a position of authority (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore lived experiences of Black female leaders in K–12 administrator, principal, and superintendent roles. The qualitative case

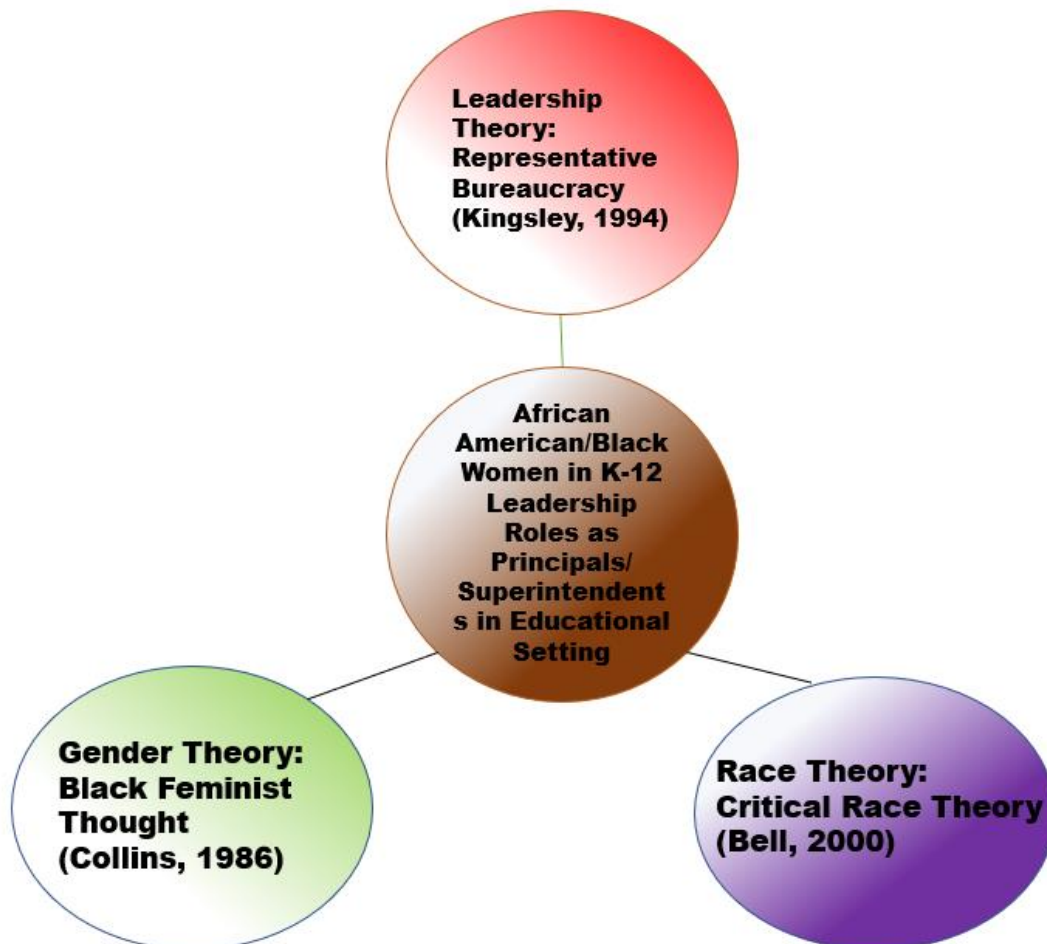
study approach was appropriate as qualitative researchers seek to answer questions that emphasize how life experiences are created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) by considering underlying values, merits, and lived experiences of participants. The intent of the study was to understand experiences of Black women in administrator, principal, and superintendent roles, how the current lack of diversity impacts their organizations' development, and what institutions can do to change employment practices.

Finally, through a framework combining critical race, Black feminist, and representative bureaucracy theories, this study focused on how the intersecting identities of Black women influenced leadership style and career trajectory. Research questions were as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?
2. What factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of Black women in their respective leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?
3. To what extent does an organization's culture and values impact the career progression of Black women?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Next, the three theoretical frameworks guiding this research are discussed. Figure 1 displays how the three theoretical frameworks interacted in the study.

Figure 1*Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework has three components used to examine experiences of Black women on a leadership career pathway in K–12 educational settings. Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986), critical race theory (Bell, 2000), and representative bureaucracy theory (Kingsley, 1994) provide multifaceted viewpoints of Black women in the context of leadership. These theories are important in the context of K–12 education because they provide critical

perspectives on race, gender, and the need for balanced representation. Moreover, they offer avenues to explore nuances between racialized and gendered experiences.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought (BFT) was first developed by Collins (1986) to differentiate traditional feminist theory from experiences of women of color, who also struggle with racism. Black feminist thought is based on the ideology of Black women's use of marginality to reflect on and incorporate self-definition and self-evaluation to become effective change agents who can defy societal oppression (Collins, 1986). This theory is important in the context of K–12 education because it provides a voice for, and rationale of, African American women's views of the world and how to overcome oppression and stereotypes in the workforce. To ensure the African American/Black woman's voice is included in the theorizing on leadership, theoretical frameworks in this research study placed their experiences at the center of the research analysis, ensuring they were positioned through the intersectional lens of race and gender.

Critical Race Theory

To understand experiences of women in leadership through the lens of Black experience, critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 2000) addresses concerns of racism and racial discrimination. Education researchers originally conceptualized this theory as a response to the civil rights movement in the United States. CRT focused on detrimental laws by demonstrating racial inequities supported by U.S. policy (Tate, 1997). Critical race theory focuses on the socially constructed and broad nature of race and indicates racism is constant and normalized in U.S. society (Creswell, 2007). According to Tate (1997), CRT provides critical perspectives on race and ways in which causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, and inequality

affect people of color. It also offers researchers avenues to explore race and racism in research (Tate, 1997).

In K–12 education, CRT provides a critical perspective on Black women in leadership roles and how they are affected by causes, consequences, and manifestations of race and racism in the workplace. Conducting a qualitative research study in K–12 education context aligns with CRT by creating the opportunity for African American/Black women to share lived experiences of racism and gendered discrimination that might have had an impact on career progression in K–12 education settings.

Representative Bureaucracy Theory

Representative bureaucracy theory (RBT) suggests a demographically diverse public sector workforce will lead to policy outcomes that reflect interests of all groups represented, including historically disadvantaged communities (Bradbury & Kellough, 2008). The theory indicates individual employees in an organizational setting should proportionally mirror demographics of individuals in the client population, based on the premise employees with similar characteristics will advance preferences and well-being of clients from their own group more readily than employees from dominant groups (Meier & Bohte, 2001; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

In the context of K–12 education and the shifting demographics of the U.S. student composition, the notion of mirror—of seeing oneself in positions of power and authority—is critical. Understanding the role of representation at the principal, superintendent, and administrator levels in schools is becoming more important and provides a roadmap to improve student outcomes across the board. Finally, representative bureaucracy theory can be understood as both a theory and a tool for enhancing organizational effectiveness, wherein organizational

leaders seek to strategically increase the diversity of staff to improve performance in programs serving diverse client populations (in this case, students).

Significance of the Study

This study provided additional research and extended the existing literature exploring lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership roles. Black women are doubly disadvantaged by race and gender bias in the workplace, presenting challenges ranging from barriers to promotion to obstacles to career growth (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Although many African American women have overcome these challenges, overall numbers of Black female leaders are still low. Additionally, examining experiences of Black women in administrator, principal, and superintendent roles and successes and challenges associated with their respective positions can provide other women with knowledge that can help to inform career aspirations and support success in similar roles. Furthermore, describing participants' lived experiences can offer insight to organizations, policymakers, and institutions that prepare educational leaders to better address societal factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in K–12 leadership roles.

Summary

This chapter focused on lived experiences of participants in this study and presented the background of the issue, problem statement, research questions, significance of the problem, and terms used. The chapter also introduced the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, comprised of BFT (Collins, 1986), CRT (Bell, 2000), and RBT (Kingsley, 1994). The next chapter presents an exploration of the three frameworks that guided the development of the research methodology. Chapter 2 also contains a literature review of relevant studies on experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational context.

Definitions of Terms

- **African American or Black:** This term refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. Black was defined for this study as persons who identify as having a collective racialized experience in the United States based on their African ancestry (Domingue, 2015).
- **Internalized oppression:** This is the process by which a group internalizes and accepts the dominant groups' beliefs about their group and rejects their own social group identity (Bell, 2016).
- **Marginalization:** This occurs when groups of people by virtue of physical or cultural characteristics are identified by members of the dominant culture as different from desired or mainstream expectations. The designation of difference can result in unequal treatment, including discrimination, exclusion, invisibility, and silenced voices for subordinated groups (Delgado et al., 2012).
- **Microaggression:** This is conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, subtle, and visual forms of insults directed toward people of color. Microaggressions are a form of everyday suffering that have been socially and systemically normalized and, in effect, minimized (Delgado et al., 2012).
- **People of color:** This term refers to individuals identifying racially and/or ethnically as African American/Black, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American, who are historically underrepresented (Campbell, 2019).
- **Oppression:** This is an interlocking multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups and is maintained and operationalized on three dimensions: (a) contextual (individual, institutional and

social/cultural), (b) conscious and unconscious (intentional and unintentional); and (c) applied (attitudes and behaviors, policies, practices, norms, values, beliefs and customs; Dominelli & Campling, 2002).

- **White:** This is a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 features the literature relevant to lived experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 leadership positions. In the literature, the historical aspects of education, the role of women in education, and lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership positions were examined. The purpose of this study was to address the disproportionate number of Black women in leadership roles in K–12 educational settings, how that lack of diversity impacts an organization’s development, and what institutions can do to change employment practices. Black women leadership in K–12 educational settings is a topic of importance as it highlights barriers and employment practices affecting Black women leaders in these settings. This chapter is organized as follows: (a) influence of gender on leadership, (b) career positioning, (c) history of education for African Americans, (d) African American women in leadership roles, (e) theoretical frameworks, and (f) how lack of diversity impacts educational institutions.

Influence of Gender on Leadership

Avgeri (2015) revealed leadership has always comprised of specific attributes that in most cases are shown by men instead of women, including competitiveness, aggressiveness, independence, and forcefulness. However, over the years research has shown a large number of these traits do not usually result in leadership efficacy. An analysis of Fortune 500 companies showed companies with numerous managers showed more productivity of their capital compared to companies having fewer female managers (The White House Project Report, 2009). Despite such findings, women still encounter many challenges.

Educational leadership has been historically and socially fabricated as a portrayal ascribed to successful male leaders and the conventional masculinist point of view seems to be predominant across years. Since the mid-19th century to the 20th, women had to struggle to be

accepted as teachers in the public-school system (Dotzler, 1983). Maranto et al. (2018) pointed out during the 19th century, both school and teaching leadership were predominantly women's pursuit, partly based on the notion women were better at cultivating children, and because local school districts could pay women less. From then, there has been more emphasis on including women as equal partners in all education aspects, including leadership. According to Semuels (2017), the number of women attending and graduating from college started to increase in the 1970s. Even though women have achieved administrative positions in schools, few of them have managed to gain positions as high school principals and those that have, have encountered barriers such as gender and racial discrimination. This situation has been exacerbated by society's culture, lack of support system, family responsibility, bias, discrimination, and sexism (Avgeri, 2015). Thus, more is needed to boost the participation of women in positions of school management.

Career Positioning

Men move from entry-level to advanced K–12 positions at a higher rate than women. The path to the superintendency has been closely aligned to the high school principalship and, according to the NCES (2013), almost 70% of high school principals are men. Moreover, the road to be a high school principal has been closely aligned to that of the athletic director and, not surprisingly, men are 3 times as likely as women to be athletic directors (Maranto et al., 2018). As such, women are more likely to hold entry-level leadership positions at the elementary level or to be employed as curriculum specialists, neither of which aligns directly to the superintendence or to a leadership pipeline.

Rousmaniere's (2013) social history of principalship showed the developing athletic coaching field did not just attract men to education jobs but also provided them with direct

courses to superintendent posts. According to Rousmaniere, by the 1960s, it seemed to be a societal expectation for women to teach and men to hold leadership positions. Further, by the 1970s, research showed approximately 80% of school superintendents had worked as athletic coaches in previous careers. Such trends promoted the common belief that men were better suited for superintendent positions, considering high schools are bigger institutions involving more staff, budgets, and students; more differentiation of missions and structures; and more community involvement. As a result, there was a decline in the proportion of women in district and school leadership across the 20th century. For example, the percentage of female school principals in elementary school posts declined from 55% in 1928 to 20% in 1973 (Rousmaniere, 2013). Today, even though women constitute about 52% of all professional-level jobs, they still lag considerably behind men in leadership representation (Warner & Corley, 2017). What is known is even though women have made progress in attaining positions of leadership in different sectors, Black women are not seeing the level of growth in career trajectory (Edwards, 2016).

History of Education for African Americans

The history of education in the United States for African Americans is one of struggle due to policies and practices. Historically, Black children were taught by Black educators in underfunded and under resourced settings (Tillman, 2004). That direction shifted in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. *Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the justices ruled unanimously racial segregation of Black children in public schools was unconstitutional (Tillman, 2004). It was one of the cornerstones of the Civil Rights movement and helped establish the precedent “separate-but-equal” education and other services were not, in fact, equal at all (Tillman, 2004).

Prior to desegregation, the role of the Black teacher was a multifaceted position. Black teachers not only were hired to teach Black children, but also served as administrators, mentors to newcomer teachers, and cultural and community supporters (Tillman, 2004). Similarly, prior to desegregation, Black principals served as the head of Black schools, and their efforts connected the school to the community. They were leaders and activists in the communities they served (Peters, 2019). School desegregation displaced many Black teachers and administrators and ultimately forced Black professionals into other fields out of fear of limited employment opportunities in education (Peters, 2019). Impacts are felt to this day.

Effects of this decision have significantly altered the course of education for Black educators and Black children (Oakley et al., 2009; Tillman, 2004). The displacement of Black educators after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was an extraordinary issue. Black educators were fired, leading to the economic, social, and cultural structure of the Black community to be challenged, and ultimately the academic trajectory of Black children was impacted (Tillman, 2004).

According to Milner and Howard (2004) approximately 38,000 African American teachers and administrators in 17 states lost their positions between 1954 and 1965. Like Black teachers who were displaced, Black administrators and heads of schools were collateral damage as a result of desegregation (Tillman, 2004). The literature shows the number of Black principals began to decrease during desegregation, and the highest percentage drop from Black principals began in 1969, when desegregation was at its peak (Butler, 1974). In a study of principal displacement in 11 southern states, Hooker (1971, as cited in Butler, 1974) found “many Black principals had been given minor administrative jobs which were token promotions” (p. 10).

Other Black principals were demoted back to the classroom or to assistant principals in charge of disciplining Black male students (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Furthermore, Ethridge (1979) research highlighted policymakers devalued the importance of Black educators and Black administrators to the education of the Black community. Although Black educators had job security during segregation, desegregation thrust them into the same employment market as their white counterparts. Black educators fared so poorly during this time because “The power to control desegregation was placed in the hands of those who fought so hard to maintain segregation” (Butler, 1974, p. 24). Their absence continues and is made more stark by the increase in the children of color currently attending public schools across the nation (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

African American Women in Leadership Roles

According to Edwards (2016), the representation of African American and other racial and ethnic minority women in superintendent and school leadership roles reduces as they move through the leadership pipeline. In conducting a study with six African American superintendents, who had served in at least two school districts, Johnson (2012) observed the number of Black superintendents in district schools was deficient. There was a significant number of white female superintendents; however, their number was lower than the Black and white male superintendents. The National Center for Educational Information in 2011 reported 90% of African American teachers were female (Gales-Johnson, 2013). In their study, Gales-Johnson (2013) observed less than 1% (5 out of 71) of district superintendents in Louisiana were African American women, indicating as African American women move up the ranks, their numbers reduce significantly. Given the diverse tapestry of the U.S. educational system and the unique needs of the student body, Black female leaders are a necessity if students are to receive

the best possible educational experiences. Additionally, Maranto et al. (2018) noted, “gendered educational leadership career paths violate 21st century workplace norms of gender equality” (p. 14).

Edwards (2016) examined African American women’s educational and professional experiences in their path to superintendency and noted the image of African American women have been perceived as a threat. One interviewee in the study aspiring to be a superintendent stated African American women leaders, regardless of background or skills, are put in the category of threatening. One interviewee in Edwards’ study indicated it was hard for African American leaders to get a clean slate to access success.

These factors coincide with Hodge’s (2017) observation. In citing Wright (2011), Hodge indicated the dominion of superintendency by white, middle-age males affects assumptions and outlooks that people of color and women are seeking to be superintendents must uphold. They must be considerably better than white male counterparts, are regarded as an anomaly, and are perceived negatively by their white male colleagues when they act forcefully. Williams (2013) pointed out aspiring and existing women administrators face challenges of lack of mentoring and sponsorship and hiring discrimination, highlighting a gap in representation.

African American leaders in K–12 educational settings have to motivate themselves to face the challenge of counteracting marginalization, institutional barriers, and negative stereotypes. Edwards (2016) reported how a female superintendent faced an internal struggle in her job to offset gendered and racial stereotypes. Her internal struggle seemed to be related to her notion of the manifold identities that induced external stereotypes when she was the initial African American female superintendent in a mainly white setting. She argued her leadership experience and credentials would offset gendered and racial stereotypes. The internal struggle

motivated her in her practice and leadership pursuits. The aforementioned interview in Edward's study stated she used the stereotype of being threatening as a motivator in her educational and professional experiences.

The study by Gales-Johnson (2013) on pathways to success for African American women superintendents highlighted some things female aspirants can employ to overcome their institutions' challenges. One participant cited being focused on the vision and ensuring consistency and fairness in dealing with people. It was also essential to seek educational opportunities and knowledge to be in a position of leading the school well. Responses from female superintendents and principals also showed it was essential to avoid political games. More so, they had to establish the reputation they were not pushovers by being tenacious in everything they did, delivering results, and being professional at all times.

Next, the theoretical frameworks that guide this study are examined. Three theoretical frameworks—critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and representative bureaucracy—shaped the study and provided a lens for this research.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three key theories grounding the limited literature on African American women's experiences in school leadership positions are discussed.

Critical Race Theory

Ledesma and Calderón (2015) pinpointed in the past 2 decades, educational researchers have increasingly used CRT to critically assess school climate, educational opportunities, pedagogy, and representation among other factors. This theory has presented both an epistemological and methodological instrument to allow evaluating encounters of customarily underrepresented population in the K–12 educational pipeline. In the pipeline, CRT is used by

researchers to identify how racism and race manifest themselves in the system in issues such as curriculum, school politics, leadership, policy, and pedagogy. Walker (2015) pinpointed five key components of CRT, including the ingrained and consistent nature of racism, an appraisal of objectivity, neutrality, color-blindness notions, interest convergence, systemic racism breakdown, and the significance of the practical knowledge of people of color. As such, the low number of African American women in educational leadership and obstacles they face in those roles are part of CRT principles. According to Mayberry (2018), African American women are assessed less positively than leaders who meet the leadership characteristics regarded as “typical.” African American women perceive the glass ceiling in leadership differently from white counterparts. The intersection of gender and race singles out African American women in leadership roles in K–12 educational settings. Hence, CRT helped to closely look at how the intersectional identity of these women informs experiences in leadership.

Black Feminist Thought

Alinia (2015) pinpointed Black feminist thought (BFT) to be a standpoint rooted in African American women’s struggles in everyday life. Collins (1986) developed BFT to differentiate traditional feminist theory from experiences of women of color, who also contend with racism (Hooks, 1989). According to Davis and Brown (2017), achieving social acceptance amid feelings of isolation and tokenization leads to the practice of changing or shifting attitudes, choices, and postures to meet the cultural codes found in the U.S. workplace. Therefore, African American women leaders have to navigate social perceptions. In educational settings, Davis and Brown (2017) pinpointed difficulty and marginalization are defining factors for African American leaders. They have to show profound resilience past being automatically discounted and work to prove their capabilities. Carter (2013) emphasized, based on BFT, in the case an

African American woman gets a principal position, they become mindful of how their actions represent their gender and race and how they influence the future outlook of African American female principals. Overall, BFT shows how domination is coordinated and functions in different power domains (Alinia, 2015). It also demonstrates the path of striving and empowerment, simultaneously pinpointing setbacks in fighting intersecting oppression. This framework highlighted the intersecting oppression African American/Black women face in K–12 settings and shed light on strategies they use to endure and progress in their respective workplace settings.

Representative Bureaucracy Theory

Grissom et al. (2015) illustrated representative bureaucracy indicates for active representation to happen, populations of clients benefit from people sharing characteristics with them being the ones to render public services. As such, a diverse bureaucratic workforce is essential to ensure groups' varied interests are dealt with in policy implementation. Grissom et al. (2015) pinpointed bureaucratic representation and its use in schooling contexts is largely alien to education researchers. This theory has been mainly applied to understand how gender, ethnic, or racial composition of teaching staff is related to systematic differential treatment of students and outcomes in relation to same characteristics. As such, this theory can be applied to evaluate recruitment practices of African American female leaders in K–12 settings.

West (2018) indicated a greater number of African American female leaders including superintendents in New York state schools could be beneficial for underrepresented children enrollment. Citing several studies, West pinpointed African American women in educational leadership positions render different contributions in positions (e.g., significant efficacy, commitment to children's care more relation collaboration, consensus building, and survival

skills). They modify their leadership to deal with needs of a particular culture while remaining true to their own. Thus, the application of this theory in K–12 settings is based on the idea leadership recruitment should consider addressing the needs of a varied student population. There has been a need for a diverse workforce of administrators and principals, among them African American women.

These theories collectively contributed to the research questions by highlighting intersections between race, gender, and a need for balanced representation in K–12 education settings. To ensure the African American/Black woman’s voice was included in the theorizing of leadership, the three theoretical frameworks in this research study placed their experiences at the center of the research analysis, ensuring they were positioned through the intersectional lenses of race and gender.

How Lack of Diversity Impacts Educational Institutions

Lack of diversity, especially among women of color in school environments, has caused harm to various institutions. One of those adverse effects has been a lack of innovation and creativity in schools. Threadcraft and Miller (2017) indicated failure to practice diversity has hindered some people from partaking in organizational activities. As a result, employees have often failed to practice skills helpful in enhancing productivity. It is through the expression of skills people learn new approaches to accomplishing educational duties in learning institutions. However, excluding women of color from partaking in leadership as administrators and principals has created a leadership vacuum in learning institutions. Due to bigoted practices, learners fail to acquire creative and innovative techniques from educators (Threadcraft & Miller, 2017). Threadcraft and Miller’s argument was also supported by Roupetz et al. (2020), who stated inability to show diversity hinders women of color from using educational background and

expertise to generate fresh and innovative ideas. Roupetz et al., moreover, agreed most of public schools have lost creativity to some extent due to the habit of having noninclusivity in education matters.

Secondly, U.S. institutions dominated by men as principals and superintendents have recorded weak results in the recent past. For example, King (2020) indicated some U.S. institutions are performing dismally because they have not embraced the leadership of women—including Black women—in activities. Failure to be involved in cocurricular events means learners are getting instructions from a particular gender, thus, causing low productivity.

In the article “Pay Equity and Marginalized Women,” Kohout and Singh (2018) asserted there is no mutual coexistence in most learning institutions due to the inferiority complex created on a particular group. Lack of a conducive corporate culture in schools has generated an overall negative attitude on institutions and those that have taken higher roles in learning centers. Kohout and Singh (2018), in their study argue institutions have failed to attain expectations due to the weak bond created between white and Black female colleagues. The nature of turnover is consequently affected as Black women feel withdrawn when they are not provided with roles of being heads, principals, or superintendents.

There are a series of solutions to be undertaken to support African American women and increase their leadership as principals or superintendents. As outlined by Medley (2017), school leaders should use their ability and knowledge or experience to integrate an element of diversity at places of work. Before an individual is provided with management roles, human resources should critically evaluate their ability to control, coordinate, organize, and staff. School heads can carry out performance appraisal on employees based on abilities rather than racial and or ethnic affiliations. Thus, the practice of diversity will be observed if women of color principals

and superintendents are appointed or elected freely (Medley, 2017). More so, Medley highlighted women of color can enjoy the role of leadership when there are effective organizational policies in U.S. learning institutions. Workers that target to achieve institutional goals will work per the set employment policies. Employment policies include adhering to the accepted code of ethics (Medley, 2017). Policies could include respecting all employees race and ethnic background regardless of place of origin. In this case, African American women can be given leadership responsibilities in the respective centers if all schools act per institutional policies.

The other solution to the lack of diversity and inclusion of African American women in the superintendent, principal, and other leadership roles is the provision of continuous diversity training (Mhlanga, 2017). Progressive education about diversity is helpful to workers as it teaches employment ethics. Being endowed with ethical rules is critical as it will allow schools to distribute leadership roles to African American women evenly. Properly educated human resources and school heads will also inform new employees in schools on respect and the practice of parity to all workers.

Overall, the creation of awareness in U.S. educational centers is vital to limiting racial bigotry toward African American/Black women. Typically, people feel content when they are recognized and promoted at their places of work. By growing supervisory consciousness of encounters and challenges experienced by Black women in the workplace, policymakers can reframe organizational prospects of leadership to be more inclusive of racial and gendered diversity.

Summary

This chapter contained an exploration of the theories—critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and representative bureaucracy which guided the development of the research methodology. The chapter also contained a literature review of the history of education for African Americans, experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles in K–12 educational settings and highlighted challenges and solutions to support both individuals and the institutions Black women navigate. Chapter 3 focuses on the method of research used in this study.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

Research on lived experiences of African American women in administrator, principal, and superintendent roles in K–12 educational settings has been limited. Therefore, it was critical to contribute to the literature on African American women in leadership roles, their ongoing engagement in their chosen professions, some challenges they face, and strategies to succeed in their roles. To gain a better understanding of African American women’s lived experiences as leaders in K–12 educational setting, the researcher employed qualitative case study methods.

The purpose of this study was to further understand lived experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 educational leadership positions and ongoing engagement and factors that impact career progression. This study’s qualitative research design included interviews to explore lived experiences and perspectives of female African American administrators and principals for K–12 public school districts. Virtual, semi-structured 60 minutes Zoom interviews were conducted with six participants who were employed in public school districts in King County, Washington.

Overview of the Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles in K–12 educational settings. As described in the previous chapter, a framework consisting of critical race, Black feminist, and representative bureaucracy theories was used to examine how the intersecting identities of African American/Black women influences leadership style and career trajectory. Research questions were:

1. What are lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles in K–12 educational settings?

2. What factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of African American/Black women in their respective leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?
3. To what extent does an organization’s culture and espoused values impact the career progression of African American/Black women?

This chapter provides a description of the research method for the study, including the role of the researcher, research design and rationale, and methodology.

Role of the Researcher

My story began in Mogadishu, Somalia. In reflecting on my life as a Somali refugee and hardships my family has endured, I think about Langston Hughes’s (1922) poem, “Mother to Son.” Hughes wrote, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. It’s had tacks in it, and splinters, and boards torn up, and no carpet on the floor—bare” (p. 1). A few months before the civil war in Somalia, my father was involved in a fatal car accident, leaving behind a pregnant wife and three young children. The conflict forced my family to flee and live as refugees in Kenya. Necessities such as food and shelter were rationed and scarce in the camp because of the sheer number of Somalis facing the same ordeal. Fortunately, after 6 years and with the help of many, my family resettled in the United States, first arriving in Texas as refugees in 1996.

I hold a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Seattle University and pursuing a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Organizational Learning at Seattle University. For the last 15 years, I have worked directly in service to residents of South King County. In addition to serving several boards (e.g., Kent Youth and Family Services, Kent YMCA, One America Votes, Somali Health Board), I am passionate about creating a pipeline for young people to access opportunities and provide an exposure to new experiences. I mentor youth through several programs, pushing systems from the outside so everyone can get to collective liberation. My area

of interest is experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 education settings. My role in this study was as an observer.

Research Methodology

To explore the research questions, a qualitative phenomenological case study research design was used to understand participants' lived experiences about a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a research design, phenomenological case study methods is described as an opportunity to gain the essence of meaning or phenomena based on one's description of experiencing the phenomena (Patton, 2015). Case study methodology derives its roots from social scientists and has evolved in definition and application throughout recent decades (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers using the methodology often seek to explore intricacies of a situation in its context, allowing for examination of a topic or issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Early foundational authors and principles offer more insight to modern researchers seeking to use the informative methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell (2007) suggested qualitative studies constitute an appropriate research design that provides researchers with a method to objectively evaluate and understand dynamics of a concept: in this case, to provide further insight into lived experiences of African American/Black women. Qualitative research also allows the researcher to maximize and amplify voices of participants and to look in depth at a topic of interest or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Population

This qualitative case study was conducted with participants from King County, WA. Together, this area has more than 200 K–12 schools (King County, 2018). The overall population of King County in 2018 was over 2.23 million (King County, 2018). The county has become demographically diverse, especially in the south and southwest regions. As of 2018,

21.8% of King County, WA residents were born outside of the country (487,000 people). Also, in 2018, there were 3.29 times more white (non-Hispanic) residents (1.31 million people) in King County than any other race or ethnicity. There were 398,000 Asian American (non-Hispanic) and 147,000 Black or African American (non-Hispanic) residents, the second and third most common ethnic groups. Currently, there are 20 public school districts in King County. Participants of this study were selected from the county based on leadership role (i.e., administrator, principal, superintendent) in the 20 public school districts. The researcher identified African American women leaders in each participating school districts and they were encouraged to participate in this study.

Sampling

Sample selection for this qualitative research was done using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling, is considered a type of purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this method, participants or informants with whom contact was already made used social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit “hidden populations,” that is, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies. This study drew exclusively from S-275 data, school personnel data, looking at the Seven Road map region districts (Highline et al., 2021) and the Puget Sound educational service district for the last 2 academic years (2019–2021). The file included the fields of race/ethnicity, region, role in the district, and highest degree earned.

Criteria for eligibility to participate in this study were (a) self-identified African American/Black woman and (b) in a leadership role (i.e., administrator, principal, superintendent) in a school district in King County. Creswell (2007) indicated it is appropriate

participants involved in sampling share lived experiences that relate to the research questions being investigated.

Data Collection

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission from Seattle University, participants were contacted through snowball sampling. Upon making contact, an IRB-approved email was sent to African American/Black women in administrator and principal roles. The purpose of the study was explained along with an invitation to participate. Steps taken to ensure confidentiality in the process were identified and each participant was assigned a pseudonym and recorded Zoom interviews were kept in a secure location. Once participants were selected and completed a consent form (see Appendix A), the researcher conducted interviews via Zoom.

Creswell (2007) noted qualitative research data collection, observation, recording, and interviews can be used to gain knowledge of lived experiences of study participants. The data collection method in this study included a demographic questionnaire and qualitative interviews: “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 117). According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007), social-science researchers suggest a researcher should specify the process of data gathering and how it was recorded.

The researcher recorded each interview session and listened carefully to each recording multiple times. The first-time listening was to transcribe for accuracy. The second time was to listen for key issues and categories of participants’ responses. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016). To conduct a member check, the researcher emailed a copy of findings to each participant and then followed up via email to clarify any aspects of the transcribed recording.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis focuses on analysis of specific statements, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis process in a qualitative research study is to examine lived experiences from the perspective of those who share such experiences. The researcher reviews the interview transcripts to determine themes and identify information stated in the interview relevant to the research question or the phenomenon being studied. Consequently, themes emerge into patterns or relationships and data is synthesized (Nowell et al., 2017).

The first step in the data analysis process is to organize and prepare data. This includes detailing the transcription process and transference of notes into other sources of information. The second step would be to read through data to obtain a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning, “What are participants saying? What is the impression of the overall depth, credibility and use of the information?” (Creswell, 2007). The researcher starts with one document, reviewing it thoroughly and making notes of underlying meanings.

The third step in data analysis is coding: Coding is the process of organizing the material into segments of text before bringing meaning to the information (Nowell et al., 2017). Once some overall themes have been identified from a few interviews, the next step is to begin grouping similar topics. Researchers suggest coding by topics (a) readers would expect, (b) surprising and not anticipated, (c) unusual but of conceptual interest to readers, and (d) that address the larger theoretical perspective in the research. After all interviews, a list of topics was generated and then grouped together (Nowell et al., 2017). Once completed, topic groups were organized into columns as “major,” “unique,” and “extra.”

The next step in coding is to abbreviate topics as codes and write codes next to the appropriate segments of the text (Nowell et al., 2017). Following the abbreviation of topics, the next step is categorization. To reduce categories, related topics were grouped together. After the reduction of categories, abbreviation decisions were finalized, and an alphabetical list of codes and abbreviations created. The final step was to organize the data into each category and start the initial analysis and if necessary, recode any existing data (Nowell et al., 2017).

The fourth step in the data analysis process is developing a description of people and categories and themes (Creswell, 2007). These themes would be identified as major findings of the research study. This study used a traditional social sciences approach by allowing codes to emerge as the data were analyzed. Transcripts were hand color coded by themes. The fifth step is to decide how the description and themes will be represented. This study had a narrative approach with a detailed discussion of themes and subthemes. The final step is to make meaning of data (Nowell et al., 2017). This interpretation of data is a comparison of what was learned from the literature and the study: “These lessons could be the researchers personal interpretation, couched in the understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from his or her own culture, history and experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 189).

Ethical Considerations

Given this study involved people participating and contributing to the understanding of lived experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 leadership roles, safeguards were established to protect and respect participant rights. Creswell (2014) pointed out some ethical issues that may occur during a study and ways to avoid those issues from happening. Therefore, the researcher protected participants’ rights by (a) getting approval for the research design from the IRB, (b) obtaining written consent from participants before participation in the study, and (c)

using pseudonyms to protect identities. Participants were over the age of 18 and were informed of the research process throughout.

Credibility

For this study, triangulation was used. Interviews were conducted with an observation of participants' surroundings and body language. The researcher remained transparent throughout the study. Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants were employed by making certain each participant understood they had the option to decline participating in the study at any time. This ensured the data collected involved participants who genuinely desired to participate in the study. Additionally, no compensation was offered for participation.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time and involves participants' evaluation of findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the study, such that all are supported by data as received from participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Journal writings shared with participants and frequent memoing were the techniques used to determine dependability.

Transferability

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted transferability refers to the degree to which results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents. The researcher facilitated transferability judgment through thick description, describing not just behaviors and experiences, but contexts as well, so behaviors and experiences may become meaningful to an outsider.

Controls for Bias

I disclosed my understandings about biases, values, and experiences I brought to the

research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, I addressed observer bias. Biases in any type of research, including qualitative, cannot be eliminated completely, but controls were used to mitigate them. Likewise, response biases were explicitly addressed by using an independent reviewer to review data, check codes, and crosscheck themes for signs of bias.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are some limitations to this research study. The most important limitation is this research was conducted during a global pandemic, that of COVID-19. Many of the school leaders were in the process of creating their school reopening plans and their valuable time was limited. In addition to the pandemic of COVID, many of them were experiencing the racial reckoning happening across the country (Monahan, 2021) and processing information and emotions in real-time. Given these limitations, this study purposely focused on a small population: African American female leaders in K-12 Road Map Region school districts to gain insight into their lived experiences. Although the sample size is small, the overall sampling strategy was an effort to reduce bias and enhance credibility because sample selection was not predicated on the outcome of the study (McMillan, 2016). Additionally, the sample size places a limitation on the generalizability of results, which may not be applicable beyond the context of this research.

Another limitation of the study was the potential for researcher bias because the researcher of this study is also an African American female. Patton (2002) emphasizes for research to be considered credible, the researcher must remain neutral while conducting the study. It is critical as a researcher to consider biases and preferences brought to the study. To safeguard against this, all the participants of this study received a copy of transcripts to confirm

accuracy, and the investigator remained transparent throughout the study to ensure its credibility and trustworthiness.

Additional limitations of this study included the following:

- Participants responses were self-reported data.

Delimitations of this study included the following:

- The research was conducted across King County, which creates difficulty for replication in another context.
- Participants of this study are personnel who volunteered to participate in this research study. Therefore, findings are limited to those professionals.

Summary

This chapter included the research methodology used for this study, a detailed explanation of the research design, and reasons why the qualitative phenomenological case study was chosen. This chapter also included the positionality of the researcher, a description of participants, and the sampling technique used in the study. Additional information was provided on recruitment of participants, data collection, and the data analysis procedure.

Timeline

The research timeline began and concluded during a 4-month period. This included operationalization of the research problem, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and data design which roughly took 1 month. Data collection then took another 1 month to gather. Finally, the analysis and report writing took another month. Prior to this, research questions were drafted by the researcher for a period of 3 months. This process also included data gathering from a public data source.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American/Black women in K-12 leadership positions. The first three chapters of this dissertation offered an introduction to the problem, a review of the literature surrounding the topic, and an exploration of the phenomenological case study methodological design used for this study. This chapter will now present findings that emerged from data collected and analyzed using the conceptual framework constructed for the purpose of this study.

This chapter presents findings of a qualitative case study. Three areas will be covered: (a) summary of the research design, (b) overview of case study settings, and (c) the study's findings. This study investigated the lived experiences of African American/Black women leaders in administrator and principal roles in K-12 education settings. Six Black women in K-12 leadership roles were interviewed via Zoom for a duration of 60 minutes using semi-structured interview questions.

This chapter presents results to address the following research questions: (a) what are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles in the K-12 educational setting, (b) what factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of African American/Black women in their respective leadership role in the K-12 educational setting, and (c) to what extent does an organization's culture and espoused values impact the career progression of African American/Black women? Themes aligned with each research question were identified. The participants of this study were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Summary of the Research Design

Data Collection Process

This section presents the process used to collect qualitative data in support of the case study. The data were drawn exclusively from S-275 data, school personnel data in Washington State, looking at the Seven Road Map Region districts (Highline, Kent, Tukwila, Renton, Seattle, Auburn and Federal Way) and the Puget Sound Educational Service District for the last 2 academic years (2019–2021). A demographic survey was sent to leaders who met the inclusion criteria of:

- Identifying as African American or Black
- Identifying with the gender construct of woman
- Be in a leadership role (i.e., administrator, principal, superintendent) in a school district in King County

An email containing a brief explanation of the study, the IRB informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire to determine alignment with the study's inclusion criteria, and a calendar link of available dates to schedule their interviews was sent to potential participants. From the seven school districts and the Puget Sound Educational Service District, a population of 40 Black women in leadership roles met the stated inclusion criteria during the 2019–2021 academic year. This population consisted of Black women in principal or assistant principal, or administrator at the district level.

Data Collection Instruments

Several instruments for data collection were employed throughout the research process. Survey responses of the demographic questionnaire were collected via Qualtrics online survey and further information was concurrently collected through document analysis of publicly

available information through the S-275 data. This publicly available information on roles of Black women helped to provide a robust understanding of the respective roles of the Black women leaders. For the qualitative research, semi structured interviews was conducted with African American women administrators and principals in King County. Research questions were addressed by using an established interview protocol with each participant. The researcher also conducted a thematic narrative analysis of the aforementioned open-ended questions. The researcher identified themes in narratives of research participants related to the research questions. Themes included: emotional impacts, organizational culture, protective factors, relationships in the school, and strategies to support Black women. Sub-themes were also identified as appropriate. For example, emotional impacts were further categorized to identify narratives related to emotional stress and hypervigilance.

Data Analysis

As described in Chapter 3, the data analysis consisted of accurately interpreting data by organizing the content and identifying patterns and themes to result in a holistic depiction or meaning of the lived experiences of African American women school leaders. To organize data in a manageable manner, a researcher can use thematic coding to analyze the information being presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the coding process, the researcher read through the interviews to get a sense of the overall themes and content. Once codes were selected, the researcher thoroughly read through each of the interview transcripts and added codes as necessary - adding some as “micro” or subcodes to help organize them. A category was developed for each code and a number was assigned.

Study Setting and Participants

This section presents background information on the study setting and participants of the study. Table 1 shows participant demographics and study setting characteristics.

Table 1

African American/Black Women in K–12 Leadership Roles

Measure	<i>n</i>	%
Race		
Black/African American	6	100
School district		
Highline	2	33
Kent	1	17
Seattle	3	50
Leadership role		
Principal	3	50
Other administrative role	3	50
Years in leadership role		
≤ 5 years	1	17
> 15 years	5	83
School/student SES		
Low-income	6	100

Study Setting

This case study was conducted in King County, a region in the Pacific Northwest area of the United States. The overall population of King County as of 2018 is over 2.1 million residents. The county has become increasingly diverse; however, much of the diversity is

concentrated in areas south and southwest of King County, although the eastern region is predominantly white (King County, 2018). The Road Map Project region spans seven King County, Washington school districts:

- Auburn School District
- Federal Way Public Schools
- Highline Public Schools
- Kent School District
- Renton School District
- Seattle Public Schools (South Seattle only)
- Tukwila School District

Together, this area has more than 200 K–12 schools. More than 127,000 K–12 students call the Road Map Region home, with, “11.5 percent of Washington State public school students and 43 percent of students in King County,” (Road Map Region Project, 2021, para. 1). The youth who attend the seven school districts speak 189 primary languages and come from 181 countries (Road Map Region Project, 2021). Participants for this study were selected from King County’s Road Map Region school districts based on their administrative role in their school district. For example, Black women who are administrators and assistant principals of each district in King County were asked to participate.

Individuals who met the inclusion criteria were selected and a demographic questionnaire and an email was sent to them. Participation was sought from all Black women educational leaders in the Seven Road Map Region school districts in King County. The number of participants in this pool was 40. Out of 40 district leaders, six individuals completed the demographic survey. Various methods were used to contact and solicit possible participants:

letters, emails, referrals, and suggested participants from other administrators that did not fit the criteria. Six Black women in leadership roles were interviewed. These interviews lasted 60 minutes and were conducted remotely via Zoom platform, recording only the audio version of responses. At the conclusion of recorded interviews, individual responses were transcribed and later coded.

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Dr. Karen has been an educator for 21 years and currently serves as a principal. She began her career as a kindergarten teacher. At the time of this research, she was a principal of a Title 1 school in a Road Map Region school district in King County. Dr. Bettina began her career as an instructional assistant 27 years ago, working her way up to an administrator level role. Dr. Bettina is a district-level administrator at a Road Map Region school district. Dr. Carmen is transitioning from an assistant principal to a principal in the 2020–2021 academic school year. She began her career as a teacher in the classroom and others encouraged her to pursue a doctorate and further her education. Dr. Carmen is a principal at one of the Road Map Region school districts in King County. Kelcey comes from a long line of educators. She worked her way up from a family support worker to an administrator at a Road Map Region school district in King County. Amanda started her career in 1998 and comes from a non-education background. Amanda is an administrator at a Road Map Region school district in King County. Jewel's career began as a high school teacher for 23 years by choice because she wanted to have a deeper understanding of the art of teaching young people. Jewel spent 25 years in a Road Map region school district in King County. Recently, she left K–12 public education to a different role aligned with her personal goals.

Findings

The six African American/Black women who participated in this study yielded significant findings aligned with the current literature on difficulties Black women face in obtaining and retaining leadership roles in K–12 educational settings. Each woman shared their lived truths navigating a system not constructed with people of color in mind. Interviews were conducted via Zoom platform. During these sessions, the researcher invited participants to share what they were most comfortable sharing and allowed the space for flexibility and grace. Given all the women were helping to design the school reopening plans, they all shared the burden they were carrying and the obligation they felt to students they serve. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure of building school level reopening plans, many of the women expressed the exhaustion they were feeling and appreciation to the researcher for documenting their experiences. The range of questions asked prompted the women to share challenging situations and strategies on how they overcame them. The researcher gave them time to process questions and space when it felt difficult for them. These are a set of detailed findings collected from participants related to each of the research questions that guided interviews.

Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational settings?

General Lack of Trust

There was a sense even with the highest credentials, which were needed in the first place to gain respect, white colleagues did not trust the leadership and vision of Black women. At the same time, they were undermined while others took credit for their ideas, and other staff had higher positions with less education and or experience. For example, Dr. Carmen shared, “I trust

people until they show me they can't be trusted. In my role, I had to show that I can be trusted." She continued, "My white assistant principal was trusted first until she did something, and even if she made a mistake, they would give her grace. With me, they would call everyone. They would question my decisions, my judgment, and my abilities." That general lack of trust for Black women leaders was confirmed by three other participants. Dr. Karen shared, "Instead of people asking me questions, they would go around me, compare my leadership to other people in other buildings." Dr. Karen recalls an incident with a white colleague and that being a turning point in their relationship where she would allow the assistant principal to say things she wanted to say, and they would hear her and not Dr. Karen. The white assistant principal would act as a witness, would look at the Black principal first, causing the other teachers to look at the principal. That shifted the power back to the Black female leader and set the stage for future conversations. The need to have white allies to build trust for Black women and be a buffer to the microaggressions they face surfaced as a strategy to lessen the distrust Black women leaders face in K-12 leadership roles.

Black Women Whisperer

This idea of being the "Black whisperer," if there was an issue with a Black person, including a Black student in a classroom or a Black educator, surfaced in interviews. Black women were asked to manage issues of everyone around them. Dr. Bettina said:

There's a framing of what people expect you to be, which is to take care of everyone else. Make sure that the colleague is ok, that the student is ok . . . we are also a product of the school system, I can talk about my experience as a student and it's the same thing that students now are experiencing. People not acknowledging that you're a Black woman, that you have a right to be here, that you have earned it.

This sense of being “The Black Whisperer”- making sure anyone Black who is experiencing any challenge, be it a Black student in the classroom or a Black educator, was highlighted by Dr. Karen. For example, Dr. Karen shared when there are Black students who are having behavior challenges, there’s a belief only another Black educator can intervene. Dr. Karen argues there’s data that documents, “Black students who have even one Black teacher during elementary school are more likely to graduate high school and consider college. Black students with Black teachers experience less exclusionary discipline and fewer office visits, a crucial break in the school-to-prison pipeline.” Others argued there is a balance between loving on Black students and having high expectations for them. Jewel notes with Black educators and leaders, Black women, there’s a shift and an understanding Black students need both; students need to know someone loves them and expects more of them. Jewel says, “It’s almost like you’re whispering to them that you know they can do better, and they often do.” For Black educators who might be experiencing workplace issues, Dr. Bettina said there’s an obligation she feels to step in and support them, “Whenever there’s a new Black colleague, I make sure to welcome them, to let them know that I see them, that I am here to support them.” For Dr. Bettina, this obligation to ensure the success of both her Black colleagues and Black students in her care is personal. It is what she had access to, other Black educators who helped her navigate her path as a leader, and she says she is committed to doing that for others.

Speaking One’s Truth Versus Staying Silent

When asked about their lived experiences, five participants shared they had to balance being outspoken enough and speaking their truth and the need to make a difference in their work on behalf of children and families they serve. Sometimes, they argued they stayed silent because of the “greater good”—impacting change. Other times, they picked their battles and fought back.

For instance, Dr. Bettina shared she challenges the system: “I have been able to prevent whatever was happening in the moment with huge cost to career progression and being overlooked for opportunities. I attribute certain things to how people stopped inviting me to spaces, and certain committees.” This way of being, of deciding to stay silent versus speaking one’s truth, felt inauthentic to Dr. Carmen, “Am I hiding who I am by code switching? Am I not living out my whole authentic truth by being strategic about what I say? Maybe. I am dropping dimes and not bursting bubbles until I am able to take actionable steps to change the institution.” Although Kelcey had been able to steadily advance because of her network and support, she observed experiences of other Black women and this sense of isolation when they do speak their truths, “I understand the need to speak one’s truth but I pick my battles. Not every battle is a war, and sometimes silence also sends a message.”

For Dr. Karen, she chooses the side of truth telling every time. As an educator for the past 21 years, she has found the balance between honoring her voice and her power with dynamics she navigates with her white staff, she notes:

There is an expectation that you hold back. There is a fear of the consequences as well, but after being in K-12 for so long, you get exhausted by the expectations of others and potentially losing your voice for the comfort of others. I am no longer engaging in that. I am no longer holding back so that others can feel better about themselves. I speak my truth; I honor my lived experience and my decades work of educating students. If my truth is difficult for someone to hear, maybe they need to reflect on that because it is not a reflection on me.

Feeling of In Group and Out Group

Despite having credentials and degrees to obtain a leadership role, the theme of feeling like leadership roles were based on connections was highlighted throughout interviews. Dr.

Bettina said:

Getting into the role was a barrier. When I was interested in becoming a principal, I did several interviews, got feedback about it's not the right fit. People were not seeing me as a leader, or a leader that can represent their community. There are several limitations where I can work or be the right fit. There is also a balance of do you speak the truth, and when you do, how much harm will that do to you? I have a recent example where I spoke with a supervisor, I spoke my truth and didn't get the recommendation I needed for a position. The thinking was that I was not the right fit. What does that mean? What work is being done to show that Black women are viable candidates for these roles, for superintendent roles? I see that many higher positions are relational and have a cost to one's advancement. Those who know me say that I speak the truth and that has limited opportunities for me beyond this current role I'm in.

This notion of a high cost to pay for being in the in-group was shared by Jewel. When asked about her experience as a Black woman in a leadership role, Jewel said:

We do not have critical mass. There are a few Black women in the school building. The leaders are sometimes grouped into hierarchical positions. If an administrator prefers a particular teacher, that teacher is given favor or grace for whatever responsibilities they have. If you are not liked as a Black woman, the doors are closed shut for you. There's no coming back to it.

A Demanding Job

Three participants described being in a K–12 leadership role as an emotionally and physically demanding job. Dr Carmen said:

My experiences have been interesting so far. I started as an assistant principal and the work was really about supporting the principal and making sure that the day-to-day operations went smoothly. Now, as I'm transitioning into principal leadership, there's a different level of focus and energy into the work. There are staff needs which sometimes are at odds with student needs. Certain community members have expectations of me, because of my identity. Others question my intention and are constantly trying to put me in a box. There are others who undermine me, school boards who are setting the agendas and policies that we must adhere to. The state also, with its mandates and new regulations has been challenging to keep up with. At the same time, we are in a global pandemic with many of our schools reopening in-person learning. I have my own personal life too, children that require my attention and have needs. It's a lot to balance.

Dr. Bettina recounted her own experience as an administrator and as a member of the Black community, saying:

There are the demands of the job and then there are expectations from others about your job. For some in the Black community, Black people who work in these oppressive systems may be labeled as working "for the man." We are not Black enough for the Black community and not welcomed in white spaces. It's a delicate situation.

Research Question 2

What factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of African American/Black women in their respective leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?

Experiences as Black Women Who Care About Children

For Kelcey, her career path has not always been clear, often balancing her instinct to speak the truth, which she said can limit opportunities for Black women to advance in their careers and caring for students. For Dr. Bettina, although she acknowledged challenges she faces as a Black woman who is undermined and disrespected, she asserted she remains steadfast because of her love for Black children and to ensure they have a different experience than she did as a product of the same school district.

Jewel argued her experience as a Black woman was different than her white peers because of the connection she had to her students, especially to Black students. She recalled the expectation to change or affect a broken system is there for Black leaders, especially for Black women. She noted, “Even as a teacher, I was put there to fix the students who looked like me, that added pressure because I’m a Black female, there was an expectation that Black students should be doing better.” When she received her credentials and became a principal, that expectation was heightened. As a principal, she was tasked to lead a majority white staff in a predominately student of color school, along with trying to keep Black children out of special education. She argued there was a tension between balancing needs of white staff and needs of students of color in her school. That tension of improving school climate for students and changing the organizational culture persisted.

All six participants shared despite challenges they face, they are in the profession because of their love for children. Dr. Carmen said, “I want to make sure that more children have a different experience than I did, I want to make sure that their experience has less harm in it.” This idea of reducing harm particularly for Black children was highlighted by Dr. Karen as well when she said:

When you see that there is work that can be done to improve outcomes for Black students and you share that concept with the staff, if the staff don't want to do it, then they will rally themselves up and hide behind the contract. How can it be work if we are undoing generational harm?

The emphasis on Black women leaders and their relationships with Black students has been shared by Amanda as well. Black women leaders provide an experience where Black students see a reflection of themselves and their potential. They see someone who looks like them and may have shared experience is in this position. Jewel says:

Black educators often have an easier time building connections with students, especially Black students, because of our cultural and racial identity. It starts as a surface-level connection at first, but that connection helps to build trust and a relationship that is critical and long-lasting. The young people see someone who not only shares their racial identity but life experiences as well. That is a bond that is special and can be understood by Black educators. That bond goes beyond the racial connection. When I see a student, who is being pulled out of the classroom, or doing something he or she should not be, I can pull them aside and ask what is going on with them, beyond the behavior. They then share, openly, because of the trust and relationship we have established. It's a different type of leadership that we offer. It's a different type of care that we lead with.

Determined to Persevere

When asked about factors that contribute to their continued engagement, five participants said they were determined to persevere, regardless of obstacles. Common themes included staying focused until they are in a position where they can bring their lived truth and persevere. Amanda shared:

I'm simply aware that there are differences between how Black women and white women are treated. I don't let them prevent me from making the decisions that have to be made, but it's just smart to be aware of obvious differences. I am constantly on edge, worried about who will report a grievance about my training or who will be upset about the way I'm leading. There are so many doubts that impact me every day. It's unfortunate because it gives you a feeling of instability to always stay on top of your toes, never get too comfortable and always be ready for anything, because anything can happen without notice. But overall, it just makes me stronger, more determined to succeed and persist.

Jewel shared that sentiment of needing to persevere, saying:

There are some decisions that I made that in hindsight that were challenging and were difficult to present to the staff. You are continuously trying to hit home runs, so that people will realize that what you say is what you mean and that you're willing to put your teeth into it, and have the courage to believe what you are doing is right for the children. I'll give you an example: I've taken on some huge challenges in this job. Some of the challenges came from my predominately white staff who would undermine my decisions. For example, one day I made a decision about a teacher that was being inappropriate to a Black student. That decision was hard, but it needed to be made for the protection of our students. That teacher was reprimanded for harming a student. I did the right thing, but it was not received well. Ultimately, I persevere because I know that I did the right thing.

Research Question 3

To what extent does an organization's culture and espoused values impact the career progression of African American/Black women?

Overall Lack of Representation in Leadership Roles

When asked to what an extent an organization's culture impacts Black women, participants shared differences impacted daily experiences and responsibilities in their leadership roles. Many of the Black women leaders' institutions have an espoused value of representation and diversity, many of them note it is not reflected in leadership. All participants acknowledged overall lack of representation was a burden they carried while many of their institutions espoused values include diversifying the workforce. As Black female leaders, some of them worked with several other people of color (i.e., Black women and men) and had the space to speak to common experiences. Dr. Bettina said:

It's exhausting to be thinking about these things before you can get even think about the work. The concern for people around you, the leaders of color who depend on you, you carry a different burden. There's a sense of community and responsibility, which is heavy. It's powerful and it's heavy. It's tiring. Constantly checking, monitoring, and correcting people and systems. Are we moving the furniture into the master's house? How do we break free and not just make it look like an appearance that it's being changed? How do I hold the staff who look like me while I work on the system?

The Black woman leaders who worked in the central office also shared this tension of being one of few Black women in positions of power. They shared this feeling there could only be a limited number of Black people in leadership role. Dr. Bettina recalled with, "If central office is occupied by white people, no one ever says there's too many white people in that room. No one ever counts the number of white women in cabinet-level roles, or in curriculum and instruction." When Black women attained those roles, there was a belief white people sponsored them, that someone white cosigned their brilliance to be in that position.

Hostile Work Environments

When asked about how an organizations' espoused values impact their career progression, several participants shared there is a tension between the value of safety for staff and the reality of circumstances for Black women in the workplace. Three participants shared their experiences at their workplace as hostile. Amanda shared a recent incident which has opened her eyes to the difference between experiences of Black women and their white female counterparts, saying:

I was leading a training for new teachers and doing a simulated activity where the participants had to do an assignment. The directions were a little loose by design. One group, a group of young white women didn't want to do the activity, were disrespectful and a constant distraction to the other folks in the class. (The lesson in the activity was how do you deal with disruptions.) One white woman was screaming about how she hated the class, she was really emotional. I asked the rest of the class to take a break and I spoke with her. She was crying and hysterical. She said she didn't want to be in the class, that she was the best teacher in the school. I told her maybe she can go outside and take a moment to breathe. She left. The next day, someone from the training ended up bringing the union into the conversation and reported to them that I made a student cry. . . and that I said meet me in the hallway. That's just one example. If I were a white woman, would that behavior have escalated? Would that story have been believable, that I made someone cry?

This incident continues to haunt her and makes her job as an instructional leader helping to improve how teachers support students and families difficult. Dr. Carmen observed other

Black women experience their physical space often being invaded. She argued being a Black woman in a K–12 educational setting is a political act; whereby, leaders like her must determine who they need to be “liked by” to get things they need done. As a Black woman, she noted, “The further I get away from protecting whiteness, the further I am pushed out. When I start popping that bubble and showing you things that you might not want to see, you are pushed out.”

Acknowledgment of Racism and Oppression

All participants shared their organization has a value of undoing racism in its institution, and three participants shared intent has a different impact. Three participants shared their colleagues in schools have acknowledged racism and oppression in their organizations but sometimes acknowledgement fell short of making changes, or the white colleagues expected Black women to take on racism and oppression. Dr. Karen said:

It seems as though systems want to check the box . . . hire people of color, Black women. But I don't know that they understand how to support us. We have to find our own support system and create brave spaces from the racism and oppression. It gets exhausting.

All six participants highlighted the notion of creating networks for Black women where they could have the space to mitigate against effects of microaggressions.

Additionally, all six have addressed the intersection of race and gender barriers they experience and have witnessed other Black women experiencing. Dr. Bettina mentioned, “Some of the challenges that I have are unclear whether the cause is my race or gender. I’ve experienced resistance just for my appearance of being a Black female administrator.” Another major barrier shared by Dr. Karen was the constant need to prove yourself over and over and realizing your

gender and your race are the reasons, noting, “Sometimes I feel that I am the face of my race or gender. It’s exhausting.”

For Dr. Bettina, an administrator at a predominantly white-led school serving students of color, the issue is more pronounced. She described one experience where she was conscious of her race and gender, “I’ve always had to make sure that at every moment, of every day, that I have my stuff together. I know what it is that I am doing, I know my content and have the knowledge and skills to be leading in this way.” This feeling of constantly being interviewed for a role they are currently in was also shared by Amanda, “At any moment, we can be let go. We cannot make mistakes, and when we do, we are not offered grace. Yes, I believe in accountability but that isn’t how white women are treated. They get grace first.” Five women connected their gendered and racial experiences to the racism and oppression in the workplace.

Networks for Black Women

When asked what more organizations could do to impact the career progression of Black women, all six participants shared organizations should create affinity group spaces for Black women to network and share experiences. Dr. Karen argued Black women need spaces where they can go for refuge, saying, “Spaces where we can ask each other, how would you navigate this? Here’s an experience that I had, what would you do different?” All participants also shared leadership and sponsorship in affinity groups, where Black women can build skills, build community and alliances to endure challenges they face.

Supportive Relationships

All six participants identified a variety of ways organizations and colleagues have supported them in the workplace. Two participants mentioned having the support of the superintendent and other Black leaders in the district. Kelcey shared her path has been guided by

leaders, white women, who helped her navigate the system and connect her with internal opportunities. These supportive relationships are fostered over time, and when a challenge arises for Black women in the workplace, those allies sometimes show up. Dr. Karen said:

In K–12 leadership, the majority of those in positions of power continue to be white men and women. Recently, I had an incident where my staff were questioning my decisions, constantly complaining about “those children” and what needed to change in the school. One day, I was fed up. I challenged one of the white educators and noticed that while some were watching, a white woman decided to back me up. She took it upon herself to affirm my decision and call out the colleague who was being inappropriate. That was a turning point for those who were watching on the sidelines as bystanders. They too knew that I was no longer interested in being questioned, that I will assert myself and the best part? That I have back-up. That supportive relationship has been a wonderful and dynamic shift in my leadership.

All of the women also shared experiences with family and close friends who were instrumental in their growth and professional journey. Two participants shared their faith was their anchor and this belief they are doing God’s work.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership roles. Overall, these findings provide robust context and content to address varied experiences, barriers Black women face, and day-to-day challenges they navigate in K–12 educational settings. Furthermore, though not a theme across interviews, several participants shared ancestral support—this sense of needing to be resilient and lean on their

ancestors for strength—has allowed them to endure emotional impacts and daily stressors of working in white dominant spaces such as K–12 education.

In Chapter 5, I turn to a discussion of interpretations, recommendations for further study and implications and a way forward.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the study and a discussion of the study's findings. Three areas are covered: (a) discussion of findings, (b) recommendations and implications, and (c) explorations for further study. Recommendations for leadership practice are discussed consistent with research findings and the literature review.

Overview of the Study

This study focused on the lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership roles. Three theoretical frameworks grounded this study: (a) critical race theory, (b) Black feminist thought, and (c) representative bureaucracy. The research questions were:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?
2. What factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of Black women in their respective leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?
3. To what extent does an organization's culture and values impact the career progression of Black women?

This case study was conducted in King County, a region in the Pacific Northwest area of the United States. The overall population of King County as of 2018 is over 2.1 million residents (King County, 2018). The county overtime has become increasingly diverse; however, much of the diversity is concentrated in areas south and southwest of King County, while the eastern region is predominantly white (King County, 2018). The study focused on the Road Map Region school districts: Kent, Highline, Seattle, Tukwila, Renton, Auburn, and Federal Way. Participants were selected from the S-275 data source, a network of data that includes the educator workforce in the state of Washington. The analysis of findings was explored through

qualitative methods and was further triangulated with literature reviews. Findings related to experiences that impact Black women in K–12 leadership roles resulted in three themes: (a) emotional impacts, (b) impacts to students, and (c) protective factors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 leadership roles. The qualitative nature of the research study made it possible to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and barriers they navigated in a K–12 educational setting. The six participants recruited for this study were African American/Black women in principal and administrator roles. Snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was used for this study. In this method, participants or informants with whom contact was already made via social networks referred the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative method and the phenomenology approach were deemed appropriate for this research based on Patton's (2002) definition of the phenomenological approach as a methodology researchers use to "explore how human beings make sense of experience, how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others" (p. 104.)

Using findings from the data analysis, the final line of inquiry highlights themes across interviews. Conclusions from this research are intended to highlight barriers Black women in leadership roles face in K–12 educational settings and to provide empirical data on those barriers so organizations can develop strategies to support Black women. Using results and findings from the data analysis, a discussion of findings along with implications follows, presenting results as they relate to the research questions.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1—What are the lived experiences of Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting? —focused on understanding the lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles. An analysis of the data produced a main theme—emotional impact of race and racism. All participants highlighted the emotional impact of being a Black woman in a white-dominant space. This finding aligned with critical race theory (CRT), which places attention directly on impacts of racism and race while still dealing with the white supremacy’s hegemonic system on the meritocratic system and putting attention on social justice and change (Bell, 2000). For African American women to aspire to leadership roles, it is essential to identify racial and gender barriers to these positions. Each study participant revealed in obtaining and maintaining their position, they had encountered personal struggles and emotional impacts not felt by others, especially white peers. Participants indicated they faced race, stereotype, and gender challenges that may have affected their career trajectories.

Noting stereotypes of gender and race they had encountered in their quest to leadership roles, women in this study reported they had to continuously prove themselves to families they served, district leadership, and the larger community. Participants reported they were often asked to justify specific decisions—a noticeable difference from their white male and female counterparts. Five participants attributed that to their race and gender. Further, participants reported gender and racial stereotypes had negative impacts on their ascension to leadership roles. Carter’s (2013) study on African American female principals of predominantly white schools revealed important race and gender intersections. Carter argued race and gender are often at play in educational leadership. This study’s findings offer confirmation the race and gender of

African American female principals influences their leadership and decisions and impact the school community.

For this study, CRT and components of Black feminist thought allowed participants to share lived experiences and barriers they faced. For example, five participants shared their voice was not being heard by white colleagues at the school and district levels. Dr. Karen reflected on an incident with her white colleague, “If I say something, it is heard differently than my white assistant principal. My voice is questioned, and my leadership is challenged.” Black feminist thought demonstrates participants’ counter-stories as an example of purposeful exclusion of the Black woman due to historical race, gender, and class discriminations against Black women (Carter, 2014). All the Black women leaders sharing of their lived experiences highlights the intersection of race and gender.

Impacts to Students

When asked what factors contributed to their continued engagement, all six participants in this study chose the education institution because they believed the best way to impact change is to become leaders in the K–12 education system. Dr. Karen and Dr. Carmen mentioned this desire to push back on the systemic challenges Black students face by their presence. For example, Dr. Carmen argued, “Thriving through all the factors and becoming leaders in the organization becomes an influential role in motivating the students of color to succeed.” For students of color, despite limitless challenges, there is a belief their dreams are highly achievable if leaders look like them and share their experiences (Townsend, 2020). Educators of color impact on diverse students has been robustly studied.

Substantial literature in political science has focused on using the theory of representative bureaucracy to support the idea of having more Black educators in schools as it has a positive

impact on outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, respectively (Ross et al., 2010). In general, representative bureaucracy indicates a bureaucracy that looks like the population it serves, based on demographic characteristics, will do a superior job of meeting individual and group needs because bureaucrats relate to people they serve and want to make decisions that benefit them (Dolan & Rosenbloom, 2003). In this study, this looks like the Black female leaders sharing similar experiences with students, supporting a pathway to success for Black and Brown students, and ensuring harmful policies that disproportionately impact students of color are removed. Jewel addressed this point by noting one of the reasons she remained in her role as a teacher for 23 years before accepting a promotional opportunity as a principal was to protect Black students in her classroom. Dr. Bettina also shared needing to protect students of color from white colleagues, saying: “There are far too many students of color who come to our schools for an education but are impacted by racism. They need us here.”

Protective Factors

When asked about organizational culture and how it impacts the career progression of Black women, all six participants shared Black women need protective factors and supportive environments to endure challenges they face, which are often not in alignment with their organizations’ espoused values. Findings indicated participants relied on God, faith, family, and their commitment to students and families they served. Dr. Karen, when asked what more organizations can do to support Black women, said:

We have endured so much. Our ancestors have been through worse, and the challenges that I face cannot compare to what they experienced. That knowledge of history, of the resistance, keeps me going, regardless of what the organization does.

Others noted protective factors are sometimes not enough in a white-dominant institution. Jewel mentioned:

Praying is powerful. I pray all the time. I also act and put in the work to make sure that the prayer is followed by deeds. We need more leaders who prioritize action and do the work to create better environments for women of color, especially Black women.

Recommendations and Implications of the Study

Findings of this study inspired multiple recommendations about experiences of Black women and barriers they face in K–12 leadership roles. Five recommendations are made consistent with research findings: (a) align organizational values and espoused values, (b) become a learning organization designed to address issues of race and gender, (c) support the creation of affinity groups at the school level, and (d) create a leadership pipeline in the institution for Black women and (e) foster an environment for transformational change. The set of recommendations are consistent with research questions and findings from this study.

Align Organizational Values and Espoused Values

In terms of thinking of organizational recommendations to create an environment where crucial conversations are encouraged, there are two strategies education organizations should explore. These options include aligning organizational values around diversity and inclusion and selecting a consultant that could support this change. These options have the potential to contribute to shifting the organization to a learning organization that centers the lived experiences of Black women leaders. These options are explored and analyzed next.

The first option for the organization to consider is to align organizational values around diversity and inclusion when recruiting, onboarding, and retaining Black female leaders. As education institutions increasingly reflect the rich human diversity of communities they serve,

understanding and nurturing the many voices in the school environment is crucial. Aligning values around diversity and inclusion includes an analysis of the landscape and power dynamics of leaders in the building (Daft, 2016).

The second recommendation is to create a more thorough process and engage a consultant who can develop a professional plan for staff. To address barriers Black women face, including racial and gendered barriers, the organization could bring in a consultant—such as a facilitative consultant focused on empowering partnerships—for explicit conversations on goals, intentions, and how to enact change (Block, 2006; Merron, 2016). Given findings on the issue of race and gender, a consultant may prove beneficial to help organizational leaders learn and develop an internal plan for team learning. Bringing in a thought partner such as a consultant could yield great conversations. The next sections focus on discussing and evaluating shifting to a learning organization and outlining specific recommendations with regard to creating a learning organization that may be most appropriate when considering school and staff dynamics.

Learning Organization

Findings from this study highlighted the need for education organizations to become spaces where learning happens. Though there is no “one size fits all” approach to transform itself and the environment, education organization leaders should embrace Senge’s (2006) approach to learning organizations and consider the five disciplines of building a learning organization: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) shared vision, (d) team learning, and (e) systems thinking. Additionally, principles of transformational change are recommended to develop an inclusive environment.

Personal Mastery

Many school organizations are experiencing tremendous growth with new staff and a great opportunity to create an environment reflective of the community. This is a critical time to share the vision and create a clear picture of the current reality before them (Senge, 2006).

Personal mastery is the idea leadership starts with each person and no matter what your leadership level, roles or goals, the critical factor to achieving shared results is within us.

Educational leaders guided by key staff must share their vision for the organization, which can directly align with the organization's purpose and espoused values. As revealed in this study, white allies have a role to play in ensuring Black women leaders are supported in the workplace. That can begin with an understanding of their personal mastery and an acknowledgment they too can disrupt the racial and gendered barriers Black women leaders experience. Each member has a role in creating that vision and continuously reflecting on processes to improve it. If the personal mastery is held by every staff in organizations, an environment can be created that aligns with organizations' espoused values.

Mental Models

Senge (2006) argued mental models are images, stories, and assumptions we carry in the minds of ourselves, other people, and organizations with whom we engage. Dr. Karen stated, "organizations must have baseline understanding of who they think they are and what kind of institution they want to be." With the constant shift in K-12 education, many staff are experiencing transitions and ever-changing policies. Some staff may carry mental models, assumptions of what the organization does, who it should serve, reflections on equity and this can carry significant influence. School leadership should explore what those mental models are and what different approaches and ideas of the work include. Examining different beliefs of the

organization, its espoused values and whether it is aligned with experiences of Black women are paramount. If K-12 education institutions are truly committed to racial equity at all levels, a reflection on the organization's mental models is necessary. These reflections can support a strategic plan that has aligned mental models so the organization can continue to support Black women leaders and create a plan that has aligned assumptions and values.

Shared Vision

As many organizations experience change, there must be an alignment of personal and shared visions. When hiring and retaining Black female leaders, it is important to consider personal visions of each staff member. Dr. Karen suggests organizations can reflect on what staff and their personal equity journey looks like and what experiences they have with issues of race. When staff talk about their vision for the organization and delve deeper into their aspirations, they will find commonalities and be able to build shared meaning. Shared meaning is a collective sense of what is important and why (Senge, 2006). Reflecting on what matters to each member of the organization and a review of espoused values of the organization (Schein, 2010) can provide an opportunity to create an internal equity plan reflective of both individuals, institution, and the community the organization serves.

Team Learning

Team learning is a process that requires collaboration and support with everyone in the organization. The benefit of team learning is the staff can come together and problem solve to build the internal capacity to have crucial conversations. Several participants shared the team learning approach allows staff to gather knowledge and elevate shared practices. Because staff members share a complex and multidimensional understanding of realities of inclusivity in the school environment, team learning can be a crucial way to bring together thoughts and

experiences of all members (Fredette et al., 2007). Team learning can provide staff and leadership an opportunity to realize their collective potential, engage in crucial conversations, synergistically build alignment, and function (Senge, 2006).

Systems Thinking

Organizations must consider multiple systems that are interdependent and impact the work the organization does. A *system* is a perceived whole whose elements hang together, continuously affecting each other over time and operating toward a common purpose (Senge, 2006). Understanding the web of interdependence is key to creating a professional development plan that aligns with the organization's mission and goals. Participants reflected on numerous systems Black women leaders interact with from the school environment, to family and community, to the central building leadership. All these systems are often at odds with each other with competing priorities. As Dr. Bettina says, "Each set of system has a need for us to respond to. None of them have a shared understanding of what the other does." Systems are often intersected; having some grounding of the landscape and intersections is crucial. An organization could benefit from an analysis of different systems impacting Black women leaders by centering their lived experiences. This systems-thinking discipline will allow staff to chart interlocking systems and identify ways to leverage opportunities for Black women and create collective impact.

Create Affinity Groups

All six study participants shared the importance of affinity groups. Dr. Karen emphasized, "Affinity groups provide a space for us to share our lived truths in a brave environment and find healing together." In their ethnographic case study, Paul-Khorshid (2019) examined over the course of 3 years a grassroots racial-affinity group as it became an important

learning and healing space for its members. Findings included racial affinity spaces for educators of color are necessary to support personal, political, relational, and pedagogical growth, which has implications on their retention and leadership in the field. Affinity groups can be a space for Black women to process emotional impacts and stressors of racism.

The emotional fatigue and exhaustion women are experiencing, at the intersection of race and gender, was originally coined by critical race theorist Smith in 2008 as racial battle fatigue (RBF). It was originally used in reference to experiences of African American men in the United States but is now expanded to describe the negative and racially charged experiences of all people of Color (PoC) in the United States. Smith defined RBF as, “cumulative result of a natural race-related stress response to distressing mental and emotional conditions. These conditions emerged from constantly facing racially dismissive, demeaning, insensitive and/or hostile racial environments and individuals” (p. 615). Affinity groups can serve as buffer from the racial battle fatigue Black women are experiencing and provide coping mechanisms to endure. Affinity groups can also be a space where white colleagues unpack their own biases.

Blitz and Kohl (2012) described the formation, implementation, and functioning of a white antiracism caucus they facilitated in a large social service agency. The authors argued white affinity groups committed to antiracism must work alongside people of color affinity groups. They also provide organizational context, group development, and attempted to address institutional racism in the antiracism caucus. Fostering spaces where white staff in organizations can address privileges they hold and impacts of their identity on their Black female colleagues can lead to an environment where they confront racial issues in the workplace.

Furthermore, all participants shared affinity groups can be a space where Black women feel they belong to. Fostering a process of inclusive leadership and spaces is an intentional

practice that requires purposeful cultivation of culture and climate to support the integration of diversity and is bolstered through constant reflection of self, power, and privilege (Harro, 2018; Osland, 2018). The implementation of inclusive leadership is focused on a culture that includes four tenants of pluralism: (a) *belonging*, or ensuring members are respected, valued, and can authentically express their identity (Randel et al., 2018); (b) *voice*, ensuring members feel safe speaking up and sharing ideas (LEAD, 2016); (c) *objectivity*, ensuring decisions are made in a data-driven way to promote fairness (Hart, 2011); and (d) *growth*, providing opportunities for learning and self-actualization (Cabrera & Unruh, 2012).

Achieving these tenants involves both the development of self and the arrangement of an organization's design to promote extreme pluralism and equity (Mendenhall, 2018; Randel et al., 2018). On the one hand, implementation of inclusive leadership and creating inclusive spaces is an intrapersonal process of continuous self-exploration for understanding how one's power and social location can impact others' abilities to thrive in an organization (Randel et al., 2018). Further, inclusive leadership can help with the creation of systems, structures, policies, and procedures responsive to needs and demands of members and eliminate dominant cultural hierarchies (Schein, 2010).

Pathways to Leadership

An area that was stressed by participants was the lack of pathways to leadership for Black women. Even when there were leadership opportunities, the Black women in this study shared their frustration with the process. Dr. Carmen stressed the need to create those pathways for Black women, "There must be opportunities for us to advance in our careers, either they don't exist, or those opportunities are not afforded to us." Alternate pathways should be considered to create additional opportunities for Black women to enter leadership roles in K–12 educational

settings. Organizations must develop a strategy to not only hire but retain Black women in the K–12 education system. Policy makers, school board directors, and other key stakeholders should develop fair hiring processes that invite Black women to apply for key positions and support systems to retain them. There should be professional development opportunities, coaching, shadowing, and training for new leaders to help ensure success (Grissom et al., 2015).

Transformational Change

Finally, as Heifetz and Linsky (2017) described, organizations must understand the problem they are tackling is an adaptive change; thus, school leaders need to examine the eight steps Kotter (2006) presented to ensure a successful transformational change. The eight steps are (a) establishing a sense of urgency, (b) forming a powerful guiding coalition, (c) creating a vision, (d) communicating the vision, (e) empowering others to act on the vision, (f) planning for and creating short-term wins, (g) consolidating improvements and producing still more change, and (h) institutionalizing new approaches.

The creating an urgency step is about helping others see the need for change through a bold, aspirational opportunity statement that communicates the importance of acting immediately (Kotter, 2006). The second step, forming a powerful coalition, includes effective leaders being able to guide and lead through a process of transformational change. The third step is creating a shared vision, where every member of the education organization understands the importance of supporting and retaining Black female leaders in the workplace. The fourth step is communicating that vision, so it is understood by the membership (Kotter, 2006).

Another important step, once the vision has been shared with others is to act on that shared vision (Kotter, 2006). For example, if a shared vision is inviting others to call out racist microaggressions in the workplace that impact Black female leaders, staff must be empowered to

act. This could create the space for an acknowledgment of a small win, when colleagues see they can play a role in creating better workplace conditions for their Black female colleagues in leadership roles. Furthermore, a consolidation of the feedback and improvements needed must take place. This consolidation helps to assess what is working, what is not, and areas that need additional attention.

Finally, the last step is to institutionalize the work in policies and practices (Kotter, 2006). As organizations engage in the transformational process, strategies Heifetz and Linsky (2017) presented, including keeping the work with the people, will further ensure the transformational success. By using this transformational change model, educational organizations can make the change to a learning organization and, thereby, continually find ways to support Black female leaders and retain them in the workforce.

Implications of the Study

It was crucial to add the voices of study participants to existing literature because they bring a unique perspective to the practice of school leadership. This research study has implications for (a) Black female educators who are interested in leadership roles as either principals or school administrators; (b) school boards and district leaders who are interested in policies that support and provide professional development to Black female leaders, feminist researchers; (c) those interested in studying leadership theory and research, and (d) Black female teachers who aspire to pursue and hold leadership roles in K–12 contexts.

Understanding and critically examining the nuanced nature of Black women in leadership roles and their experiences is paramount. Perspectives shared in this study provide a window highlighting racial and gendered biases Black women leaders must carefully navigate. Their experiences not only impact students, but their continued engagement in K-12 education. If

school leaders are committed to racial equity in schools, inequities Black women leaders encounter must also be addressed. An honest and critical examination of organizational culture and values must be explored for school and district leaders to develop the trust, support, and collegial working environments needed to recruit and retain Black women leaders. This insight is imperative, not only for diversifying the K-12 workforce, but for building a leadership workforce more representative of the school environment and more capable of serving an increasingly diverse population of students.

Finally, in acknowledging the racial and gender inequities Black women leaders face, it is imperative school systems address inequity in access to leadership, the gendered and racial experiences of Black women and examine opportunities for improvement. Simply recruiting Black women leaders is not enough. School systems must pay equal attention to creating conditions for them to stay by developing a leadership pipeline. Holding onto Black women leaders requires education leaders to understand their unique experiences and perspectives. By centering the lived truths of Black women, school systems can not only improve the workplace conditions for them, but help students, particularly students of color, see they too can dream to lead.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings of this study of the lived experiences of Black women in K–12 leadership roles and barriers they face has resulted in the identification of needs for future research. A study that could be conducted to further expand on the knowledge base is the impact the presence of Black women have on students, particularly students of color. The research could also be qualitative in nature and focus on journeys of participants, including youth, to gain a deeper understanding of factors that contribute to their continued engagement. The research could also be a quantitative

study that allows the researcher to conduct a measurement analysis of student outcomes, discipline data, and academic trajectory of youth.

Another study that could be conducted to further expand on the knowledge base relative to the implication of barriers Black women face is to explore the role of safe and brave spaces for Black women to share their experiences, connect with other Black women, and identify ways they can support each other. Some schools have affinity groups embedded in the school environment that could provide robust data. Findings could be beneficial to various types of institutions where Black women are in leadership roles or interested in leadership roles.

Additionally, much scholarship has focused on the schooling experiences of African American boys. Although it is important to address challenges Black boys face in our education system, African American girls encounter unique educational perceptions and obstacles. Although Black girls in a predominately minority school performed well academically, educators often question their visibility, their manners and behavior (Morris, 2007). Many of these girls are perceived as “ladies” which can have implications in classrooms and beyond potentially limiting their academic pathway. A study on Black women in leadership roles and their impact particularly on Black girls in K-12 education could yield important insight.

The following are additional recommendations for further research:

- Expand this study to a mixed-method approach. The mixed-method approach would allow researchers to explore qualities of both qualitative and quantitative data in the study. This would provide more robust and in-depth information (Creswell & Plano, 2007).
- Expand this study to include teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the role of Black female leaders in K–12 educational settings. Teachers’ and students’ perceptions are

critical factors as they play an essential part in the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

This phenomenological research case study was conducted to investigate the lived experiences of African American/Black women in K–12 leadership roles. All six participants presented their journeys and stories on their lived experiences as principals or administrators. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data to analyze lived experiences, factors contributing to continued engagement, and how an organizations' espoused values impact career progression. The following overarching themes emerged about participants' lived experiences: (a) general lack of trust for Black women, (b) Black women whisperer, (c) speaking one's truth versus staying silent, (d) feelings of in group and out group, and (e) a demanding job. For the second research question—what factors contribute to the ongoing engagement of African American/Black women in their respective leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?—two themes emerged: (a) Black women who care about children and (b) determined to persevere. Finally, for the third research question—to what extent does an organization's culture and espoused values impact the career progression of African American/Black women?—five themes emerged: (a) overall lack of representation in leadership roles and (b) hostile work environments, (c) acknowledgment of racism and oppression, (d) networks for Black women, and (e) supportive relationships.

Although this study was limited to six participants, it provides a comprehensive examination of how African American women in leadership roles in K–12 understand their experiences as leaders, the impact of race and gender on their role, and strategies organizations can employ to support Black women. As a result, the study provides a rich understanding of the context in which African American female leaders experience the education system and can

provide guidance for other African American women seeking leadership roles in K–12 education. Though this study was specific to African American women, it has overtones for all women at the intersection of race and gender.

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APPENDIX A. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Choose the response(s) that best describe you.

1. Do you identify as an African American/Black Woman?

- Yes
- No

2. What school district are you part of? (List and have them select from it)

- Kent
- Highline
- Seattle
- Bellevue
- Tukwila
- Renton
- Prefer not to say

3. Are you in a leadership role? If so, what is that role?

- Principal
- Superintendent
- Other Administrative Role
- Prefer not to say

4. What is the social economic level of students in your district this year?

- Low-income
- Middle-income
- High-income
- Prefer not to say

5. How many years have you held your current position?

Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, More than 15
years

Survey Wrap-Up

This is the end of your survey. Thank you so much for participating in this research study!

APPENDIX B. CONSENT FORM

INTRODUCTION

This research is being conducted by Shukri Olow, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Seattle University. As part of my thematic dissertation experience as a doctoral candidate, I am interested in gathering perspectives from African American/Black women leaders in the K–12 education setting. You have no obligation to participate in this interview. If you do choose to participate in this interview, you can leave the interview at any time or ask the information not to be used.

I would like to remind you that to protect the privacy of participants, all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms (fictitious names). Your responses are confidential. Only group data will be reported in the final study. Your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to participate and may stop your participation at any time. You may choose not to answer any question. The interview should take approximately 60 minutes or less and I will double record it to make sure it is recorded accurately.

Answers to questions are being collected to further this thematic dissertation project for the sake of learning and publication, and all information is kept anonymous. Afterward, notes will be shredded, and names will be changed in the final output. During interview you will be asked questions about your observations and experience with workplace inequity. Some questions may not apply to your situation and if that is the case, please let us know.

There are no right or wrong answers, so please be as honest as possible. Do you have any questions before I begin? Do I have your permission to record this interview?

1. Please tell me about your professional background.
2. Please tell me about your qualifications.

3. Please tell me about me about your support system.

Based on Research Question 1:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in leadership roles in the K–12 educational setting?

1a. Describe your experiences as a K–12 AA/Black woman in a leadership role in K–12 educational setting (either principal or superintendent)

2a. How, if any, do you believe your experiences have differed as an African American Female?

3a. How do those differences impact your daily experiences and responsibilities in your leadership role?

Based on Research Question 2:

2. What factors contribute to the continued engagement of African American/Black women in their respective leadership role in the K–12 educational setting?

2a. Tell me about some barriers you experienced, if any, when you entered your leadership role?

2b. Please share any barriers you experienced, if any, while serving in your leadership role?

2c. Please share any barriers you experienced, if any, and how you deal with them?

Based on Research Question 3:

3. To what extent does an organization’s culture and espoused values impact the career progression of African American/Black women?

3a. What barriers, if any, exist organizations that impact your career progression?

3b. What barriers, if any, have you identified that are challenging for other AA/Black women within organizations?

3b. What strategies, if any, should organizations employ to support AA/Black women in reducing those barriers?

APPENDIX C. EMAIL MESSAGE TO PARTICIPANTS (INITIAL)

Dear [First Name, Last Name],

You are receiving this email because you are a full-time school leader working in one of the Road Map Region school districts located in King County, WA. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. If you are a school leader who currently serves as a principal, or building level school administrator, I am asking your assistance in this research by completing the attached demographic questionnaire. The data collection method for this qualitative study is a 60-minute interview. The interview consists of nine questions and should take approximately 60 minutes of your time. Your answers will remain anonymous, and you will be given a pseudonym. You may stop participation at any time, even after beginning the interview. There is no compensation to participate in this study.

I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Seattle University. I am conducting this study under the supervision of the primary investigator, Dr. Colette Taylor. Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary, and all your responses will be kept confidential. No personal identifiable information will be associated with your responses to any reports of these data. The IRB of Seattle University approved the implementation of this study. Should you have any comments or questions, please contact my research supervisor, Dr. Colette M. Taylor, Program Director, Educational Leadership at (206) 296-6061 or email taylorco@seattleu.edu.

Email to Participants (Follow-up)

Dear School Leader,

If you have already participated in this research, thank you for your assistance! I wanted to send a follow-up message and would love to hear from you. You are receiving this email because you are a full-time school leader working in one of the Road Map Region school districts located in King County, WA and are invited to participate in a research study. If you are a school leader who currently serves as a principal, or building level school administrator, I am asking your assistance in this research by completing the attached demographic questionnaire. The data collection method for this qualitative study is a 60-minute interview. The interview consists of nine questions and should take approximately 60 minutes of your time. Your answers will remain anonymous, and you will be given a pseudonym. You may stop participation at any time, even after beginning the interview. There is no compensation to participate in this study.

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SEATTLEU

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Admin 201 | 206-296-2585
 irb@seattleu.edu

April 12, 2021

Shukri Olow
 College of Education, Leadership & Professional Studies
 Seattle University

Dear Shukri,

I'm following up on my April 6 email indicating that your protocol submission "**A Qualitative Study on the Lived Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions in K-12 Educational Settings**" meets exemption criteria in compliance with **45CFR46.104(d)**:

- 2) Research that includes only interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if (i) the investigator records information in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained (directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects); (ii) any disclosure of the data outside the research would not reasonably place subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) the investigator records information in such a manner that the participant's identity can readily be ascertained, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review.

Note that a letter of exemption does **not** mean IRB "approval." *Do not include statements for publication or otherwise that the SU IRB has "reviewed and approved" this study; rather, say the SU IRB has "determined the study to be exempt from IRB review in accordance with federal regulation criteria."* Please retain this letter with your study files.

If your project alters in nature or scope, contact the IRB right away. If you have any questions, I'm happy to assist.

Best wishes,



Andrea McDowell, PhD
 IRB Administrator

Email: irb@seattleu.edu
 Phone: (206) 296-2585

cc: Dr. Colette Taylor, Faculty Adviser