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## Intersectionality and Leadership in Context: Examining the Intricate Paths of Four Black Women in Educational Leadership in the United States

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## **Abstract**

There is an emergent body of scholarship about the specific ways in which Black women lead within the context of education. In the United States, women comprise three-quarters of the educational workforce. Yet, roughly four in five senior-level leaders in education are male. Although developments continue to be made, only very recently has significant advancement been made in what remains a historically male-dominated space. Black women represent the most educated group in today's workforce; yet, they represent a small fraction of leaders who ascend above the ranks of mid-level management. In response to this, we were compelled to add to the existing research in this sphere. Our paper incorporates social justice leadership theory as a frame for the study of Black women in the context of educational leadership. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenology, we interviewed four Black women in educational leadership to examine the intersecting factors (i.e., race and gender) that impact these women's ability to lead. Using in-depth, timed, semi-structured interviews, contributors reflected upon their unique experiences and perceptions as non-archetypal leaders. Participants' recounted stories of resilience, community, struggle, and perseverance revealed the need for more US-based research specific to the intricate leadership journeys of Black women in education.

**Key Words:** Educational leadership, Black women educational leaders, equity, identity, intersectionality

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**Intersectionality and Leadership in Context:  
Examining the Intricate Paths of Four Black Women in Educational Leadership in the  
United States**

Although men in leadership positions have been studied rather extensively, women have been historically neglected in this area of research and theory development (DeWitt, 2016; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016). This is not so surprising considering that women have generally been excluded from positions of leadership for much of recorded history (Beard, 1915, 2000; Noble & Moore, 2006). Some scholars have even questioned whether there is an “implicit quota” on women leaders, given their present domain of influence (Dezső, Ross, & Uribe, 2016; Lennon, Spotts, & Mitchell, 2013; Reagle & Rhue, 2011). Without question, gains have been made regarding the participation of women in society, politics, education, and employment. Yet, the representation of women in positions of power and influence has been conspicuously less progressive (Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Harper, 2018; Slaughter, 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the leadership journeys of four Black women, all senior-level leaders in education. The research question that framed this study was: *How have the racial and gender identities of Black women informed their educational and professional experiences in and on the path to leadership?* In this paper, we begin by revisiting the existing literature regarding women and women of color in educational leadership. We then juxtapose this literature with the guiding frame, Social Justice Leadership Theory (SJLT), given that the tenets of equity are rooted in SJLT. This is followed by the methodology, a hermeneutic phenomenology. The essence of the phenomenological route allowed us to examine the encounters that Black women face both on the path to as well as in their roles as educational leaders. Finally, this paper culminates with concluding remarks, comprised of recommendations

for advancing this sphere and increasing the representation of Black women in educational leadership in the context of the United States of America.

### **Literature Review**

Though growing, there remains limited literature in the United States that speaks directly to the complex experiences of women in leadership. There is less research speaking to the intricate roles of women of color in leadership. The divide is even more amplified in the field of education, a space in which women are largely represented as a whole (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). What research does exist suggests that, overwhelmingly, successful women are likely to be disproportionately represented in leadership. Within the educational realm in the US, this discrepancy is even more dichotomous, in that while women reflect roughly 75 percent of the workforce, they represent a paltry less than 20 percent of those at the highest levels of leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Gupton, 2009; Reeves & Guyot, 2017).

This information is particularly relevant for Black women, considering the incongruence that lies between their heightened levels of educational attainment as compared to their generally lower status within the organizational pecking order (Davidson & Burke, 2000; Helm, 2016; Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009; Rawls, 2009). For this reason, we bring this matter to the forefront by examining the experiences of four Black women in senior-level educational leadership positions. Despite their disproportional representation in this capacity, they continue to successfully navigate the unique and complex educational leadership sphere.

### **Intersectionality and Educational Leadership in “Context”**

Persistently absent from the extant body of literature is the consideration of context (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Karin, 1996). Contextual factors, or in this case, the intersection of

race, gender, leadership, speak to the multiple identities of Black women in various US educational settings. This study was therefore one that focused on a specific context. According to Liden and Antonakis (2009), “although context has been acknowledged as salient to leadership for decades, only in recent years has empirical research given the context widespread attention” (p. 1587). What is known, however, is that because of their multiple identities as women and minorities, Black women in educational leadership regularly encounter the twin hurdles of racism and sexism (Brown, 2014; Lord & Hall, 2003). Existing paradigms, according to Allan (2003), cannot be uprooted without open and honest conversations about the presence of gender and racial inequalities in the realm of leadership. Creating and cultivating equitable leadership pathways, according to Betters-Reed and Moore (1995), requires investigating the origins of inequity, the preservation and duplication of imbalanced structures, the social consequences of stratification, and extant systems of inequality. We argue that these conversations around intersectionality, equity, and imbalanced leadership cultures are relevant to and for current and future generations of Black women educational leaders. Hence our study that focused on the multiple identities of study participants, Black women in educational leadership, who have all encountered the twin hurdles of racism and sexism in and en route to their present leadership roles.

A common thread between scholars in this sphere, including Anthias (2013), Hogg (2004), Iverson (2007), Ngwainmbi (2004), and Wing (2003), was their emphasis on the extant racial and gender imbalances in educational leadership, and the struggle involved in disrupting the status quo. Considering the challenges presented in work of this nature, Hogg’s (2004) work highlighted the difficult path for underrepresented leaders when the groups they lead represent the demographic majority. Through their work, Cho, Barrett, Solomon, Portelli, &

Mujawamariya (2009), Richardson and Loubier (2008), and Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston (2016) underscored the necessity of equitable representation, particularly for those who have been historically and generally excluded from the leadership sphere. Moorosi, Fuller, and Reilly's (2018) examined the professional journeys of three Black women school principals in three different countries, uncovering the concurrent racial and gender barriers these women faced in their work to be effective leaders in education. We gained inspiration from these studies as we made decisions about the context and focus of our own study.

There were communal and recurrent themes in the research that investigated race-gender intersectionality, manifested within the realm of educational leadership. Sawyer, Salter, and Thoroughgood (2013), for example, asserted the importance of "studying and understanding the realities of identity through intersectional research" (p. 80). Parker and Villalpando (2007) also spoke to identity and the importance of using critical theory analysis to challenge dominant ideologies in the move towards more democratic, justice-based leadership spaces. Other scholars (Cho et al., 2013; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Russell, 2015) claim that findings of studies specific to leadership cultures and identities can help increase the number and diversity of leaders in general, and particularly, Black female leaders.

The research also showed that despite the progress made in diversifying the demographic profile of educational leadership in the US, males, especially white males, continue to dominate the educational leadership sphere (Kellerman, Rhode, & O'Connor, 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015; Rhode 2017). As such, the theory and research have historically reflected the male perspectives that have been applied to all groups. While inroads have indeed been made in capturing the experiences of women and minority education leaders, research specific to Black women in leadership remains grossly underrepresented in the literature (Alston, 2012; Collins, 2000, 2002;

Evans, 2008; Horsford & Tillman, 2012). In light of this, and as leadership theory continues developing to more accurately match the complex intricacies of modern organizations, greater attention must be paid to the multiplicative aspects of identity and leadership development in this capacity.

Recent studies exploring existing power structures, agency, and causality provide context regarding the factors relevant to leadership systems and cultures (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, 2010). Given the growing educational status of Black women in the workforce, it is becoming increasingly important to create and identify research that acknowledges their variant experiences (Nash, 2008; Rutherford, 1990). Encouraged by these claims, we argue that it is important to acknowledge the great gains women have made in society, politics, education, and employment. Indeed, there is an increasing number of women who do manage to break through the glass ceiling to occupy such positions (Chemers, 1997; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Yet, despite some progress, only recently has meaningful advancement been made in the realm of leadership – a historically and characteristically male-dominated space (Catalyst, 2007; O’Meara, Campbell, & Martin, 2011). While researchers have made strides in amassing an initial and veritable accounting of the ramifications and implications embedded in being a Black woman in educational leadership, we deemed it important to contribute to the knowledge in this field by framing our study using the leadership theory that is consistent with our stance that there is a need for equity in the educational leadership sphere.

### **Social Justice Leadership Theory**

We chose social justice leadership theory (SJLT) as our frame of best-fit, as this framework embodies the tenets of equity and activism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003). Manifested in the context of leadership, SJLT is actively, overtly, and vividly equitable at all

times (Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017). This promotion of equity includes the ongoing effort to increase the number of Black women – the most educated group in today’s workforce – into educational leadership positions (Alston, 2012; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). From this perspective, it is essential that the connections between theory, practice, and power be made and addressed as transparently and as tangibly as possible (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998).

Scholars contend that by unpacking the layered relationships between race, gender, and leadership, stakeholders are provided with appropriate frames for examining the tangible manifestations of social justice leadership (Dinh et al., 2014; Kalwies, 1988; Pratt-Clarke, 2010). Moreover, the overt and intentional promotion of equitable practices remains a critical component in reducing the leadership divide within the realm of education. In this same vein, and in the continued work to provide a transformative next step in the evolution of this and other related scholarship (Adejare, 2018), our study participants’ narratives shed light on the factors connected to the increased representation of Black women in educational leadership in the context of the United States.

### **Moving the Research Forward**

Numerous scholars agree that more research specific to Black women in leadership will allow for a path in which to sufficiently address the needs of and inform policy around this group on a number of levels (Anthias, 2013; Patton, 2002). Included is Brown’s (2018) research, indicating that longstanding racial and gender notions continue to mischaracterize Black women as “ incongruent with leadership positions” (p. 1). In addition, Moorosi et al. (2018) spoke to the “shortage of literature on Black women in educational leadership, which leaves Black women’s experiences on the periphery even in contexts where they are in the majority” (p. 1). Munden (2015), for example, states that the administrator experiences of Black women, as well as the



challenges faced by them in institutional settings, illustrate the extreme importance of (1) developing organizational leadership-based strategies and (2) gathering more narrative evidence from this particular group. According to numerous scholars, including Dreachslin and Hobby (2008), Collins, 2000, 2002, and Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), the residual outcomes resulting from increased diversity in leadership would undoubtedly benefit all members of the constituency.

This study was, therefore, a response to the growing, yet underdeveloped literature directly connected to the representation of Black women in educational leadership. The incorporation of a hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed us to investigate the multiplicative identities and experiences of four Black women. The women ranged in age from early-40s to mid-50s, all in senior-level educational leadership positions, and they represented every corner of the United States. Embedded in this work is the ensuing discussion regarding the impact of race and gender on these women's experiences. Through our work, we highlight the need for more research geared towards making a case for the importance of reducing the noted leadership gaps in US education.

### **Methodology and Research Design – A Phenomenological Study**

Understanding and extracting the meaning of people's lived experiences serves as a focal point of the phenomenological process (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009; Vagle, 2018). Rooted in both philosophical and psychological origins (Buber, 1958; Marcel, 1983; Schutz, 1967), there is a two-fold aim to conducting a phenomenology. First, this strategy is used to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Second, this approach is well-suited to communicate the shared meaning for several individuals of their lived

experiences of a particular phenomenon. It is customary, then, for phenomenologists to focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a specific phenomenon (Vagle, 2018; Van Manen, 2017). Thus, it was a good fit for our study of the experiences of this group of Black women who lead in the context of education.

### **Selection of Participants**

Criterion purpose sampling was used to select the participants (Patton, 2002). Four Black women, holding the titles of: K-12 district-level executive, program directors (one college to career transition and the other, principal leadership), and CEO of two K-20 STEM-based LLCs, were all selected based on their authority, knowledge, and judgment. They represented various regions throughout the United States of America, from the Northwest to the Southeast, and were senior-level leaders in education. The intention was to uncover a breadth of relevant information regarding these four women and the totality of their unique, varying leadership experiences. In the interest of protecting the identities of study participants, their full names have been replaced with pseudonyms (see Table 1 below):

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Participants represented an array of locations, a vast knowledge-base, and all served in a myriad of educational leadership roles in the US. Their diverse experiences provided us with essential information specific to the black-woman-leadership phenomenon in this particular context.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We embarked upon the hermeneutic phenomenological route (Heidegger, 1977, 1996), given its focus on interpreting the structures of a particular experience. Further, this route

investigated how things are understood by people who live through these experiences and by those who study them (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The hermeneutic cycle possesses an “ontologically positive significance” (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2004, p. 269); it involves an ongoing commitment to reading, reflective writing, and interpretation of the data in a rigorous manner (Laverty, 2003). Using this recurrent process, we collected data from face-to-face interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, 1994), with each participant engaging in three 60-minute, semi-structured interview sessions. The goal of employing a 3-part interview process was to decrease the weaknesses of constructing findings on any one individual occurrence, and thereby strengthening the overall outcome of the study.

The first round of interviews included questions about all of the support systems that served as the foundation for these women’s paths. Pertinent, in this regard, were the relationships, early experiences, and decisions connected to their growth and progression as they developed into educational professionals. Round two included documentation of contributors’ successes, barriers, and other relevant experiences in and en route to their current leadership roles. Contextual factors included differing regional locations, varied perspectives, work-life balance, the navigation of new terrain, and the ‘hinge’ decisions that guided their leadership journeys.

During our final interchange, contributors were asked to share the lessons and tools they accrued along the way. They were called upon to advance this sphere by offering advice, strategies, and tools for burgeoning, underrepresented leaders as they carve their own paths towards leadership in education. In the continued effort to ‘get the story right,’ upon extracting the data, we invited study participants to ‘member check’ – to review, to correct, and to update all relevant findings as necessary for accuracy (Kafle, 2011).

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

We employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is a psychological-based qualitative approach with an idiographic focus (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is one of several approaches to qualitative, phenomenological psychology. However, it is distinct from other approaches because it combines psychological, interpretative, and idiographic components (Larkin et al., 2011). This method of analysis promised to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The emphasis of the analysis of our data was on the phenomena that related to experiences of some personal significance, such as a major life event, or in this case, the navigation of the educational leadership path for these four Black women.

The purpose of incorporating the IPA process was to gather qualitative data from study participants using interview questions designed to speak to the components listed above (i.e., psychological, interpretative, and idiographic). We approached this method from a position of flexible and open-ended inquiry, with a curious and facilitative stance. IPA afforded us the opportunity to produce findings that were salient, rich, and full of depth. Participants' accounts were captured via the interview, transcription, and collation processes. Employing the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) model also allowed us to provide the reader with a better understanding of the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of participants' 'lived' experiences. In this way, we recognize that a single unifying meaning of this experience does exist (Hycner, 1985; Miles, Chapman, & Francis, 2015).

## Results

The utilization of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method involves “self-report data elicitation through interview associated with a sophisticated thematic analysis. The approach is idiographic and invariably linked to non-experimental research designs” (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, p. 229). Consistent with this process (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), we followed all of the essential steps in recording and reporting our data. In essence, a “two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, is involved. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith et al., 1999, p. 229). The emergent themes, resulting from this cyclical process were: (1) characteristics that set these women apart at the onset; (2) community; (3) resilience; (4) perseverance; and (5) the price they paid and/or continue to pay to be educational leaders. In the following sections of the paper these themes are presented and discussed.

**Characteristics that set these women apart.** This theme emerged as participants spoke of the early occurrences in which they identified as ‘different.’ The first three interview questions<sup>1</sup>, inquiring about contributors’ personal and professional backgrounds and qualifications, brought forth information about the pivotal factors that set contributors’ paths apart. Participants expressed mixed sentiments regarding some of the introductory experiences that contributed to how they viewed themselves. For example, Annie C.<sup>2</sup> stated the following:

...so, I went through a system where I feel like I had, for the most part, pretty strong teachers, but I did encounter racism. I didn’t know maybe necessarily to call it that at that

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix D, *Guiding Questions/Prompts*, for the full list of interview questions.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Corene, EdD, early-50s, Southwest, Southeast, & Northeast regions

age and stage of my life... such examples as...encountering the middle school counselor saying, 'No, I don't really think you should take honors classes. That's going to be too challenging for you to handle'. (Interview 1)

Further, Annie C. expressed instances in which she “would see just discrepancies on how white educators would interact with other white children versus how they would interact with me” (Interview 1). Reflecting on that, she then noted the following: “when I got to the HS level, I started to realize the tracking system. I didn't know that's what it was, but...I was the only Black person in my honors classes in high school...a fairly large high school” (Annie C., Interview 1). She reflected on being set apart as the lone Black person in her honors classes. On top of that, despite being told by the school counselor that she could not handle the rigor, she shared that she ended up graduating in the top five percent of her class.

Simone F.<sup>3</sup>, while recalling some of her most resonant interactions with former classmates, shared:

The first time I was called, 'acting white' was when I was 9, in 4th grade, and that just blew my mind because I never had been around white people before. So, I said, 'how could I be acting white when you all grew up around white people.' I never have...but that meant because I was in the gifted classes. Well, I was in the...more advanced classes. (Interview 1)

She, too, was set apart as a 'gifted' student. As she allowed the memory of that occurrence to ruminate, Simone F. added that since then, no one ever thought “I was trying to be white outside of that first comment... no one ever said that to me again, never, because... They just knew...I was about my work, and I was going to do what I needed to do” (Interview 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Simone Freeman, PhD, mid-40s, Northeast & Southeast regions

Other recollections include Jacqueline G.'s<sup>4</sup> memories growing up in what she referred to as a 'working-class'<sup>5</sup> community. She said, "not too far from where I lived, there was a housing authority. I tell you, ...growing up, I never realized that was a housing authority. I just thought, okay, they lived in apartments, we live in houses" (Interview 1). Reflecting on these differences in the shaping of her environment, she also shared, "I never knew racism existed until I became an adult. Because we were just...we just knew each other as a community on the side of town that I grew up on" (Jacqueline G., Interview 1). Growing up in this environment, according to Jacqueline G., is partly why she knew early that she would attend a diverse university. She chose her school because it "represented the real world...and I wanted to be prepared when I entered the workforce if it was diverse, then I'm used to interacting with people of all kinds of races" (Interview 1).

Finally, Monique M.<sup>6</sup> knew from the beginning that she and her affinity for STEM were 'different' in numerous ways. Reflecting upon her experiences, she shared the following:

I had always been a girl that loved math and science and was encouraged to do so...starting with my 6th-grade teacher who told my mom that I was good in math and science and to encourage me in that. I know the moment for me where it kind of narrowed down was 10th-grade Chemistry... I want to say that since my elementary class, she was my only...Black math or science teacher. (Interview 1)

Connecting that experience to how and when she knew she was set apart, Monique M. revealed,

"one of the things I do miss, and I think this happens with my parents not having an interest in

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<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Goldsworth, EdS, late-50s, Northwest & Southeast regions

<sup>5</sup> Merriam-Webster defines 'working class' as "the class of people who work for wages usually at manual labor" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/working%20class>).

<sup>6</sup> Monique McCallister, LLC, early-40s, Northeast & Southeast regions

science, that I don't think I did enough out of school time things, programming, and activities connected to STEM” (Interview 1). Because of this, she came to see how her experiences were different from those of her classmates and how important visibility – and lack thereof – is to current and future success in the field.

These four Black women similarly shared that they all knew, early on, whether they were able to articulate it then or not, that they were ‘different’ (Crenshaw, 1989; Evans, 2008). For some, this realization stemmed from a conversation; for others, it was a result of a specific occurrence. Regardless, and pertinent to matters of identity, it would take more time, some of them revealed, before they were able to see the ‘good’ in their classification as ‘different’ (Crichlow, 2015; Harris et al., 2012).

**Community.** Participants were asked to talk about the support and accountability systems in their lives (Interview question #4). They were also asked to share what impacted their decisions to become educational leaders in the first place. The theme, *community*, emerged as participants spoke of the structures, people, accountability, and support systems that were central to them and their development into leaders. The topic of ‘accountability’ and ‘support’ brought with it a fluidity of responses. For example, Annie C. identified her father as a constant source of support and accountability, saying:

...One of the things he advised me to do [as a school leader] ...he said, ‘take 5 minutes and just write the highlights of the day’. So, I did that. On my iPad, my school iPad, I would just go into the notes section, and I would type in the highlights of the meetings, parents, things, and...there were a couple of situations where some parents had gone over my head...to the founder at that time, and she would come back, and I would just pull out my iPad. I had my notes, and when I got ready to transition, I literally could say, on such



and such day, at such-and-such time, we were in this meeting with these people...these people were at the table, this was the discussion... But it was because I had been disciplined enough each day, at the end of the day, to write down what happened. ...So, my dad is a support. (Interview 1)

Annie C. shared that throughout her life, she has had phenomenal mentors. Recalling a recent conversation with one mentor, she shared, “we were talking about accountability. ...the definition that he told me of accountability is: ‘You give the answer before you’re asked.’ And I really, I feel like as a professional, I’ve operated that way. ...you know, I’m pretty transparent” (Interview 1). This definition provides her with something concrete as she continues to build and grow her own leadership community.

Simone F., when called upon to identify her support and accountability systems, shared the story regarding her mother’s decision to quit her job to pursue her dream career. Years later, Simone F. shared how relevant her mother’s choice was when the time came for her to make her own, similar decision:

I put my mother in there because me quitting my job, literally... I just knew I needed to quit... And I only had two weeks to decide, to sign my contract or not. Well, I didn’t sign it. Not knowing if I had...been accepted to the program. But that was, that was my mother...that was my mother. Knowing that she could quit her job...with two children and a husband...to pursue her dream. I know I could do that. So that, definitely, is my support, my everything. (Interview 1)

Simone F.’s mother provided her with a real, tangible example, one in which she was able to draw direct inspiration from. That precedent set by her mother proved instrumental to her own decision to leave the K-12 classroom and pursue her doctorate full-time.

While the first two participants directly connected community to family, the other two spoke of extended family as the people who comprised their sense of community. Jacqueline G., for example, shared that her sister's boyfriend played a major role in helping her complete her student teaching. She had a 45-minute commute, but according to her, "...I did not have a car...and he went and co-signed...a car to drive to my student teaching, and I paid him every month, the car payments, out of my financial aid and my money that I made working... (Interview 1).

Finally, in reference to her own support system, Monique M. shared these thoughts: ...support system is diversity of things. I don't, I don't want to say I have a formal accountability thing, but what is a real blessing in my life is that I do have a circle of sister-friends that we all talk about our goals and our dreams. [In addition], I do have an informal accountability through my mentor. But just having this sister circle that I've picked up through different journeys. ...because we're all striving to be better personally and professionally, you know, we do...celebrate each other's success... (Interview 1)

In doing so, Monique M. shared that she built community by aligning with supportive people at different stages of her life. Throughout her journey, she found that, "you really have to make sure that you prioritize and have the space for the things that are really, really important to you" (Interview 1). The presence of community is especially important, she expressed, given that "there's an isolation with entrepreneurship... There is a, you know, as Black women you don't have as much resources" (Monique M., Interview 1).

Despite the range of people who provided these women with a sense of community, the four Black women readily identified multiple sources of 'community' in their lives. They were unified in the belief that these support and accountability systems were key in their initial

decisions to undertake their leadership journeys. Applicable to this is Bryson and Crosby's (1992) assertion that positive, supportive cultures tend to breed success. For this reason, we argue that in the effort to increase diversity and representation at the highest levels of leadership, community is key (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2001).

**Resilience.** This theme, *resilience*, emerged as participants spoke of the life experiences that equipped them for the undertaking of the leadership journey [Questions 5-7: What impacted your decision to become a leader within the educational sphere?; Describe your experiences as an educational leader; and How do you believe others perceive you as a leader in education?]. Participants were asked, among other things, how they believed their paths to be unique as Black women. In addition, they were asked to talk about the successes and barriers they encountered on their leadership journeys. Finally, they were asked to talk about how these experiences informed their paths. Jacqueline G., throughout her journey, always viewed herself as a 'gap-filler.'

Jacqueline G shared:

I think the same thing that made me become an engineer is seeing things in a certain way and wanting to solve certain problems and knowing that I could not do that if the buck didn't stop with me. I couldn't make the decisions. I couldn't make it happen in the way that I wanted to make it happen. And so, that was the decision for me. ...if you want to see it, you want to create it. (Interview 2)

Based on her experiences, Jacqueline G. said, "Who knows? ...I pursued a STEM career because I love math and science. But most kids aren't going to be that ambitious... They really do need the parental support...a lot of parents don't know how to do that" (Interview 2). As it relates to resilience, she "saw the need," and knew that she had to do something about it, particularly in a space in which "we" are and remain underrepresented (Jacqueline G., Interview 2).

Similarly, Annie C. shared that before she attained any official titles, she was already a referent leader in her own right:

I just, I was the type of person, I saw things wrong, and I would try to solve the problem with as much leeway as people would give me. You know, like, okay, if you're going to let me do it, then I'll do it, you know. I didn't need a title to officially do it (Interview 2).

According to Annie C., this capability served her well throughout her journey, in that she believes she has been to "...make a decision and own up to your decision'. As a leader, you can't be afraid to make a decision. You have to make a decision with the best information that you have at the time and move forward" (Interview 2).

Reflecting on her path to the leadership sphere, Simone F. spoke of the contrasting encounters she had as a student and staff member in the academy. As a student, she shared, "I never felt I could not be me, I could not be a student of color, be a Black student, focus on Black students, Black issues...in my program. ...I just felt as if I had support... I did" (Interview 2). Now, however, "...it's a different story. Now, mm, ooh, child, this is the...the Band-Aid has been peeled off. The cover has been removed, and now I see some issues in...dealing with students of color. Children. Oh, definitely. Definitely" (Simone F., Interview 2). For her, the journey to leadership was completely different than what she'd experienced upon arrival.

Jacqueline G. shared a number of instances in which examples were set before her to help pave the way. When asked about the uniqueness of her leadership journey as a Black woman, she readily recounted the memory of one high school teacher in particular. This teacher served as an important visual representation for her. She said, "I just loved how classy she was and how passionate she was about teaching literature, and I just said to myself, 'I want to be [like her] one day. I want to be that type of teacher'" (Interview 2)

Years later, that same teacher became Jacqueline G.'s department chair. Not long after that, Jacqueline G. began her own venture into the realm of leadership.

In a space that has been historically exclusive (Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Mabokela & Madsen, 2005), participants provided vivid insights regarding their ability to successfully navigate en route to their leadership roles. Throughout their journeys, all participants shared a collective sense of resilience. Their responses shed light on how they were able – and equipped – to answer the call to lead. Their stories reflected the essentiality of this information in developing strategies for organizational progression and improvement (Bogotch, 2000; Sanchez-Hucles, & Davis, 2010).

**Perseverance.** Participants were asked to speak to their experiences as current educational leaders (Interview questions 8 and 9). They talked about: the uniqueness of their roles as Black women in educational leadership; the successes and barriers they encountered and continue to encounter as leaders; and how these experiences continue to inform their paths.

Jacqueline G., reflecting on her role as a district-level leader, revealed the following:

I am the first African American, not male or female, but the first African American executive...in the [entire] school system. So, I'm in the room with 20 others ...there's probably 23 of us. ...And I'm the only African American in the room. And it just hurts me that I don't understand how we can't see that is an issue because it's not representative of our demographics. It's not even representative of our leadership at our school level. Because when you go to the school level, we have African American principals, we have several, a lot of African American assistant principals. We're pretty diverse at the school level, but we're not diverse when it goes beyond the school.

(Interview 2)

She credits her journey, in large part, to her ability to be tenacious and persistent. So, in response to what she sees as the lack of Black Americans in leadership, Jacqueline G. believes it is her responsibility to connect with and build the next crop of leaders. She shared that she has been actively “finding talent in African Americans. ...And I connect with them. ...I have to be conscientious. I have to be aware that that is an area of need in our system because our students need to see it” (Interview 2).

Annie C., who considers herself to be a ‘servant-leader,’ holds the principles of character, values, integrity, and moral leadership in high regard. To that end, she said, “When you’re in a leadership position...You have to make decisions with the information that you have and then be willing to move forward, you know what I mean? Stand behind those decisions...” (Interview 2). Speaking to the successes and barriers she encountered throughout her journey, she had this to share:

I feel like...the fact that I don’t have support is tolerated because I’m a Black woman. I do feel like that. Because I feel like, if, if it was a white male, you know, or even a white female in this position, I feel like they would have gotten help. Like their...requests would have been validated, heard... I love the work that I get to do. I don’t love the, um, politics and hoops that I have to jump through to get it done. (Annie C., Interview 2)

Unique to her as a Black woman in educational leadership, Annie C. said, “needless to say, I met resistance.” Nevertheless, she is able to persevere by letting her work speak for itself. She shared, “so if I choose to do something, I want to do it well...one way I define success is winning. You know, achieving your goal. And so, with that definition, I’ve had a lot of success” (Interview 2).

Simone F. credited her role as a self-proclaimed advocate for her ability to successfully undertake the leadership path. Reflecting on her journey, she said,

I perceive myself... [As] an advocate. ...I believe that if I were a white male, then my, what I do would be much more elevated... If I were a white male, I don't believe my Black boss would have told me, 'you can do much more.' Because he would have seen my work and because I'm a white male and everything I do... Everything that white males do seems to be elevated. (Interview 2)

Regarding her own challenges as a philanthropist, entrepreneur, and non-traditional leader in education, Monique M. said this:

...a situation that I battle sometimes, like, you have to constantly prove yourself. Your tone is policed, your body is policed, um, people want to make you prove things, and um, this is even something that I, I'm getting better at, but I struggle with. Like staying in environments and being your authentic self ...saying, I don't have to prove myself to anyone. So, I belong here too, like, I don't have to prove I got invited to the same table. But people will make us feel like, 'How're you here? Why're you here?' And just, if women can learn how to navigate that earlier, um, and have that confidence and not having to prove yourself, it wastes a lot of time. (Interview 3)

Perseverance was a common thread with much overlap. Some examples include Simone F.'s statement that "...there can't be as much...relaxation and being able to move through the day in your job. Because you have to face...all these little microaggressions" (Interview 2), and Monique M.'s comment about the constant 'clutter' and 'chatter' she sifts through daily. She said, "...it kind of doesn't allow you to just be free to just move throughout your day and/or life sometimes. Because it's all these extra things attached to what your professional life...looks

like” (Interview 2). Still, all were able to speak to their ability to persevere despite existing, inequitable cultures. The capability to persist through these challenges confirms their staying and lasting power as leaders.

**The price they paid and/or continue to pay to be educational leaders.** Consistent with this theme, the price they paid to be leaders, participants were asked to share their knowledge regarding the challenges (successes and barriers) they believe face Black women aspiring towards careers as educational leaders (Interview questions 10-13). In addition, contributors were asked to provide insight regarding their own navigation of the leadership sphere.

Not long into our final interview session, Jacqueline G. had this to say:

When you sign up to be a school administrator, you’re signing up for stress. ...mental, physical, you are signing up for sleepless nights. You are signing up for emotional turmoil... You have these internal struggles sometimes with, you know, doing the right thing, doing what you know in your gut is what should be done. But then you’ve got those external forces, you know, district expectations, uh, other expectations. (Interview 3)

When probed to elaborate further, she continued:

But you still need to be aware that there are sometimes, there are going to be barriers in certain environments. But I truly believe that you can overcome those barriers if you learn to play the game. Because it really is like a game, in maneuvering your way through corporate America. Because even though I’m in the public sector, education is a big business. It is like a corporation, too, because it has different levels of leadership, just like corporations. (Interview 3)



Pertinent to those women who aspire to educational leadership, Jacqueline G. was able to speak to her own price paid to be a leader. In the realm of leadership, she revealed, “people make decisions about whether or not you’re going to be allowed opportunities in those upper levels of management just like in corporations. So, you really have to start paving your way at the onset” (Interview 3).

When invited to share her insights on leadership culture and the representation of various groups in leadership, Annie C. said,

...you see privilege on display all the time. White privilege, white male privilege, um, voices of African American, or professors of color trying to be silenced during faculty meetings or not understanding their perspectives... The reason why there are not more Black people in positions of power, influence is because of racism. That is intentional. There’s no sugar-coating it. But we see that play out in so many other areas of our society. So, it’s, it’s not much different, you know? (Interview 3)

As it relates to the price she paid – and continues to pay – to be a member of the academy, Annie C. maintains that “just the same way that you tout [diversity] with the student population, if they wanted [diversity] at the top echelon, it would be. They don’t want it to be. They are racist. It’s institutional racism” (Interview 3).

Simone F., reflecting on the alignment between her expectations and her current experiences as a leader in academia, shared this:

I always thought, just focus on that, and all this will come. And I still believe that. Just focus on your work. People will see your work, people will congratulate you, people will give you titles, people will give you raises, don’t worry about that. And I still believe that, but then... I’m learning that you also have to fight for yourself in that, [the

academic] arena also. So, there's just a whole bunch of fighting that has to happen all the time. A whole bunch. A whole bunch. (Interview 3)

When asked to connect her experiences and her ability to overcome, Simone F. spoke to the price she has and continues to pay to be a leader as she relayed a recent conversation with her father:

My father says, 'we succumb to racism, [or] we overcome racism'... And so, we as Black people may not be racist, because we don't have any power in this country to be racist, but we can...succumb to racism. So, we can succumb to the stereotypes that racism has placed in our society. ...Our actions can reflect racism also. Our thoughts can reflect racism. So, that's what I just chalk that up as...this has been going on since what, 1619. And so, it's going to take a lot to overcome. (Interview 2)

How, as a Black woman in leadership, are these experiences and the price they paid unique?

Jacqueline G. stated:

As Black females, we've got to realize that society does have certain perceptions about us, and we have to work harder sometimes to change how they perceive us. And we have to be a little bit softer...sometimes in order to move to where we want to go. ...I'm not saying be fake. Don't be somebody you're not because it'll end up backfiring on you. But just start being more aware of how am I presenting myself? Am I coming across too harshly? (Interview 3)

While there was variance regarding the role of the recipient in changing the way she is viewed, what all participants shared was the notion of the "fight." In this respect, they communally referred to the fight against being marginalized, overlooked, unappreciated, and characterized in ways that do not necessarily represent them (Annie C., Simone F., Jacqueline G., Monique M.). Simone F., not resigning herself to the notions of others, said in the event that people "do have

issues with my personality, they know my work. And so...so for me, I do, and I don't have to be too worried about the way people have mischaracterized me, you know. Yeah, but all that will happen. (Interview 3)

Finally, Jacqueline G.'s concluding remarks, regarding the slow progression of women within the realm of educational leadership, were:

So how is that we have so many top-level positions that are held by men in education? ...I think it's because, for so many years, like, what the MeToo movement is about, we don't stick together. As women, we have to stick together. So that's something that also I'm starting to pay more attention to myself. Like certain roles, we think a man is supposed to do that. No, we need to open up our eyes... When you, as a woman, get a position of power and influence, open your mind to ensure that not only there is racial diversity, but there is diversity in reference to gender. We have to stick together and not minimize each other. I think that's something that's hurting us in our field in that area of...upward mobility as well. (Interview 3)

These comments are consistent with the growing body of scholarship focusing on "women's issues and the liberation of women from positions of disadvantage within various social, political, and economic systems" (Cox, 2015, p. 4). In education, this includes confronting Jacqueline G.'s 'so how is that we have so many top-level positions that are held by men?' question. Regarding existing power relations, it is important to expand the current discourse around gender, race, and class, and the role these elements play relative to the social and organizational spheres (Crenshaw, 1989, 2005; Verjee, 2012).

Study participants provided us with ample information regarding their realities, perceptions, and strategies for navigating and leading within the context of leadership. They

spoke to the importance of being set apart (Alston, 2012; Pratt-Clarke, 2010), the necessity of having an established sense of community (Collins, 2000, 2002), the resilience and perseverance required to remain steadfast throughout the course of their journeys (Crenshaw, 2005), and the price they paid – and continue to pay – to be the successful educational leaders they are today (Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Murphy, 1999).

### **Bringing it all Together: Identity, Intersectionality, and Black Women in Leadership**

The five emergent themes reflected contributors' insights and the totality of their experiences as leaders, as black women, and as agents of change in the realm of US education. When asked the final question, "*What concluding remarks do you have for those seeking to more fully capture the experiences of black women serving in and aspiring towards careers in educational leadership?*" all four women spoke to 'answering the call' to lead and the sacrifices they made in taking the "road less traveled". All four spoke to the numerous responsibilities – and proclivities – of serving in spaces and places in which they are and remain underrepresented.

From a moral standpoint, according to Brown and Treviño (2006), academic researchers have been granted a rich opportunity to conduct and execute research that can improve the cultures, climates, and performance and ethics of leaders. On a more pragmatic note, this discourse is especially relevant to and for Black women, considering the positive correlation between "ethical leadership" and "effective leadership" (Alston, 2012; Eubanks, Brown, & Ybema, 2012). We take this seriously, considering the incongruence between Black women's heightened educational attainment compared to their current status within organizational leadership as a whole (Davidson & Burke, 2000; Evans, 2008). Our own study highlights the need for more US-based research specific to the intricate leadership journeys of Black women in education (Reeves & Guyot, 2017).

### Conclusion

The themes uncovered in this paper underscore the fact that the nature of leadership in education, especially at higher levels, is such that all five factors must be in alignment (i.e., “the stars must align”) to enable a Black woman to emerge into educational leadership roles. Study participants’ recollections provided critical insights into the specific elements that them apart, the importance of community-based support systems, the need to resilient and persistent in spaces in which they are underrepresented, and the price they paid and continue to pay to be the leaders they are today. In sum, contributors’ experiences suggest just how exceptional a Black woman and her support systems must be to overcome extant barriers to emerge into positions of power. In the context of education, a true understanding of gender and racial inequities in education leadership remains elusive. By taking into account the noted contextual dynamics (Hofstede, 2011; Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017), we can build the knowledge on how race and gender shape the varied experiences of Black women in educational leadership. As a continuous social construct, educational leadership cannot be comprised of one design, one program, or one worldview, to the exclusion of other perspectives and approaches (Belden, 2017; Lederman, 2013). Through this study, we found that in education, this includes the qualifications of women, and specifically women of color, to serve in senior-level leadership roles (Gupton, 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Helm, 2016; Prime et al., 2009).

Applicable to and for Black women in the United States is the fact that they are currently primed and positioned for advanced leadership roles in education (Nash, 2008). This conversation is all the more relevant, given the exceptional path that must be undertaken by black women to emerge into positions of power. Following the lead of our study contributors and a growing number of scholars in this arena, we argue that advancing social justice leadership

theory and research requires that scholars re-examine the assumptions that have defined leadership and organizational research over the course of the last 2000 years. As the landscape of our society continues to advance on national and global levels, so should it “provide for the successful outcomes and increased level of educational attainment for all... As long as educational inequity exists, it unravels the single garment of destiny in the fabric and vitality of our nation” (Cowan, 2016, pp. 3-4). To this same point, however, the ability of researchers, educational leaders, and other relevant stakeholders to use study findings to inform relevant policy in this capacity has been greatly restricted by persistent theoretical, systemic, and methodological limitations. For this reason, the conversation cannot end here.

Because confronting these factors is key to addressing the race-gender leadership gap, we write this paper to highlight the tenets embedded within equitable, social leadership (i.e., identity, equity, and intersectionality) effort to move this work forward. For Black women in education in the United States, this includes addressing the impacts of their intersectional, race-gender experiences on their leadership paths. We, therefore, join the growing list of scholars in this arena in the call for development and training programs that speak directly to race and gender bias in leadership. We posit that this is a step in the right direction toward deliberately and explicitly promoting the values of equitability and justice. It is our goal to add to the growing list of stakeholders who wish to influence equity- and justice-based policy initiatives within the realm of U.S.-based educational leadership. We assert that unless there is engagement with the matters of equity in leadership as highlighted here, the work of stakeholders who wish to influence equity- and justice-based policy initiatives within this sphere is unsustainable.

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