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The work of their hands: Black women and critical visionary pragmatism

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THE WORK OF THEIR HANDS:
BLACK WOMEN AND CRITICAL VISIONARY PRAGMATISM

by

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A Dissertation

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Dedications

To the memory of my grandmothers, Martha W. Coleman and Agnes Bond. May your legacy live on through my life.

Abstract

Natoya D. Coleman
THE WORK OF THEIR HANDS:
BLACK WOMEN AND CRITICAL VISIONARY PRAGMATISM
2020-2021
Dr. Shelley Zion, Ph.D.
Doctor of Education

This study examined the leadership principles, practices and perspectives of Black women principals serving schools that are populated by primarily Black students. A portraiture of the participants' description of their racial and gender identities was conducted using kitchen table talks, to understand how identity development informed their leadership choices. This analysis introduces the development of a theoretical focus that speaks directly to the leadership practices of these Black women working in schools that serve Black student populations: Critical Visionary Pragmatism. Findings illuminate the ways that Black women principals utilize their own lived experiences, double consciousness, and natural inclinations to make pragmatic decisions for the benefit of the students in their school, and in response to the systemic inequities facing their school populations, as a leadership approach.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There is an ongoing conversation among researchers and practitioners in the field of education about how to create equitable and liberatory spaces for diverse students within American schools. This question is examined as it relates to curriculum and instruction, school climate, school culture, teacher workforce, and more recently, even, social-emotional learning. Leadership is also a sub-field and subject of inquiry in this ever-evolving conversation, and one that can illuminate the impact of each of the aforementioned categories. School leaders who are committed to the academic success of their Black students support the efforts of teachers, counselors, and community members in creating these liberatory spaces. This topic came to me upon personal reflection on my educational experiences as a Black woman Ph.D. student raised in an urban community. While I always knew I wanted to become an educator, my reflections led me toward a deeper understanding of this inclination, and further supported my desire to explore the practices of Black women in education.

Attending college was a non-negotiable in my household, so my concern was mostly where I would go, and what I would become. I liked the prestige of law and the lifestyle that a successful legal career would bring. However, I also loved literature and learning, so I decided I would attempt to do both. My parents ensured, to the best of their ability, that we had everything we needed to make choices that would bring us to the best possible end, as Black middle-class teenagers. I attended the University of Michigan and majored in English Language and Literature. I took freshman-level English twice. I

earned a B- the first time, but I knew that I had gaps in my understanding. Even with all of my celebrated accomplishments in high school, such as scholarships, National Honors Society membership, and achieving a high grade-point average, I struggled in my major, and that was deeply troubling. What I recognized, with my limited knowledge and exposure to any other learning environment, was that I had limited access to certain types of knowledge and the subsequent instructional methods that were commonly employed in environments where this level of thinking existed. One of the things I noticed my classmates doing that I did not do, was ask questions. This intrigued me so much that when I had the opportunity to choose a topic for a project in my linguistics class, I did an analysis of my parent's attitude and approaches to questions, and found that my parents didn't dismiss my questions, but felt that my questions were indicative of my independent and inquisitive nature. We had elaborate discussions about things that were relevant to our lives, and our dialogue rested within that range. My parents, like many Black parents, trusted schools to provide information and facilitate learning beyond what we discussed at home. However, the training I received in school was very much associated with the supply and demand of our community – blue-collar, automotive industry or construction work – which mostly required rote memorization tasks.

I discovered that this unknown ceiling for inquisitive activity was not just within my home environment, but also within most of my K-12 experiences. Detroit Public Schools are populated by Black students as the majority, and it is consistently factual that anyone who lands a position in Detroit will be a teacher of Black students, with one region, Southwest Detroit, as the exception and home to a majority Mexican population.

Additionally, Detroit Public Schools are situated near automotive plants, and are the supply and demand of the American Automobile Industry – a dynamic which results in automated behaviors resembling the assembly line, and intended to prepare children to take their parents place in the plant (Finn, 2010). What I recall from my schooling experiences in Detroit was that the majority of my teachers only expected for us to regurgitate what was given to us. There was only a handful of extraordinary teachers and school leaders who had higher expectations for our comprehension and engagement as learners.

As I continued to reflect, I realized that my most passionate teachers, whose instruction was unrelenting, and whose efforts went beyond instruction from a textbook, were Black women. When I was in the fifth grade, I wrote a poem, "Under the Apple Tree." While I don't remember the poem, line by line, it narrates the apple tree as a place for quiet reflection and serenity. Mrs. Trent, a firm and rigorous teacher, known in the community for her no-nonsense approach, called me to her desk one day, and told me that my poem would be entered into a district-wide competition. Although it wasn't the first time I had been singled out for my writing, there was something significant about this particular instance. Mrs. Trent treated us like we were her own children. I only had one Black woman administrator, Mrs. Catherine English Gray, who was the principal of my elementary school. She became principal in the middle of my third-grade school year, and she came in like a windstorm. Her focus was to teach her students to have pride in our school. She taught us who Abner E. Larned was in school assemblies, and mandated that from then on, we could not shorten the name of our school, but would refer to it by

the full name, Abner E. Larned Elementary. I do not know much more about her leadership style, but I know that her ethic of care was evident to me from the first day of her principalship.

These women, the teachers, and administrators, carried out their roles in many different ways. Some were committed to expressing their femininity in traditional forms, wearing dresses and high heels daily. Others were strong and stern in their decorum, wearing pants suits and less elegant in their presentation and delivery. I took note of this. It stood out to me. Without the language to express this idea or exposure to literature on gender expression, I appreciated the fact that a woman's way of being needn't fit properly within a norm, and that what is deemed as normative behavior is not necessary for a woman to be effective and/or successful in her work. During my junior year of college, I decided I wanted to become a teacher and emulate the impact of these women on my own students someday. I wanted to draw out their strengths, to promote pride in their identity, and to expose them to what is possible in their academic pursuits. I imagined that we faced the same mountain of struggles. This included living in a town where the industry is the automotive company, navigating our way through perils of public schools, aspiring for the kind of success that brings stability for ourselves and our students, and facing the ceilings that are customarily placed on women. Such experiences were challenges I knew little of at the time but now, as an adult, I am sure we share.

While each teacher was inspiring, there was one additional woman, my late aunt, Dr. Hurlette Coleman-Dickens, who deeply understood the liberating power of education. The oldest of eleven children (my father being the third child and paternal namesake) she

began teaching at home and mothering her younger siblings. She went away for college, only, and remained no less than ten miles away from her parents for the remaining 51 years of her life. In that short time, she graduated from Saginaw High School, Michigan State University, and Central Michigan University, and became an elementary school teacher, an administrator, and an instructor at Delta College as well as a community leader. She blazed trails in our hometown, despite longstanding inequities. Her passion and an unrelenting commitment to serving others led to powerful access and opportunities. My mother, who was a student at Delta College, traveled with my aunt and other students to New York and other cities as a part of her extended learning opportunity, before she married my father. I was 20 when my aunt fell ill and I hadn't fully realized her impact on my life and the lives of others. Eventually, I became a teacher. At that time, at age 25, family members began pointing out how much I reminded them of Aunt Hurlette. Like the women I mentioned before, my aunt's deep commitment to education was not clear to me when I was a child, but now that I am older, I see the influence she had on my life and the lives of many others. The consistencies across all of these women point to a significance in the way that Black women teach and lead in educational settings serving majority Black student populations.

In the following sections, I will introduce the problem, and highlight the focus of this study. Next, I will examine the intersecting components of the problem, drawing out existing literature to support each of the components. Then I will discuss the conceptual framework for this study, and how that framework will inform the theoretical framework and the design of the study.

Statement of the Problem

This study examined Black women principals and "the work of their hands" in order to understand how their experiences with the intersections of race and gender informed their leadership approaches within an urban setting. I explored the perceptions of Black women educational leaders on the social, historical and geographically-bound issues of access to as well as success in the field of education. This included how they approached their work in the face of these inequities, for the sake of the children they serve as well as the other educators in their networks and beyond. Black women carry the weight of the success of the students under their watch in very intricate and intersecting ways (Omolade, 1987, Evans-Winters, Esposito, 2010). Teachers in urban schools are often inundated by strategies that have been adopted as best practice as a means for improving the educational experiences of their students while administrators are charged with the task of overseeing the implementation of these practices (Price, 2010). The crisis in urban communities is a byproduct of the embedded practices within the oppressive structures of urban schools. A microcosm of society, schools are persistent sites of oppression (Friere, 1966).

Thus, leaders must make decisions on the roles they will play and how they will either perpetuate or disrupt oppressive practices in schools. When Black women, in the field of education, are committed to student success, they become a matriarchal extension in their environments, going above and beyond for their students; a long-held tradition in education known as othermothering (Henry, 1992). Black women who are educational leaders do not have the option to focus exclusively on their work, but they must carry the

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additional burden of navigating their intersectional identities within the work space, while making certain that their students receive quality instruction, in a safe and orderly school climate. What emerges from their experience and expertise is a leadership approach that is nuanced and can be named as a response to the persisting inequities in education.

Barriers for Black Women Educational Leaders

Nationwide, women are increasingly rising in leadership positions, and in some states surpass men. Still, the challenges of women in educational leadership are intensified when race is included in the picture. Black women are the least represented group among educational leaders in K-12 and higher education. Women leaders in K-12 education embody the socialized leadership characteristics of women, using their emotions, feelings, compassion, patience, and intuition as strengths (Normore & Jean-Marie, 2008). Black women who focus on building relationships before dismantling oppressive structures have significant amounts of influence and the opportunity to initiate change within the areas of curriculum and instruction as well as behavior management policies (Alston, 2005, Normore & Jean-Marie, 2008, Collins, 1999). They are often rewarded with formal appointments and high-visibility opportunities (Biklen,1995). However, the "bad girls," the Black women who are more vocal and take more risks, display subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes and behaviors and often become activists organizing either independently or in unions (Bassica & Young, 2001). The contrasts and the assumptions embedded in those oppositions constitute structures that frame an individual's perceptions and decisions, thus having very real and continuing career consequences. Yet, Black women have persisted, and are increasingly enacting policies

and disrupting oppressive systems within their spheres of influence (Jean Marie, 2006). In this study, I will positively posture Black women as educational leaders and trailblazers in economically oppressed areas, and highlight *the work of their hands* (Psalm 90:17, New International Version), by illustrating how their racial and gender identities inform their leadership practices.

Potential Objectives for Fostering Liberatory Educational Environments

Curriculum and instruction, community engagement, and school climate and culture are essential for creating schools that are liberatory. The gap in academic performance of Black and brown children on standardized tests in America speaks to the need for specific attention to be dedicated to not only teaching, but also to the actions of educational leaders in these schools. Educational leaders have a responsibility to evaluate the efforts within their educational contexts and the outcomes and advocate for systemic changes that will make schools safe for their students. They are also charged with delivering educational opportunities and cultivating learning environments that do not center whiteness as the dominant perspective, but present the world from the frame of multiple perspectives (Santamaria, Santamaria, 2012). The following paragraphs outline potential targets for fostering liberatory educational environments to include curriculum and instruction, community engagement, and climate and culture.

Curriculum and Instruction

Traditional schools fail to honor students' cultural identities, overemphasizing the completion of instructional activities that are isolated from their histories and present

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realities (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Too often, schools serving Black students are governed by a curriculum that does not center their own cultural identity (Love, 2019). Students should be affirmed in their cultural identity (Paris & Alim, 2016) and school leaders can support this by creating an environment that encourages teachers to incorporate ways for students to explore their identity within their daily instruction. Consequently, learning experiences that begin with the student's identity, lived experiences and understandings of the world, and build upon that with meaningful text from various literacies and backgrounds lead to more meaningful classroom experiences for students (Lyiscott, 2017, Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Liberatory education begins with a systematic understanding that students' lived experiences and perspectives, popular culture, multimodal texts, social media, and any other medium can be considered as meaningful texts in the classroom (Morrell, 2007). A system-wide initiative that is liberatory empowers teachers to search for meaningful texts in both conventional and nonconventional mediums and regularly revise teaching plans to reflect current issues in popular culture. Education cannot be neutral (Giroux, 2002). Educators must expand curricula to include elements of popular culture that play a powerful role in shaping the interests and identities of students. This is not to suggest that students ignore the Western-oriented curriculum, but rather posture these texts as a means of exploring how literature and the information presented there perpetuates power systems and forms of knowledge. (Giroux, 2002). Thus, the formal and informal knowledge that is taught in schools, the methods for instruction, and the evaluative procedures need to be looked at connectedly, otherwise much of their real significance is

lost. These everyday social practices are linked to economic, social, ideological structures outside of the school building (Apple, 2004). Additionally, a school can be a mirror and a window. The learning experiences encourage hearing, seeing, and dialogue that expose students to the world outside of their lived experiences and provides a reflection of the hearing, seeing and dialogue within their own cultural experiences (Style, 1996). It is the task of educational leaders to ensure that their students encounter both windows and mirrors in their school experiences.

Community Engagement

Giles, Johnson, Brooks & Jacobson (2005) highlight the power of a school leader who is focused on engaging with the school community as a means of positioning the school to receive resources and then become a resource. With a focus on support, care, trust, participation, and facilitation and the building of consensus, the principal of Fraser Academy successfully transformed a school which was facing challenges with academic achievement, school climate and culture, crime, and substance abuse across its local community. Giles et al. highlight how successful school leadership can positively impact a school community and bring all stakeholders together to create a positive environment for students within the school.

While the previous study highlighted transformational leadership, Miller, Brown and Hopson (2011) suggest that a non-traditional Freirian leadership approach should be implemented in order to create an environment of love, trust and hope within school communities. Community-based educational leadership—immersed in urban life and

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committed to urban transformation—can openly counter institutional and social structures that perpetuate injustice, exploitation, and violence (Miller, Brown and Hopson, 2011). Armed with emic love and historical understanding, Freirean leadership engages oppression at its core without fear of professional repercussions. It can work naturally to support the marriage of critique and possibility.

School Climate and Culture

School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Cohen, Mccabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Leaders who are dedicated to their students focus on their physical and emotional safety and their learning and academic engagement as well as communication with them and their families (Ryan & Warner, 2018, Blitz, Yull & Clauhs, 2016).

Schools have been noted as sites for social control (Focault, 1977). Classroom rules serve as the law, and justice is served when students who are noncompliant are heavily penalized (Noguera, 2003). Such an arrangement is dehumanizing. It places the focus on fear and behavior management, which leaves students voiceless as it relates to their learning (Friere, 2000). In a liberatory classroom, students and teachers show respect reciprocally and teachers create opportunities to learn from their students (hooks, 1989, Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Students of color and White students experience school differently, making it essential to consider race when assessing school climate (Shirley & Cornell, 2011). Black

girls and boys often receive harsher punishment for behavior infractions and are suspended at disproportionate rates due to subjective judgment of teachers and school leaders (Ladson-Billings, 2011, Evans-Winters, 2005). Despite the experiences of Black children in schools, conversations around liberatory education frequently exist without addressing the existence of racial violence within schools. Lyiscott (2016) encourages educators to take on the work that interrogates the pedagogy of racial politics as well as the racial politics embedded in the pedagogies of Literacy/English education. If Black lives matter (or don't matter) on the streets of Ferguson, MO, do they matter in our classrooms? If Black lives matter in our classrooms, then why is there a nation-wide urgency to inscribe this truth into the discursive landscape of our present reality (Lyiscott, 2016)? School leaders must assume the responsibility of engaging in this dialogue and leading the charge to create school cultures wherein racial violence is considered just as reprehensible as the more commonly discussed forms of violence.

Black Women Educational Leaders: Intersecting Identities

Leading in liberatory ways is dependent upon the leader's perception of self and how they choose to embody this perception in their daily activities. Black women experience the world from intersecting identities, both as a person who is Black and as a person who is a woman. These two existences, while essentialized in research, must be actualized by each individual. The following section will highlight the process for examining and embodying one's racial identity as a Black person and gender identity as a woman in the field of education.

Racial Identity

Race, a social construct that is not biologically determined, is used to impose a social hierarchy that has been sustained throughout history for hundreds of years. Racism, then, is normalized and embedded within the fabric of social institutions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2014). While racism can be credited for centuries of oppression, pervading every area of life for people of color, there is no absolute for how people of color understand and inform their actions by their racial identity.

According to Sellers (1998), people move from salience and centrality, from centrality to regard, and from regard to ideology on the continuum as it relates to their awareness and integration of their own racial identity into their life. Black women who exemplify a nationalist ideology carry with them the weight of the Black community and work diligently to ensure that their children understand and celebrate their racial identity, and an assimilationist ideology places a focus on integration into the culture as a means for success (Sellers, 1998). Black feminists operate from an ethic of care for both those in their immediate sphere, but also for the greater good of the race, with a focus on centering racial identity. Black women scholars suggest that leadership positions, like the principalship, are places for community transformation (Cooper, 2017). A principal who has a salient racial identity will approach her work with a burden for racial liberation, a teaching and leadership practice that centers love, collaboration and reconciliation, and a long-term goal of dismantling racist institutional practice.

Gender Identity

Similar to race, gender identity is also socially constructed, and often includes prescribed behaviors that are autonomous with gender classification (Butler, 2011). These characteristics are often the cause of stereotyping in traditional work roles, resulting in the presumption that women are inferior to men in the workplace, particularly in leadership positions (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan & Ballenger, 2014). Women in leadership are viewed as "facilitative and collaborative" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Eagly and Carli (2007) asserted that to successfully negotiate the labyrinth of leadership, one "must combine assertive agency with the communal qualities of kindness, niceness, and helpfulness." The notion of gender performativity is demonstrated within many of the characteristics that are used to describe Black women in education, namely the concept of othermothering, however othermothering has been widely accepted in the field as a way to explain the nurturing and supportive nature that is embodied by Black women who are classroom teachers or administrators. Departing from the label of othermothering, nurturing characteristics that are demonstrated by Black women are examples of conscious decisions towards a leadership practice that is focused on supporting students.

Leadership Style in Education

Black women are the least represented group among educational leaders in K-12 and higher education. The few women who answer the call to promote inclusive-oriented educational environments are regarded for their endurance and sacrifice (Biklen, 1995). One of the noted challenges that Black women leaders in K-12 education face is the

dispositional stance they take when undertaking issues that respond to the needs of marginalized populations. Black women who temper their radicalism have significant amounts of influence and the opportunity to initiate change within the areas of curriculum and instruction as well as behavior management policies. They are often rewarded with formal appointments and high-visibility opportunities (Alston, 2005). However, the "bad girls," the women who are more vocal and take more risks, display subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes and behaviors and often become activists organizing either independently or in unions (Bilken, 1995). The contrasts and the assumptions embedded in those oppositions constitute structures that frame an individual's perceptions and decisions, thus having very real and continuing career consequences for women. However, Black women have persisted, and are increasingly enacting policies and disrupting oppressive systems within their spheres of influence (Jean Marie, 2006). This study positively postures black women as radical disruptors for systemic change in economically oppressed areas, and highlights *the work of their hands*, by illustrating their identity, pedagogical and leadership practices, and most significantly, their triumphs.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the focus is on Black women leading education organizations populated by Black and brown children. Using Critical Race Feminism (Berry, 2010), Engaged Pedagogy (hooks, 1989) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1998) to frame my perspective, I am able to examine how the intersections of the identities of Black woman educational leaders add levels of complexity to their assigned position responsibilities as well as the counter stories recounting how these Black woman

Educational Leaders navigate the intersections of their identities, and the barriers they experience, as they lead their schools.

Conscious of the impact of simply being Black and woman in a leadership role, these women are inherently at odds with their organization, but are dedicated to the organization for the purposes of maintaining the opportunity to make an impact (Alston, 2005). Maximizing opportunities, they are radical in their ideals but intentional in how they work within the confines of their organizations (Alston, 2005). As a result, maintaining ambiguous positionality is sometimes a strategic part of the coping mechanisms for Black women who step into spaces and situations where their voices should be, but historically were not heard. Therefore, there is a need in the literature to name the actions of Black women who unapologetically negotiate in spaces where their marginalized voices have been silenced, historically.

Theories that speak directly to the experiences of Black Women in education are essential for grounding this study. Critical Race Feminism brings voice to women of color who are historically in the margins of discussions around race in the dominant culture. Through this framework, I privilege the counter stories of the research participants and hope to center their experiences as a socially and politically marginalized group (Berry, 2010). Black women employ engaged pedagogy that teaches "in a manner that respects and cares for" students, and cares for their souls, as opposed to a rote regurgitation of educational information (hooks, 1990). In doing so, Black woman educators incorporate popular culture as well as their own life experiences into the learning setting which creates a vulnerability that is essential to creating a nurturing and

caring space in the environment (Love, 2019). These women maintain a commitment that as they arise, they will create room for other Black women to also arise (Collins, 1998). They do this, knowing that they are in a space that seeks to erase not only their existence, but their struggle. Yet, they persist (Crenshaw, 1989). This study examines how Black woman educators lead within settings where the intersections of their identity create tensions, and what methods they employ in order to satisfy the demands of their positions and advocate for their students.

Research Questions

1. How do Black women educational leaders describe their racial and gender identities in relation to their pedagogical and leadership approaches?

2. How do the identities, pedagogical practices, and leadership approaches inform the leadership decisions of Black woman educational leaders?

3. How do Black woman educational leaders use their roles to address systemic inequities?

Procedures/Methodology

This study used portraiture, a qualitative research method which privileges the voices of the participants as well as the researcher as data, to capture the aesthetic nuances of the experiences of the Black woman Educational Leaders in order to understand how the intersections of their identity as well as the population where they serve inform their leadership practices (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997). Through an

analysis of their personal experiences and their professional practice, I explored the important work of Black women educational leaders and responded to a line of inquiry that drew out the intricacies of their identity, principles, practices and perspectives. This exploration was informed by the scholarship of Black woman scholars and will contribute to existing literature, an illustration of the tensions they faced as they navigate school systems, and creatively supported their students while resiliently facing many obstacles in their personal and professional lives.

My inquiry utilized two data collection approaches: kitchen table talks and participant shadowing. The data collected was used to prepare a portrait, using words, of the life experiences and career outcomes that explain their tenure as Black woman educational leaders (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Researcher Role and Assumptions/Positionality

I engaged in this study as a first-year Black woman educational leader, concerned about issues related to marginalized populations, with a particular focus on Black students living in neighborhoods that are impacted by systemic oppression. I was born in Detroit, the town that is the context for this study. I am a school leader in Flint, Michigan, a city that is just 30 minutes from Saginaw. Therefore, I have personal connections to the topic and the context. The participants of this study are all women that I know well, or am connected to in some way. One of the participants, I met while in college. The other two participants are close friends of the family. They know my aunt and uncle very well. For these reasons, I am happy to name them participants in this study. Our partnership

will ensure that the illustrations produced from this study will capture "the whole" of their narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and include the joys, pains, challenges, and triumphs of their journey toward creating equitable educational experiences for the communities they serve.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Since their arrival in North America, the experiences of Black people have been violent and deadly. However, Black students in America have not always suffered violence within educational spaces, particularly post-slavery and before the integration of schools, when Black children were schooled in Black neighborhoods and taught by Black teachers. A historical review of the progressive evolution of schools shed light on the fact that that during the good and bad times, Black women have been at the helm, teaching students, leading schools and school districts, and providing educational services to their communities (Fairclough, 2001).

In the late 1600s, schools in American colonies were instituted to instill in children the principles of the Protestant faith. As the population demographics began to change to include greater numbers of enslaved Africans and European immigrants, the early Americans felt that teaching religion would help to civilize the Native Americans and the immigrants. Under the guise of the opportunity of assimilation through education, the colonists attempted to strip them of their language, customs, and ways of knowing (Spring, 2017). Enslaved Africans were not permitted to attend school, excluding them from receiving any type of formal education.

Upon the abolishment of slavery, Black students attended schools taught primarily by Black women teachers who operated freely in their instructional practices. In the spirit of enlightening their Black students, they relied on education as a path to

liberation (Fairclough, 2001). Blacks perceived a high school education and, even more, college education, as a means of escaping the poverty, cultural isolation, and political tyranny of the southern region (Fairclough, 2001). Against the odds of limited funding, dilapidated facilities, extraneous extracurricular responsibilities, and reluctant parents, Black teachers (mostly women) persevered to keep schools open for Black children (Fultz, 1995).

In the years to come, after the Jim Crow era, and then post Brown v. Board of Education, the plan for educating Black children highlighted the reality that America was never liberating, but always a part of a larger social hierarchical order. Any legislation related to Black students in American schools was accompanied by a greater plan that converged with the interests of the Black community, to result in greater economic gain for the preservation of white supremacy (Solorzano, Allen & Carroll, 2002).

At the end of World War II and The Great Migration, many Black families moved from the South to northern cities for the opportunities that existed there (Tolney & Beck, 1992). These cities were metropolitan locations and were labeled this way because of the large populations and diverse inhabitants. Racial housing segregation exacerbated the inequitable conditions, prohibiting integration, and relegating school funding to what was allocated by cities (Rothstein, 2017, Tate, 2008*).*

More recently, urban centers are often referred to as sites of decay, needing renovation and regeneration. Housing inequities resulting from redlining policies impact where marginalized populations are permitted to own property (Gotham, 2000). This

affects the type of academic experiences students have. Heavy policing in these neighborhoods has led to higher incarceration rates. Joblessness and poverty have created an ongoing crisis. Thus, urban centers were associated with decay, deficits, and desolation.

Researchers exposed these conditions, leading to a nationwide effort to improve the conditions of schools. After the Moynihan Report, which analyzed the conditions and causes for poverty among Black families, the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. later followed suit with legislative extensions incorporating requirements for schools serving students from economically disadvantaged environments and benefits such as Title 1 Funding.

The term "urban" evolved specifically in response to these types of needs, located within urban centers and on the margins. "Urban" became more of a character than a location and its meaning shifted to refer specifically to Black Americans living in these areas or coming from these areas (Milner, 2012). However, the narratives of poverty, crime, the abundance of social services, and underachieving youth have been shared under the guise of urban concerns but are understood as synonymous with racialized concerns. Such subversive language, used to slander Black culture, must be named, and the focus of urban education must widen in order to zero in on the particular issues that plague urban schools. This is not paradoxical, but the expansion allows the focus to move beyond race to particular aspects of schools and communities that help to deconstruct the inequitable systems that impact schools.

Economic Attainment and Education

While Bowles & Gintis (2002) would argue that academic programming, success in school, and high performance on standardized testing does not determine one's economic attainment, they assert that there still remains an issue of access and equity, along with social determinism, that can be dismantled if the systems are challenged. Limited access to preparatory programming, instructional practices that are not student-centered, and district-mandated curricula absent of the lived experiences of students, are barriers to liberatory education. These are significant concerns which must be addressed to move schools to a place where students leave with greater opportunities to create a life above the poverty line. Social and cultural capital serve as gateways to access and opportunity. Schools are the vehicles used to facilitate the distribution of knowledge and those who fail to attain this capital will likely struggle academically (Allen, 2010). Students who attend college are more likely to be employed above the poverty line upon graduation, however, Bowles & Gintis argue that a more significant indicator of wealth is the wealth of parents (2002). Therefore, parents of Black children rely on the school environment to provide children with the tools they need for success in college.

Black Women in Educational Leadership

Throughout American history, Black women have made significant contributions to the field of education despite limited access to formal education and credentialing. Serving primarily as teachers, Black women taught Black children in segregated schools before Brown v. Board of Education made school segregation illegal. As they began to

lose their teaching positions, the number of Black women teachers declined (Nitri, 2014).

Despite this, several of them left indelible marks on the field of education before

desegregation took place.

Liberatory Education

Liberatory educational leaders advocate for systemic changes that will make

schools safe for their students, present educational opportunities, and cultivate learning

environments that do not center the dominant perspective but present the world from the

frame of multiple perspectives (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1990; Yosso, 2005). Black women

have been at the forefront of liberatory education for decades. Bernice Robinson, an

untrained educator, practiced liberatory pedagogy, teaching literacy, with the motivation

of also teaching personal and political power. Her goal was to empower her students to

pass the literacy test as well as the test that would grant them full citizenship. She also

taught her students how to complete voter registration and polls (Nitri, 2014).

Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964) and Nannie Burroughs (1879-1961) were two of

many highly educated women who practiced various pedagogies of resistance while

pushing for the ideals of equality, liberty, and democracy (Alridge, 2008). Johnson

(2000), in a comprehensive work of Cooper and Burroughs, defines them as warriors for

education who shared a commitment to and an understanding of democracy as a human

right accessible through education. Although "the gendered nature of . . . education has

positioned women's contributions as low-status 'practice' rather than high-status

'theory'" (Crocco & Davis, 1999, p. 3), both Cooper and Burroughs became transformative agents who conflated education and social activism.

Today we benefit from the powerful scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Etta Hollins, among many others, who shape the way schools across the nation deliver education to their youth. Their collective body of work is centered around understanding the needs of Black children.

Over the last 30 years, the leadership practices of Black women have been explored, interrogated, theorized, and replicated in ways that contribute to a larger conversation about educational equity for students, teachers, and leaders of color. This scholarship offers a particular focus on the experiences of Black woman educational leaders in educational settings in order to offer a counter-narrative to the consortium of deficit-based depictions of schools where Black woman educational leaders serve. Now, Black women are occupying spaces where they were historically excluded and enacting leadership and pedagogical approaches that emphasize the experiences of the students of color where they serve, in order to create more equitable schooling experiences for themselves and their students (Baker-Bell, 2017).

Despite the significant amount of research offered by powerful scholars, inequities exist with little to no changes to the educational environment for Black women (Baker-Bell, 2017). The aim of this study is to further explore the experiences of Black woman educational leaders and how they approach the work of equity and social justice for Black and brown students living in urban intensive spaces, as well as their own

experiences with structural and systemic inequities, in order to offer a frame for understanding their unique way of bringing their identities into their leadership.

Theoretical Frameworks

This examination of the leadership practices of Black women must first begin with the foundational acknowledgment of Black women as intellectuals (Collins, 1990). Their history of advocacy and experiences as raced intellectuals offering ways of knowing to the world continues to be affirmed through scholarship, explored through theoretical frames, and enacted through praxis (Cooper, 2015). Furthering this scholarly conversation, a framework that centers the experiences of Black women can provide a way to encapsulate the nuanced components of the leadership practices of Black woman educational leaders. My conceptual understandings point to the need to present scholarship that allows the voices of Black women to be at the forefront of inquiry and stands sufficiently as a frame for the production of new knowledge. For this study, I focus specifically and exclusively on frameworks that are seminal in the field of educational research and that were presented by Black women.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminism names the experiences of Black women separate from the Feminist perspective by specifically drawing on the identity as *Woman* and *Black*, which is a distinction from traditional feminist theory research which focuses on the white woman experience exclusively (Moorsi, Fuller & Riley, 2018). It is important to make this distinction because of the significant differences in experiences of Black women

from that of white women. Black woman experiences are not explicitly named in the discourse of feminist theory (Collins, 1998, 2000). Black women, not excluding those who ascend to leadership, face oppression towards all of the intersections of their identity on economic, political and ideological levels which also includes the struggle for access similar to their Black and white male counterparts as well as the demeaning representations of stereotypical characters on media outlets (Collins, 2000).

This omission legitimates the need to incorporate inclusions into feminist theory (Henry, 2005). The most critical is that of the existence of double-consciousness, which affords Black women the power of acknowledging both their experiences as Black and as women—two marginalized groups which in isolation represent two separate experiences (Duboise,1903; Collins, 2000; Shaw, 1991). This double consciousness informs both the way Black women enact pedagogy and the way that they lead in educational settings within schools and within the community (Lane, 2017).

Black women, because of their intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class, have a double-consciousness that gives them an outsider-within perspective. This "way of knowing" is a result of "social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power" (Collins, 1999). This way of knowing is not accessible to persons from privileged groups, however, it is amassed by Black women from their paid and unpaid work experiences, their neighborhoods, their relationships with one another, and their familial environments (Collins, 1989).

Black women have historically faced interlocking forms of oppression, which include economic, political, and ideological stratification (Collins, 2000). This "Matrix of Dominance" (Collins, 1999) makes space for the expansion of an understanding of multiple layers of oppression for Black women and other marginalized groups. Kimberle Crenshaw (1990) furthers this conversation to name this experience *Intersectionality,* which specifically refers to the ways that race, class, and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of women's employment experiences. Black Feminist Thought affirms the articulation of lived experiences, the unique perspectives that can be afforded by the outsider-within ways of knowing, and the unique differences between the white feminist and the Black feminist scholarship.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) (Berry, 2010; Evans-Winters, Esposito, 2010) stems from the field of legal research, specifically from Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Solorzano, Allen & Carroll, 2002; Billings & Tate, 2016) as a way of understanding the nuanced and intersectional experiences Black women face, exclusively from Black men and other race and gender groups. CRT names, among the five core tenets, the notion that "race is normalized" and "counter storytelling" as central ideas that shape the formation of CRF as a framework (Solorzano, Allen & Carroll, 2002; Billings & Tate, 2016). Race, in our modern society, is a social construct which governs the actions of people and the systems and structures which shape our daily lives (Billings & Tate, 2016). Through this social construct, racism is institutionalized and impossible to circumvent. In particular, schools emulate the perils that are associated with inherent and systemic racism. Not only

do students suffer race-based violence within schools and in their communities, but educators are also subjected to the impacts of racism, in their work, and within their day-to-day affairs. Black woman educational leaders are not only victims of race-based violence, but must also investigate, mediate, and resolve conflicts that are a result of racism, prejudice, and implicit bias. The array of responsibilities and experiences of Black woman educational leaders illuminate the necessity of the second CRT component which is counter storytelling. Counterstories legitimate the voices of Black woman populations in an environment where whiteness reverberates.

Whiteness studies began with the work W.E.B. Dubois when he described this phenomenon as "privileging the white experience as the only experience" (Dubois, 1969). Whiteness exists because of the lack of knowledge or acceptance that there is anything else, for in fact, "whiteness is the ownership of the earth" (Dubois, 1969). Whiteness takes for granted the realities of others who do not know white culture as a way of being. This becomes evident and problematic in education when schools organize their structure and curriculum around whiteness and do not consider the possibility of the existence of needs outside of white culture. In this study, I hope to utilize CRF as a framework for understanding how whiteness insulates white privilege, as well as strategies to counteract these systems of privilege, disrupt the white culture, and create a pathway towards progress for Black woman educational leaders.

Building on the work of CRT scholars, Critical Race Feminism is rooted in the mission of social justice and social change (Henry, 1995). It emerged as a framework, supporting the following key tenets: 1). CRF is a theoretical movement, 2) CRF focuses

on the lives and experiences of women of color, 3). CRF asserts the multiple identities

and consciousnesses of women of color, 4). CRF is multidisciplinary, and 5). CRF calls

for theoretical and practical advances to combat racial and gender oppression (Evans

Winters, Esposito, 2007). Using these tenets, I place a particular focus on the lives and

experiences of Black women and make clear the notion that their experiences should be

named and explored in scholarship. CRF, as a framework, examines the experiences of

Black woman educational leaders as they work in their schools and community to

dismantle systemic inequities while experiencing race and gender-based trauma on their

own journey. Additionally, this framework requires a focus on praxis, which is inevitable

in the work of Black woman educational leaders. The tenets of CRF will guide the data

collection, as well as the data analysis process for this study.

This approach, highlighting the stories these women tell, is relatable to Alice

Walker's words about her mother:

> Only recently did I finally realize this: that through my mother's stories of
>
> her life I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of
>
> the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the
>
> knowledge that her stories, like her life, must be recorded (Walker, 2004).

In this excerpt, Walker talks about the pungency of her mother's stories,

and how critical it was not only for her to hear the story, but that the story must be

told. BFT and CRF inform my understanding of the practices of Black woman

educational leaders and frame my decision to examine the ways they go about

supporting the learners in their respective populations. Their thoughts are

legitimately intellectual. Their work is a part of a larger movement and is the praxis of Black Feminist Thought in motion. This study affirms BFT by utilizing frameworks written by and for Black women in order to understand the principles, practices and perspectives of Black woman educational leaders.

Black woman scholars have also made their contributions to discuss ways in which black women teach and lead, which I employ in this study to examine the teaching and leadership practices of Black woman educational leaders. Two of the more seminal theoretical contributions applicable to this study are Engaged Pedagogy and Visionary Pragmatism.

Engaged Pedagogy

Engaged pedagogy encourages teachers to teach in a way that respects and cares for the souls of their students; this is the only way to create conditions where deep learning can take place (hooks, 2014). Hooks introduces strategies to incorporate conscientization (Friere, 2000) in the classroom and encourages teachers and students to both become learners in the classroom and to collaborate to create knowledge. In this environment, it is the teacher's responsibility to be a self-actualized individual. During the process of liberatory teaching, the teachers also experiences growth and shares vulnerability with their students (hooks, 2014).

Hooks illuminates the ways in which Black women educators embody love and care in their teaching practices. She claims that this happens when Black women:

1). Move away from instructional methods that reinforce dominance

2). Focus on teacher-student relationships

3). Focus on power within the text and within the classroom (reciprocal learning)

4). Teach from a stance and valuation that differs from the norm (for example, a Confrontational teaching style that focuses on encouraging students to work on 'coming to voice')

5). Focus on how and what students are learning with an emphasis on personal confession in classroom discussions, and finally

6). Ensure that there are other feminists in the classroom to learn and engage with one another, whether they are students or guest speakers, or both (hooks, 1989).

These practices create an environment where students and the educator share in the learning experience and grow together from the process. This liberatory educational experience dismantles hegemonic norms which promote one-sided, banking-system-styled learning experiences designed to keep students in a posture where they are learning only what they are told (hooks, 1989). While pedagogical practices are most often referenced in conversations about teaching, one's pedagogical approach reflects how she relates and interacts with others within an educational setting and how she sets expectations for how teaching should take place within educational settings. A leader's pedagogical choices will be evident within the classroom, within a staff/faculty meeting, a professional development plan, parent conferences, and any other education-based

interaction. Black feminist pedagogies place reciprocal learning exchanges and transparency at the heart of their leadership and approach.

Visionary Pragmatism

Leadership, as explained by Patricia Hill Collins, should be a "visionary pragmatism," a theory of justice that fosters an "intense connectedness" (Collins, 1998) that when enacted, mirrors Engaged Pedagogy as an ethic of love (hooks, 2014). Visionary Pragmatism calls to consider the intersections of social power on individual identity but refrains from subscribing to identity politics (Collins, 1998). A visionary pragmatism based on a love ethic aims for a universal humanism, and as bell hooks explained, it does not overlook the communal and spiritual needs of oppressed people (Willett, 2002).

When Visionary Pragmatism is employed as a leadership strategy, the leader seeks to establish relationships with those she leads, with careful consideration of the experiences of all of the stakeholders, and specific attention to the needs and experiences of marginalized groups. Her aim is to lift as she climbs, moving her organization forward, while working to address the holistic needs of those she serves. Visionary pragmatists seek out ways to mentor, evaluate, and reform systems and structures, and search for radical ways to support their educational community.

Black Women Educational Leadership Experiences

While educational spaces are heavily populated by women, there is a distinct difference when a Black woman is present that is impactful and powerful (Olomade, 1987). Black women have a nuanced way of bringing along with them varied brands of femininity and blackness implementing liberatory instructional practices that are rooted in the premise of love. More frequently, scholarship on Black woman educational leaders describes the challenges they may face within a singular context in isolation. An analysis of the varied contexts, with the focus on education as a constant, will allow for the exploration of each of the contexts and the leadership theories that speak to the experiences of Black woman educational leaders broadly, for the purposes of continuing a study. This study will examine the experiences of Black woman educational leaders across three contexts: Higher Education, K-12 Education, and Community spaces.

K12 Principalship

Schools have historically been primary locations for the transformational love and care of Black woman educators. In the 1920s, Black women were employed at higher rates than white women, and not exclusively in domesticated, service-oriented positions (Shakeshaft, 1989). These women were classroom teachers, heads of schools, and community organizers in segregated towns. Black woman educators also opened their own schools and were both the teachers and the administrators (Giddings, 1984; Green, 1967; Jones, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1989).

The "no excuses" methods employed by Black woman educational leaders in schools today can be traced back to the 1930s with the emergence of the Jean's supervisors, funded by the Negro Rural School Fund, a program founded by Anna T. Jeans in 1907 (Alston, 2005). This group of predominantly woman Black educational leaders mirror what we understand today as school improvement officers who are charged with the task of going into schools and employing the necessary methods to support academic instruction in rural, under-resourced school environments. These positions were phased out after schools were desegregated, as most schools needed to redistribute funding allocations to support the shift in student populations, in both predominantly white and black schools. This was a direct result of the dissolution of separate schooling.

Black women's success in educational leadership was often acquired while encountering racism and stigmas informed by long-held stereotypes of Black women as angry, emotional, and unruly (Moorsi, Fuller & Riley, 2018; Abrams, Pope & Belgrave, 2014). As a result, any increase in their numbers is a major accomplishment that should not be underestimated (S. N. Jones, 2003). My aim for this study is not to highlight leaders who "serve" and "temper" their actions. This reifies the whiteness stance which places Black women in the dehumanizing subservient role of needing to appease the master, or a system, in order to accomplish their goals. I hope to examine the ways that women intentionally cross borders, break down boundaries, and use their influence to disrupt without centering the sacrifices and the lowered position or stance they must take to get there. This does not expunge our history from such sacrifice, but through

scholarship, it provides a frame that can be used to discuss the work of their hands in ways that are uplifting and empowering.

Community

In the field of education, scholars have examined the experiences of Black woman educational leaders as it relates to their experiences within K-12 and Higher Education environments and in communities where they, as leaders without degree or title, seek to provide support for the holistic needs of students (Lomotey, 2019; Nitri, 2014). Historical accounts capture the work of Black woman community leaders such as Bernice Robinson and Maritcha Lyons (Nitri, 2014, Johnson, 2018) who opened schools, launched voting campaigns, created new curricular approaches, and more in their own hometowns. Yet, there are few studies that make the direct connection between the efforts of Black women community leaders and school reform.

There is a direct connection between urban school reform and community leadership (Giles, Johnson, Brooks & Jacobson, 2005). In much of this research, scholars have linked urban school academic outcomes with local community conditions. Urban school reform coupled with social inequities within a community underscore how structural forces such as systemic racism, deindustrialization, and economic inequity influence urban schools and communities (Green, 2015).

This study aims to extend existing research and center the experiences of Black women who are involved in educational reform from the community perspective. Black women educational leaders also engage in teaching and leadership and work to address

issues of race facing urban communities. Their experiences are critical and belong in the conversation as the work continues to create equitable educational experiences for youth in marginalized communities.

Black Women and Leadership Theories

In leadership roles, Black women who use their double-consciousness and intellectual prowess to improve the organizations faced with the stigmas associated with Black women. Persevering, these women negotiate their identity with gender normative behaviors in order to build alliances and create opportunities for themselves (Alston, 2005, Jean-Marie, 2005). These negotiations often result in promotion and prominence, creating more room for leadership opportunities and platforms to create access and more opportunity for others. Leadership theories that are most prominent in empirical studies are Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Tempered Radicals, but they do not fully articulate the intentional decisions of Black women informed by their racial and gender identities (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007, Alston, 2005, Jean Marie, 2006, 2009).

Intersecting Theories

These theories address the intentional behavioral and relational moves Black women choose to embody in order to lead effectively and successfully. But in the wake of the #MeToo Movement and the Year of the Woman, it is time to continue the conversation and theorize a way to understand Black women by using the theoretical work of Black women. To do so, I begin with Applied Critical Leadership Theory, which

considers the principles, Transformational Leadership, the practices, Critical Pedagogy, and the perspectives, Critical Race Theory. This is in order to name the leadership approach of Critical Leaders: Applied Critical Leadership Theory.

Applied Critical Leadership Theory

Figure 1

Applied Critical Leadership Theory
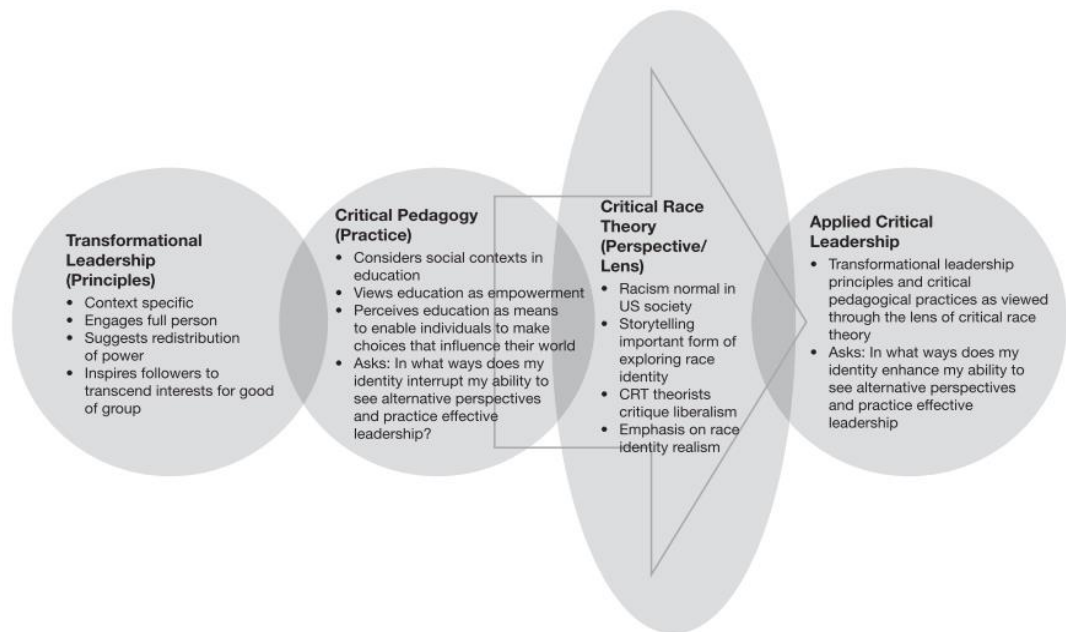
There is a continuing leadership conversation about how to best serve schools and communities in urban settings (Irby & Brown, 2004). Traditional leadership models analyze the ways in which school leaders make decisions, develop staff, engage in communities, and establish school culture. But they do so within a Whiteness frame

(Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). This is problematic because it examines critical

educational leaders, who are often Black and brown, with the white gaze (Morrison,

1998), instead of with a lens created to understand Black and brown educational leaders,

and that explicitly names the dynamics that impact the leadership practices of a Black or

brown leader. Applied Critical Leadership (ACL) explores the leadership and

instructional approaches with a Critical Race Framework, naming that there are specific

challenges that leaders of color face when servicing schools that are impacted by

systemic oppression (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). Additionally, ACL draws from

frameworks that are liberatory in nature by examining the leadership practices of leaders

of color through the principles of Transformational leadership, pedagogical practices

through Critical Pedagogy, and perspectives about the broader issue through the frame of

Critical Race Theory (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). Applied Critical Leadership

(Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012) embodies what I believe to be the three fundamental

characteristics of leadership: principles, practice, perspectives. However, in efforts to

align these concepts with the experiences and perspectives of Black women, I find it

essential to center theories that are written by and for Black women.

Centering the Frameworks of Black Women to Examine the Leadership Practices of Black Women

To understand the principles of Black women in educational leadership, I employ

Visionary Pragmatism (Collins, 1998), which suggests that Black women operate in dual

capacities, cultivating the skills necessary to survive and thrive, making pragmatic

decisions that pave the way, while imagining a future where their community can thrive

and, thus, working towards that vision (Collins, 1998). To understand the practice of

Black Women in leadership, I employ Engaged Pedagogy (hooks, 2014), which explains

that Black women create learning environments where they join their students in the

learning process, share their own stories, and their actions are governed by an ethic of

care. This work is all done with a perspective that is informed by Critical Race Feminism

(Berry, 2010), which affirms the multiple identities and consciousnesses of women of

color and calls for theoretical and practical advances to combat racial and gender

oppression (Evans Winters, Esposito, 2007). Through the principles, practices, and

perspectives of Black women, I understand their leadership approach to be Critical

Visionary Pragmatism.

Figure 2

Critical Visionary Pragmatism

Visionary
Pragmatism
(Collins, 1989)

Black women operate in dual capacities,
cultivating the skills necessary to survive
and thrive, making pragmatic decisions that
pave the way, while imagining a future
where her community can thrive and
working towards that vision.

Principles

Engaged
Pedagogy
(hooks, 2014)

Black women create learning
environments where they join their
students in the learning process, share
their own stories, and their actions are
governed by an ethic of care.

Practices

Critical
Race
Feminsm
(Berry, 2010,
Evans-Winters
& Esposito,
2007)

Perspectives

Affirms the multiple identities and
consciousnesses of women of color,
and calls for theoretical and practical
advances to combat racial and gender
oppression.

In Visionary Pragmatist Leadership, Visionary Pragmatism and Engaged

Pedagogical practices are implemented as a response to perspectives informed by Critical

Race Feminism. Critical Visionary Pragmatism postures identity as a resource,

acknowledging the *outsider-within* perspective as a tool for practicing affecting

leadership and leaving space for Black women to embrace their racial and gender

identities. It is with this leadership framework that Black woman leaders challenge systems and structures that impact the lives and educational experiences of youth in marginalized populations.

Saginaw, Michigan

The site of this study, Saginaw, Michigan, is urban emergent, and while not densely populated, exhibits similar challenges to a densely populated city, and is in need of significant support. Saginaw is best known for being the location of the largest industrial plant in mid-Michigan. Home of Dow Chemical since 1897 and currently the location of Nexteer Automotive. Many of the subsidiary automobile industry needs are met in this small 18 square mile city, which today has a population of about 49,000 (Saginaw Population, 2019). As the automotive industry experienced highs and lows, so did the city of Saginaw. The population in the town increased drastically from 7,460 at the time the city charter was signed in 1870 to 98,265 in the middle of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-1960s, after which the was a steady decline of about 10,000 people each decade (Saginaw Demographics, 2017).

Today, the population in Saginaw rests near 49,000, and the racial distribution is 43% black and 37% white. While Black people are greatest in number, they are not equal in opportunity. According to Data USA, in 2018, 46.6% of persons living in poverty in Saginaw are Black, while 30.7% are White. In 2017, 80% of the degrees awarded at institutions in Saginaw, were awarded to White graduates, and 10% of the degrees were awarded to Black graduates (Data USA). These statistics provoke questions about the

marginalization of the minority and what structures are in place to keep the group that is more largely represented excluded from opportunities.

Saginaw was at one time a place of great opportunity. Families could move into this town and find work, place their children in school, purchase a home, and live well, just from working at an automotive plant. In fact, 8,469 homes were built between 1950-1969, as opposed to 1,752 built from 1980 to today (Saginaw Demographics, 2017). After an analysis of the social and historical context of the time period when there was a mass exodus, the decline of the automotive industry played a significant role in the reason for families leaving the city.

In Saginaw, 43% of the population is white and 44% of the population is Black (Saginaw Population, 2019). While jobs were readily available for Blacks in the 1940s, housing was not available in all areas of the city. In fact, today, Black Saginawians live on the east side of the Saginaw River, while white Saginawians live on the west. The primary industry is medicine and any positions existing outside of the medical field require a minimum of a bachelor's degree. However, only 9% of Black Saginawians have a bachelor's degree as compared to 15% of white Saginawians (U.S. Census, 2020). Many of the persons who hold these positions live outside of the city limits. Saginaw demographics also highlight gender inequities in the areas of employment, income, educational attainment, and homeownership. The demographic data suggests that there is a pattern of marginalization among underrepresented groups within the town and in the schools. The examination of demographic data, with the intent of merely displaying the deficits of underrepresented populations, should be a toxic trait of the past. Instead,

researchers are taking up critical quantitative methods to explore how the intersections of identities might suggest new ways of responding to inequities within schools through Critical Quantitative Inquiry (Sung & Coleman, 2019).

In Saginaw, there are higher levels of poverty, which are directly related to the limited employment opportunities and also related to public health issues, drug use, and crime within the area (Julius, 2011). Although it is a small town, it is one where economic disparities are rampant. In 2018, 34% of persons living in this city were living in poverty. The per capita income is $16,700. In 2017, 42% of the city's Black population was living in poverty (U.S. Census, 2020). Poverty brings with it limited tax dollars to provide social services to support these conditions. In addition to impoverished financial conditions, there is no fresh food grocery store on the east side of the river and the only food options are fast food restaurants, local diners, and small markets which sell processed foods at discounted rates. This leads to a cycle of oppression that resulted in a mass exodus and the population in the city is steadily declining, as there is no way to thrive in this community. This mass exodus resulted in the closing of the city's magnet high school, Arthur Hill, during the summer of 2018, resulting in larger class sizes, the loss of instructional and administration positions, and staff positions.

Today's schools in Saginaw are facing a great challenge as the school board and the district leadership are working to contend with the performance of their students, closing of school, instances of violence in the school community, and the grim hopes for employment opportunities for recent graduates. While Saginaw has its own school district, it is monitored by a state agency, the Saginaw Intermediate School District

(SISD), to ensure that the improvement plan that was agreed upon by Saginaw Public School District, the State of Michigan and SISD is fulfilled by 2020. Reports to Saginaw ISD impact the funding allocation the city receives from the state. Saginaw is currently in a partnership agreement with the Saginaw ISD and the state of Michigan as a result of the performance of the school district. This directly impacts the principal's liberties as a school leader and superintendent's liberties as steward over the district. One of the major requirements of this plan is that schools contract support for professional development and strategic planning. These services must be approved by the state agency and those available vendors are provided by SISD. Principals can only use allocated funds on approved vendors. These kinds of arrangements impact students in urban schools in significant ways, taking the focus away from efforts to meet student's individual needs to accomplishing plans created by individuals who are hired by the state to execute a plan.

Finally, the factor that is most important to this study is what actually happens in schools. Students have the right to a rigorous, informative, and engaging education, regardless of their hometown (Spring, 2000). Still, students in urban emergent schools are subjected to banking system-oriented instructional programs and poorly funded academic extension opportunities (Freire, 2018). To eradicate this injustice, schools must create academic programming that centers the students' identities, supports the interests of the students, and creates opportunities for them to pursue a wide variety of careers and options. College should not be a single pathway, especially in towns like Saginaw. Although students who earn bachelor's degrees are more likely to find work than those with only high school diplomas, in 2014, less than 50% of high school graduates attend

college (Census, 2014). This leaves the question of whether or not academic

programming in Saginaw is meeting the needs of the students within the school

community and providing them with the exposure and opportunities to pursue their

dreams post-graduation.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The establishment of schools in the United States was accompanied by an intentional design to establish a standard, single way of being American, one that resulted in the marginalization of anyone outside of the white majority. This is not a novel issue (Spring, 2014). Over time, the inferior treatment of underrepresented groups has become even more complex, and those who take up this matter in the field of education, are often moved to enact change as a result of their own experiences as persons who are, themselves, members of marginalized populations. Research has illuminated the concern that teachers in U.S. classrooms do not reflect the ethnic origin of students in the classroom. In the 2019-2020 school year, 82% of the teachers who entered the profession were white (AACTE, 2013). This can be seen as both symptomatic and the perpetuation of historic marginalization. In response to this concern, many Black women teach, lead, and engage in community work with a passion that is inspired by the challenges that are associated with the intersections of their identity, guided by a unique ethic of care. Black woman educational leaders are often placed in districts with high majority-minority populations and face significant challenges such as poor school funding and assessment data suggesting that students are underperforming on standardized tests (Reed, 2012). Yet, these women persist, and blaze trails not only within the schools but also within surrounding communities. This study seeks to examine the "work of their hands" (Psalm 90:17, New International Version) and how the principles, practices, and perspectives of

Black woman Educational Leaders inform how they enact change within the educational sphere.

Research Method: Portraiture

Since the establishment of the first school in the United States, there was an intentional design to marginalized groups. Over time, the nuances of this issue have become complex, and those who take up this issue, are often moved to enact change as a result of their own experiences. Black women, marginalized and at the very bottom of the power structure, are among those groups who teach, lead and engage in community work motivated by the challenges that are asymptomatic of the intersections of their identity and do so with an ethic of care that guides them. This study seeks to examine how the identity, pedagogies, and leadership styles of these Black woman Educational Leaders inform how they enact change within their educational sphere. In order to do this, I plan to explore the narratives of each of the participants or actors through portraiture. My position is that through the stories of others, we are able to understand more about life and human experiences. Portraiture, as a method, allows the researcher to capture the object or participant and the landscape surrounding the participant in order to understand the relationships she has with the larger picture of society (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997).

During the kitchen table talks, I explored the participants' beliefs, values, life histories, experiences within the context, and the outcomes of their practice. Our conversations inspired the creation of a broader narrative highlighting their journey of

courage, strength, struggle, and triumph. With an aim to capture the "goodness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of each Black woman educational leader, I examined and analyzed their experiences as a member of a marginalized group serving marginalized groups. This included how they define their identity, the pedagogies they support and implement, and their leadership practices. It also included their journey towards refining these factors and how each of them create a synergy for change in their contexts. Informed by the kitchen table talks, I created a narrative reflecting the complexities of the intersections of their identities, the path that led them to their current position, and the creative changes that were a result of their passion for the work and resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Research Questions

1. How do Black woman educational leaders describe their racial and gender identities in relation to their pedagogical and leadership approaches?

2. How do the identities, pedagogical practices, and leadership approaches inform the leadership decisions of Black woman educational leaders?

3. How do Black woman educational leaders use their roles to address systemic inequities?

Methods

I explored the experiences of each of the participants through Portraiture (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997) as a method. This method calls for the portraitist to

build relationships with the participants or actors and ensure that after each session, the participants feel safe and whole. Such relationships are established by a "search for goodness, then through empathetic regard, then, development of symmetry, reciprocity, and a negotiation of boundaries" with the actors (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As a portraitist, I analyzed the data as the observer, interpreter, discipline specialist, and autobiographer (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Simultaneously, by listening to the voices of the actors and the dynamics of dialogue between the actor and the portraitist, I attempted to capture a comprehensive illustration of their experiences in order to illustrate a narrative that reflected the principles, practices, and perspectives shared by the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Although traditional science or positivism suggests that there is one way to know the truth, and that truth can be tested or verified by science, critical theory suggests that truth can be understood within the confines of one person or one group's lived experiences. These experiences are known through dialogue and/or discourse (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, it is through one's analysis and description of their lived experiences that one might understand a way of knowing from that experience. This study suggests that through the lived experiences described by Black women, we can produce knowledge that offers insight that might be informative for others. Kitchen Table Talks (Kohl &McCutcheon, 2014) create an environment for the researcher and the participants a space for sharing their experiences, which mirrors the traditional ways that women share intangible knowledge. This relaxed environment is designed to feel

informal and participant-driven but allows for knowledge to be co-constructed by the participant and researcher.

While this method suits my research objectives, there may be some potential limitations. One limitation might be subjectivity and generalizability. Portraiture, as a method, is inherently subjective because it is based on researcher interpretation (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997). Any scholarship is impacted by the perspective of the researcher because you cannot extract perspective, completely (Foucault, 1971). Another potential limitation lies within the inability for this method to produce generalizable knowledge, to which I respond that I am only hoping to capture the nuanced experiences of the participants so that this knowledge might offer helpful information to others, but not suggest that these experiences encompass the experiences of these participants as a whole. There is potential to utilize the key learnings from this study to propose a framework that could be studied with the purposes of producing generalizable knowledge. However, that is not the singular desired outcome of this study. Finally, one might suggest that as a Black woman, I am too closely connected to the topic to engage in an objective exploration of the experiences of Black women. I contend that my experiences are exactly why my perspective is valuable to this study. The kitchen table talks will be greatly informed by the connectedness that I share with the participants by way of our lived experiences. While I will not impose my experiences on the participants, I am familiar with the nuanced ways the participants relate to others, communicate with others, and take up spaces in their school environments.

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Participants

This Portraiture displays the strength, competencies, and insights of the actors, thus allowing space for the researcher to identify participants, settings, and materials which elevate these characteristics. Through purposeful sampling, I invited Black woman educational leaders, who hold leadership positions within institutions that serve historically marginalized populations, specifically where Black students are in the majority (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). These participants will be persons who identify as Black, representing any ethnicities from the African Diaspora, and woman. Acceptable institutions include the State, K-12, Higher Education, or community organizations. The institutional range for this study is broad because leadership practices are transferable by context and leadership strategies can be implemented in significant ways across all of the aforementioned institutions.

This study analyzes participants' experiences with and impact on school systems and structures across contexts. Each of the participants have more than five years of experience serving as principal in a school in Saginaw, Michigan. The projected sample size for this study was three participants, which allowed time for collecting data during the school year. Portraiture creates space for the portraitist to include her voice in the illustration and this is a critical component of the study (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997). However, Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) cautions the researcher to be conscious that her voice never resonates louder than the voices of the participants. A failure to do this could result in biased analysis, and in turn, distort the illustration of the actors' experiences. After each portrait was created, I offered my initial interpretation to

the participants for their feedback. This feedback was taken into consideration as the final portrait was created.

Table 1

Participants in the Study: Black Woman Principals in Saginaw, Michigan

Participant Name	Leadership	Racial Identity	Gender Identity
Kay	Principal, K-8 Charter School	Black	Woman
Keisha	Principal, Elementary School	Black	Woman
Stacey	Director of State/Federal Programs & Professional Development, The School District of the City of Saginaw, Former High School Principal	Black	Woman

Note. The pseudonyms were inspired by Kamala Harris, Keisha Lance Bottoms, and Stacey Abrams, three influential Black women in politics, particularly during the year I collected data, the year of 2020.

Setting

The study took place in Saginaw, Michigan, my place of birth. This city was selected because it is a town that has been impacted by the decline of the automotive industry, and the economic conditions of the town have caused duress since the late 1970s. The racial climate in Michigan has consistently reflected a black-white divide,

separated by the Saginaw River which is at the center of the city (Warner, 2006).

Currently in Saginaw, while the school population is 99% Black, the teaching staff is

17% Black and 77% white (MI School Data, 2019). The Administrative staff is 43%

Black and 48% white, 65% woman, and 34% male (MI School data, 2019). The data

suggests that the administration is becoming more diverse, while the teaching staff is still

primarily white. I am interested in understanding how the participants navigate the

perpetual economic decline, gender discrimination, and racial tensions in the city. I am

also interested in how they have impacted schools and the community. By conducting

this study in Saginaw, Michigan, I hoped to "focus in on the meaning of a particular

aspect of the experience" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) This distinct location had some

similar characteristics as other urban and economically oppressed communities. Further,

by engaging with these participants in their context, I sought "to document and illuminate

the complexity and detail" of their experiences with the hope that readers will find

themselves represented in the greater universal themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,

1997).

Data Collection Procedures

Kitchen Table Talk

For the kitchen table talks, I selected two sets of semi-structured interview

questions as a guide. The first comes from Catone (2014) whose study is aimed at

capturing portraits of teachers who are self-proclaimed activists within their classrooms

and asks questions to understand their personal history, teaching practices, and

sociopolitical development. This instrument allows me to understand the family history of the participants, to provide a greater depth of understanding about how they came to their racial and gender identities, their leadership practices, and their stance on equity and systemic change. The second instrument, developed by Santamaria & Santamaria (2012), focuses specifically on how the participants align with ACL in their daily practices. These questions are guiding my exploration of the development of the participants' racial and gender identity development along with their pedagogical practices and leadership principles. These questions do not center Visionary Pragmatism but will lead the kitchen table talks in a way that will allow for an analysis of the practices which fall under the Visionary Pragmatist frame. In Appendix A, I have included the questions for the three semi-structured interviews as well as the observation reflection conversations.

Participant Shadowing

Between the kitchen table talks, I visited one meeting with the participants within their work environment, taking descriptive notes on the participants' interactions with others, and their work that I notice while shadowing. The purpose of the shadowing was to collect data to draw deeper meaning from the kitchen table talks. I ask the participants to chat briefly after the meeting to capture their reflections on their experience in the field. These reflections were collected using the Kitchen Table Talk collection tool.

Key Individuals

In order to triangulate, I spoke two with key individuals who worked with each participant during their tenure as principal. These kitchen table talkies were aimed at

understanding the leadership style of the participant from the perspective of a colleague or subordinate staff person.

Focus Group

I conducted one whole group kitchen table talk with the three participants. This focus group utilized the kitchen-table talk, semi-structured interview style, and covered the general themes of identity development, teacher/educator style, and leadership practices. This approach created space for the participants to share their distinctive views and generate new ideas.

Materials

The transcriptions of kitchen table talks will serve as the materials to be examined for analysis. Additionally, any documents or items that the participants present as artifacts, my observational notes, and any other written documents produced during the time of data collection will also be used as data for this study.

Observational Notes

During each kitchen table talk, I captured brief descriptive notes to accompany the audio recordings. I will transcribe the recordings, which will happen either in person or via web video conferencing.

Data Collection Overview

       The table below explains how each of the data collection methods align to the

research questions and the theoretical framework.

Table 2

Research Questions and Data Collection Tools

Research Question	Theoretical Frame-Critical Visionary Pragmatism	Data Collection Method	Interview Questions
How do Black woman educational leaders describe their identity, pedagogical and leadership approaches?	Perspectives	Interview Focus group Portraitist	Kitchen Table Talk # 1: Reflections on life histories and sociopolitical development**.**
How do the identities, pedagogical practices and leadership approaches inform the leadership decisions of Black woman Educational leaders?	Practices Principles	Interview Focus group Observation Portraitist Notes from Shadowing	Kitchen Table Talk #2: Reflections on what it means to be an educator and reflecting on their sociopolitical development. Kitchen Table Talk #4: Observation – Reflection Conversations

Research Question	Theoretical Frame- Critical Visionary Pragmatism	Data Collection Method	Interview Questions
How do Black woman educational leaders use their role to create change?	Principles Practices Perspectives	Interview Focus group Observation Portraitist Notes from Shadowing Documents Artifacts	Kitchen Table Talk #3: Reflections on Educational Leadership

Data Analysis

I transcribed the audio recordings from the Kitchen Table Talks, focus groups and observations, and then conducted two rounds of coding. First, descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016) cycle was implemented to capture initial emergent themes. The purpose of using this type of coding was to better understand the overarching themes of each piece of data and to engage the participants in ongoing dialogue about the early findings.

After gathering the first round of data, these themes were used to inform the next round of data collection, which is why this process was iterative. The remaining cycles of coding were thematic (Saldana, 2016). These thematic codes helped to guide the

meaning-making process and served as a guide for the illustration of their experiences. The culmination of this study is presented in the form of a narrative illustration to support the purpose of this inquiry, which is to present "patterns of meaning articulated around events, processes, epiphanies, or themes" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Themes were used to guide the narrative writing process. The findings were presented in the form of narrative portraits.

Limitations

This study is one that is very personal because I am closely connected to the topic and participants. Although Portraiture commissions the researcher to build and maintain a relationship with the participants that is centered around trust, there are no admonishments for relationships that are already established and how that might impact both the data collection and data analysis process (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Davis, 1997). Additionally, this type of study could potentially be limited by a shorter period of time for data collection. Without the confines of a dissertation study, perhaps data for a study of this nature could be collected during an entire calendar year or beyond.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges the important work scholars have done to elevate the knowledge and experiences of Black woman educational leaders, particularly through empirical and conceptual studies. However, the focus of this inquiry was not solely to highlight leaders who served and tempered their actions. While such actions may be effective strategies, I hoped to focus this study on the ways that women unapologetically

cross borders, break down boundaries, and use their influence to disrupt oppressive structures while embodying the fullness of their identity as Black women without resignation or reservation. After conducting the study and analyzing the data, I found the experiences of the women were quite complicated, and illuminated the tensions that lie between critical theory and the practical application of these theories. The next chapter will highlight the childhood, teaching and leadership experiences, and the tensions they experience as they seek to meet the needs of the students in their school community.

Chapter 4

Results

The three portraits narrate the racial and gender identity development, entrance into the field, emergence as a leader, accomplishments, trials and triumphs of the participants. Although the journey is linear because it is bound by time with a specified starting point and finish, the development of racial and gender identity is progressive and dynamic, and the experiences of trials and triumphs occur throughout. The portraits provide a narrative for how life events color the perspectives of the participants and illuminate the path for each step on their leadership journey. In this chapter, the experiences of the participants are captured in narratives which highlight experiences in their journey towards becoming as well as their tenure as building leaders, and detail the work of their hands, and the unique ways that their experiences inform their decisions and practices.

Kay

Visionary, confident, and relational is what I gathered from Kay during our kitchen table talks. I know her from a previous context, our college gospel choir, but I had not spent a significant amount of extended time with her, outside of brief check-ins since we left the campus of our alma mater. Kay is in her mid-thirties and is the principal of a K-8 charter school. Although she believes that this position is exactly what she *should* be doing in life, education was not her first choice of a career. Her mother is a

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retired teacher, so she grew up seeing the perils of the job, and vowed that she would choose a different service-oriented profession. She wanted to be a doctor.

She was born in Oklahoma, but spent the majority of her childhood in Michigan. Growing up middle-class, she spent the majority of her school-aged years in suburban schools where she was one of only a few black students. Her neighborhood in Michigan was unique in that she lived on the school boundary line. Her neighborhood was all Black and her school was predominantly white. This allowed her the opportunity to experience the cultural differences before she could really articulate them.

As a young child, she lived in the shadows of her older sister, who was always labeled as the pretty one. I understand this narrative very well, of being compared, subversively, to the outward presentation of another sibling, and my heart ached from this pain. She found her self-pride in her intelligence. It was undeniable. She excelled in school and that became her identifying attribute.

Okay, so I have one sister she's just a year older than me, but we were very different and my parents, I think put labels on us really early. So my sister was like, who you would consider the 'pretty one,' was very delicate and dainty and girly. I was definitely more of a tomboy. And so she started, my sister started modeling really early. And so she got that label as the 'pretty one.' And so once it was told to me that, because I could read, that made me smart I really held onto that identity. So I was the 'smart one.' And like, it didn't matter what I looked like. You couldn't tell me anything. I was like, I'm a genius and I know it. And

then I had a great community of people reinforcing that. My neighbors told me I was a genius.

This affirmation helped to shape her identity, along with her talent of playing classical piano. She played competitively, which she feels enhanced the narrative of her being a smart girl.

Another really strong identity is I play the piano. I play classical piano, started playing when I was four and I used to compete. So I did competitions throughout the state and some national competitions. And so that went along with you're a very smart person and you play the piano. Like it went together and it just was, it just is how I saw myself.

Exposure and celebration, both influences from her experiences of traveling and participating in piano competitions, are things that she incorporates into her instructional and leadership practice. She talks about how she finds any kind of competition to host at her school as a means of celebrating student success. When I asked her about this, she shared the following examples of competitions she uses to celebrate the academic achievement of her students:

So having a kindergarten in first-grade spelling bee, something you would never think that little babies would do but they didn't do it and be super excited to spell the and, and, and you will fill a gym with their parents and families like, "That is my baby spelling the words." We do like fraction tournaments. We compete [for] other kind of like regional math things, but just in the building, just like simple

stuff. We're going to have a fractions tournament or a multiplication race and pack our bleachers and make a big deal about it

Her parents made intentional efforts to help her understand her identity as a Black woman. She recalled that as she was growing up, her father would tell her she was an "intelligent Black woman" or an "intelligent Black young lady", and she says that she feels that "whether negative or positive, what people say, kind of molds sometimes how you see yourself." Her father's words and actions created for her, the self-concept that she holds, today. Giving her magazines and books which featured Black faces helped her to see Blackness as beautiful, intelligent and a future success. This, in addition to his occasional reminders to see everyone as equal, even people who are not of the same hue, helped her to have a clear understanding of both her racial identity and her human responsibility to treat everyone fairly. There was one particular instance where she recalled her father addressing and correcting a stereotype she had at a young age:

So I was watching TV one day and a white person was singing. And so I'm little and for some reason I had it in my head that white people can't sing. And so I said it out loud and my dad was in the room and I was like, why is he singing. White people can't sing. And he got mad and he said, "Don't you say that." He was like, "You cannot judge somebody based off of what they look like." He's like, "All kinds of people can sing." So he checked me really quick. And I was like, "Oh, you can't say things like that. That's not right." And that's my memory of being aware of, well, I mean, obvious I didn't realize at the time that I have a bias. I have this stereotype. But that's my memory of that kind of conversation in our house.

In her formative years, the lessons she learned from her parents, but more specifically, her father, shaped her perception of herself and her world. Her parents stressed education, celebrating their racial identity, strong faith, and fairness.

Kay went through her schooling and college, graduating with her bachelor's and going into the nonprofit sector. She worked there for some time, but eventually found herself working in schools, after avoiding the field because she'd seen her mother's challenges and heard her father speak with disdain about how limiting the jobs were in education. Nevertheless, after she married her husband and moved to Saginaw, she left her position as a program director, and became a para-educator. She went from being a paraeducator to a second-grade teacher, then an academic dean, then a principal. As a teacher, she saw herself as a nurturer. She says she did all the things that teachers shouldn't. She hugged her students, prayed with them in their classrooms, and just gave her all to making sure that her classroom was a loving and safe environment. As she ascended to leadership, she maintained her nurturing persona and embodied a leadership philosophy, which she states is to "take care of those who take care of you." It is a practice of reciprocity, and she is always looking for ways to let her staff know that she cares about them as individuals and not just about what they can or should produce. She talks about how she asks her staff members about the last time they took a day off when she notices that they have been working for a long stretch without any approved absences. I asked her about her hiring practices, and she shared that she intentionally looks for people who are "good people" and who "really love children." Such intentionality with hiring allows her to trust that teachers are doing their very best for the children, which is such a contrasting difference from the other participants in the study.

When I asked Kay about her stance on issues of social justice, she shared that this was an area that she has been focusing on as of late. She recently sought out to provide culturally responsive teaching training for her staff. I asked her about what inspired her to go in this route, and she shared that the events of the summer with George Floyd, police brutality and racial injustice caused her to want to provide training opportunities for her staff, in preparation for the questions that may arise from students surrounding those current events. Since then, she has started a Ph.D. program focusing on curriculum and instruction, and her research interests have to do with how teachers incorporate social justice in their instruction. She talks about how her entrance into the Ph.D. program came just in time, as she was beginning to think that it was time for her to leave school leadership:

> This leadership world is not my passion at all. I might have told you that. It's not really where my heart is, but where I see I can be impactful based off of what I'm trying to research and get at is helping me to be like no, you got to stick this out. You got to see this through because you have this chance to at least make some change right here, and soon. Not five years from now, but immediately. You can do so it really has renewed purpose. So I'm super happy that...I'm happy that it happened when it happened because I had one foot out the door.

I asked her why the job is so difficult, and she talked about the long days, filled with difficult, weighty decisions, and that as a leader you "never get a break. You work year-round, responding to the needs of students, teachers, parents, and the Network." It is exhausting, physically and emotionally, especially when it becomes routine, and is not about pursuing a passion. Her new academic pursuits have brought about a refreshing

change and an opportunity to implement her research into practice immediately. She affirms that this is truly the most ideal role to have when making systemic changes is your mission.

She is indeed a visionary, in her own right, and has made changes in her school in the area of discipline. She uses her relational skills to build trust with her staff, and then leads them in innovative ways to support students with behavioral concerns.

One of the things that helps adults to have trust and buy-in to their leader is being consistent. So then how do I navigate gray areas when you need me to be consistent? And that was a constant struggle for my first two years as a principal. I feel like there's better ways for us to support students when they're not following our behavior expectations than being just punitive, or consequence-driven, or suspending them. I told you, I'm very aware of the statistics, and what suspension and all this stuff is doing to our students. And so as a leader, I had to bend sometimes and say, "Adults who are delivering something to the student, you need me to show you some consistency before I can then capitalize on this relationship to now make some changes." And I didn't like having to bend, and just as a teacher, I do feel like there are some kids that I lost in the process to be able to save more later. I lost some at the beginning. Just as a first-year teacher, there were things I didn't know what I...I didn't know I was doing something wrong, and you were fortunate and unfortunate to have me first. You're my guinea pigs. There were some things I did well, there were some things that I messed up on. And then you moved on to the next grade, and then it wasn't until after that that I was like oh, I'm not going to do that like that again. So over time as a

leader, I've been able to implement different strategies, and programs, and things, whereas now there's barely anybody left in this building that's going to be like, "This student needs to be suspended."

Not only has she changed the directional focus for discipline, but she has also cultivated a familial culture for the entire school building. Her staff members trust her because she makes intentional efforts to show them that she cares about them as human beings. She walks the building in the morning to say hello to each of the teachers, just to greet them each day. She listens to them and looks for commonalities that they share to bring up in future conversations. She says that this togetherness or communal environment was also bred from overcoming obstacles together. During her first two years as principals, her building was significantly understaffed, which meant that the staff had to share the load and increase coverage, creatively, to cover all of the missing classrooms until those vacancies could be filled:

I mean, I had two years in a row where I had the number one classroom openings in all of Legacy Academy So there's 90 schools and I had the number one. The school year is starting and I got seven classrooms without teachers, or nine classrooms without teachers, and we're still opening, and I don't have teachers. Or I'd have teachers quitting, like, "It's the day before school starts and you're telling me that you just quit?" Or it's the second week of school, and they...And it just kept happening. So my first two or three years, that's what it was. Not my first two years. My first two years, the turnover was horrible. And you can't have a school when you don't have teachers. And I'd have to talk to parents about, "Your child's teacher just resigned again." That's just craziness. And now we've gone

two years without any resignations, so I haven't had any kind of ...Yeah. So that's been, "Yay. Can we get three?"

Her ability to overcome this obstacle has also placed her in high regard among her peers. She shares that in meetings with other principals in the network, she is recognized for overcoming obstacles such as this one, and known as a leader who is able to solve problems efficiently and effectively.

The thought of a principal like Kay leaving the field because of a lack of passion or connectedness to the position is exactly why I wanted to explore this topic. Why aren't the "Kays" feeling fulfilled in their work? What can we do to highlight the work of her hands and show that this particular approach, the approach of Black women principals, is one that should be featured as premier and regarded as an exemplar of high-level expertise in leadership?

Stacey

Stacey is sunny, with a dazzling smile that brightens, an inner light that illuminates, and a warmth that embraces every human interaction. Every single time we sat at "the kitchen table" her smile was full and bright, and completely refreshing. Like her smile, her perspective is optimistic, and while her life was not always reflective of a summer's day, she describes even the dark days with grace.

She grew up in the heart of the city, with her mom, older sister and younger brother, and describes herself as the poster child for "at risk." Her mother was an alcoholic, and the disease impacted the quality of life for Stacey and her siblings. Her

kitchen was roach-infested, but they never went without food. She says that she didn't

know she was poor until she was older, and realized that the holes that were torn in the

toe of her shoes was not in style, but was her mother's way of getting more time out of

them. But Stacey did well in school. She was often labeled as the outspoken child of her

siblings, her sister being shy and her brother, who she explained "was born with a hole in

his heart," needed attention and care, and did best by following orders. Stacey was the

opposite of both of her siblings. She was popular in school, outgoing, and was actually a

tomboy up until she realized that while she liked to play rough, she didn't have the

innards to be an aggressor. She loved to dance, like her mother, and this love led her to

the pom-pom team. She spent most of her time out of the house and with friends, but as

she reflects, she shares that:

> Nobody really knew what was at home and it wasn't as bad then. I think in
>
> reflection, while I know it to be bad now, as a kid coming up, I know I didn't want
>
> to be there.

As a student, Stacey worked hard. She touted about being in the top ten of her

class during high school and was confident that this would be her way out of her

neighborhood because the top ten receive a full scholarship. Unfortunately, she shares:

> I ended up at the last minute dropping to number 11, so I missed out on the top
>
> 10. So, became number 11 and I missed out. So, I got a scholarship, but
>
> they weren't renewable.

She describes her educational journey as long and hard, and that for her, it seemed

like it took longer to accomplish goals than most. Instead, a trip to Detroit to learn about

the military ended up in the completion of the entrance test and a commitment to enlist. While it was an ill-informed decision, Stacey says it saved her life.

> My senior year, we were in the gym, we had [a] career day and I knew I wanted to be a teacher, we happened to go somewhere and then a army recruiter called us over and said, "I just want you to come back." Well, I go and we did, my friends and I, we listened and we all took the test. I mean, he talked to us into, "Just take the test, you never know, just see what..." We took the test, well, he came to the house, talked to my mother, she said, "We're just going to go down to Detroit, she's going to take the test."

This unplanned acceptance into the military, however, she saw as a divine intervention. Without the military, she felt that she could not have moved her life out of poverty, and so, God allowed her to encounter a recruiter who convinced her mother that the military was the best next step for her life.

> So, in my mind, I told myself, "Okay, you know what, they said they're going to pay my college every year, they said that they're going to do this." I let that become the fuel that said, "Okay, you know what, even though you can't, you're going to have to take the summers off and you can't go to school in the summer because you have to go do your active duty." It became the answer to me getting out of Saginaw to go do something that prevented me from being a statistic, or confirming what was said about children who are at risk or grow up in single parent households and all that.

Her decision to add to the equation of her life, a commitment to the military, at the expense of a traditional four-year college experience, was just one of the major choices she made because she knew that she simply had to "do it on her own." There were no academic or sports scholarships, and certainly, no family contributions that would assist her, financially, with securing her degree.

> By the grace of God, everything going to college was all me. I paid for my own first car, paid my own tuition, I did everything. There is two things that I can recall that somebody helped me within my family and it's not that they wouldn't I just never asked, you know what I mean? I probably could have but that just wasn't me. I was going to figure out a way how to do it.

So she did it. She went to school, and served her time in the military. After completing her years in service, she worked at a hair salon as she looked for jobs in education. She had two offers for teaching positions, one at the school where her husband worked, and one at the high school where she graduated.

The classroom was a place of destiny and comfort for Stacey. She taught her students with love and care. Building relationships was her primary focus, so rules like no teasing and putting others down, respect others as yourself and listen to everyone's perspectives were law. Another identifying characteristic was her commitment to create a sense of community in her classroom where the students' knowledge and lived experiences were valued.

> To me, our students need to know we're human. I am not perfect. You know what I mean? They need to know that. They need to know that I make mistakes just

like them. You know what I mean? That I can do this math problem and get it wrong, and Johnny over there, if Johnny see that I did something wrong, then I expect him to tell me and make sure that nobody else in the class is doing it my way, because I did it wrong.

There will be some teachers who will get offended if a student corrects them. See, I think if you have relationships, Johnny knows that it's a safe place to tell me to make the correction. I don't feel intimidated because Johnny, because I made a mistake and Johnny caught it, you know what I mean? So if you build relationships and you have a culture in your classroom, you can reach the whole child because now that child is coming to you to tell you, 'Ms. Abrams, I didn't have anywhere to go sleep last night.' 'So, okay. So, Mikayla, do I have your permission to go speak with the counselor so that we can see if we can get you some help?' Mikayla has to know that it's a safe place for her to come tell me that, so that I can get her what she needs. You know what I mean? I don't know that all of our students are like that.

So, as a teacher, I feel like that's something that I did very well with my students. I built relationships with them. Not relationships that cross the line, but relationships that let them know that, "Hey, I got you. I got you. When you come in here, there's a certain level. I don't expect you to stay here. We're going to rise for this and I will do my best to get you there."

When it came to instruction, Stacey was comfortable with challenging students and walking them through the process of breaking through to achieve their goals. As a

math teacher, she understood that her content was rigorous, but with her militaristic and motherly attributes, she lovingly led her students to achieving success.

In addition to supporting her students with their challenges, she was also committed to learning and struggling through that growth process.

> Knowing that there's going to be some struggle along the way in some areas. Even I, if there was something somebody asked me and I didn't know the answer, I'd say, hold on, let me go next door and ask Mr. Roseo. He was my mentor teacher right next door. I go next door and said, "Mr. Roseo," you know what I mean? I asked him, he'd tell me and I'd come [back to my class] and say, "This is what I just learned," because I was a new teacher too. I didn't have all the answers. They needed to see that I was okay with not having the answer. If I don't have the answer, I know how to go get it. You know what I mean? So I think that's how I was able to have good classroom management and build culture in my classroom.

Her ascent to leadership brought out her military training and implementing systems and structures became her primary focus. She took up curriculum and instruction and developed a reputation in the district for increasing the school's academic achievement. While strengthening the instructional focus, she consistently found herself dealing with personnel issues from the male staff in the building. She recognized that she would need to help her staff adjust to her as a building leader when for years she was their colleague as a teacher. So, she continued to advocate for a robust curriculum and special programming while building relationships with her staff, and things were looking up for her as the building leader.

To her dismay, this success caused her leadership to see her as an asset to support a new principal, and after only one year and some months as the principal, she was moved back to the role of assistant principal. This was a pivotal moment in her career. She attributes her move to "politics," which she admits that she never did well, along with the preference to support the advancement of the Black male emerging leaders over the woman leaders. Her story highlights what she says often happens when women are asked to play the supporting role to support the advancement of men, and in this scenario, Black men.

In her present role, she supervises special programs. This role allows her to ensure that schools have funding to provide the holistic support students need. Although the duties of her position previously resided in one department, and her work-load is inhumane, when she speaks of what she does, the sun comes out again. The grit of the job is taxing but the reward appears to be fulfilling. She sees her job as her call and life's mission, and yet when asked about her greatest accomplishment she stutters. Potential, interrupted, leaves her thoughtless in these moments. With only one year and a few months as a principal, and the years following as an assistant principal, her mind slowly meanders to the work that she is doing now on the district level. A district policy manual is the response. I ask her why she doesn't list her accomplishment as the first Black woman principal at the high school, to which she replies, "Oh yes, I didn't think of that." There are no artifacts, not articles, no monuments of victory. Only the sound of shuttling feet skipping off to the next thing.

Keisha

Demure, tempered, and steady is Keisha's disposition. She was happy to help and committed to the process. She came to every "kitchen table talk" just after her Saturday hair appointment. This was clearly her sacred space, her time for self-care, and she protected it. I was fortunate to be her next activity after each beauty salon appointment, and sometimes the talk in the shop carried over into our conversation. Her stylist is a grandmother, and on this particular day, another woman in the salon was a mom of younger children. They talked about the madness of virtual learning, and how much it takes to get students set up to do virtual learning. Although she is straightforward, and a clear communicator, she cares deeply about children and families, and seeks out ways to better support students and families, even at the expense of her own selah moment. She says:

> It's important for me to hear perspective from somebody who's not in education. So from the parent of the grandparent sitting there saying, "What in the world is going on?" So I need to know that they don't understand what in the world is going on. And I say this all the time in education, we throw around acronyms and we're always in the MTSS process this, and we throw around a lot of acronyms, the PBIS, parents don't know what that is. So those are the times that you inform people in these informal talks, it just is.

This commitment to supporting students and families is evident in how she has adapted to virtual learning as a school administrator. Instead of assembling a team and disseminating responsibilities to support students without technology, she provides

technical support within her building, getting students set up to complete their classes online who do not have internet at home.

I see that other districts are starting to trickle back in and making their announcement to come in because this is really hard, especially for your K-2 population. Those little kids, because we have a learning lab for the families with no internet, and so I have eight kids who've been coming and I have one sixth grader, everybody else is second grade and below. And I say, "Okay, get your Chrome Books out and log on. Do you know your password?" "Yeah. Yeah." Then I go look at the screen, they've typed in god only knows what. "That's not your password, your password is right here. You see that?" "Huh? What? It won't come on Ms. Davis." So I'm now in charge of the Chrome Books and putting in passwords, I know those kids passwords by heart now myself because I've put them in so much.

I was perplexed by her stoic presentation, when her leadership practice was one of service, care, and compassion. Then I began to reflect on her childhood stories and how she came to education, and I understood, better, how she came to be one who had very little to say unless warranted, was suspicious of most, and not very easily swayed by emotion. She was the youngest child in a family of four girls, and proudly proclaims that she benefited greatly from being the baby, until she learned that she was going to have a younger brother. This news rocked her four-year-old world, because even at such a young age, she knew that the privileges she enjoyed because she was the baby of the family would change, drastically.

He stole my thunder when I was four, okay…Because from then I was fighting

for attention, trying to get somebody to notice me. I'm the fourth girl down, and

you know, ahead of a little brother who's the only boy. So yeah, it changed my

whole status as, "Oh, this is the baby of the family, this is the baby girl." So since

then I've been fighting for attention and space at the table to be heard.

After this anecdote, at the beginning of our first talk, there was no other mention

of her brother. Her sisters are all outspoken and natural born leaders. So, not only was she

no longer the baby, but the attention she received from her family now had to be shared

with these powerful women who were strong, confident and unapologetic in their stance,

even in their youth. She talked about how this shift in position within her family resulted

in a never-ending pursuit for her voice to be heard.

Nevertheless, she found success in school. Her fifth grade teacher was most

impactful because she always told her that she was smart, and since her teacher thought

so, and said it consistently, it must've been true! So, she worked to make good on the

affirmations given to her by her teacher and excelled in her classes.

Fifth grade, Mrs. Turner, because she always called me the smartest girl in class.

And it's funny, and I remember distinctly in second grade when I got moved to

the highest reading group because I was in the middle group for first grade

because we didn't read in kindergarten, second grade I got moved to the highest

reading group so a new set of friends, new time to go to reading. And so that was

a big deal to me...So I always aspired to be the smart one, which is how I became

an administrator I'm sure, because I seemed more intelligent than everybody, I'm not saying I was.

Her plan was to "go to college and get a degree" because she needed a bachelor's degree to achieve her dream of becoming a retail manager. So, she went to college and graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and history. While in college, she worked at the local drugstore, and upon graduation, she was swiftly promoted to manager. She loved her position as manager, taking the time to get to know regular customers, and building relationships with her employees, but after eight years, the retail hours and the travel required became too strenuous for her lifestyle as a mother of young children. So, she decided to become a substitute teacher, at 35 years old, and she says "that's when I fell in love with education." She subbed for four years, earned her certificate in two semesters, and taught in the classroom for three-and-a-half years before someone suggested that she become an administrator. Although she was not looking for an administrative position, she shared that she clearly demonstrated the organizational and communication skills that would allow her to be successful in the position, and despite comments from colleagues, one white male teacher, in particular, that she was only being tapped because she was a Black woman, and the optics was optimal for the district, she asserts that she was legitimately qualified for the position. This was not the only time when she experienced "backlash" from a promotion. She went on to be a Title 1 Coordinator for two years, and then became a principal in the Flint Public School District, without becoming an assistant principal. Such an advancement was not well received by her white male counterparts.

So as a Black woman and having only been an administrator for two years, there's was some real outrage from some of the older men principals who have been assistant principals for ten years, it was somewhat of a backlash at that time because, "She just got here, she doesn't even know," and all that. But I was promoted based on, from my opinion, what I did and what I could bring to the table.

Keisha served as principal of the premier high school in Flint Michigan for ___ years. As the district changed and superintendents changed, positions changed, and Keisha found herself in Saginaw, Michigan as the principal of Saginaw High. After a few years at the high school, she began to feel that she was at the end of her career, and started preparing for her retirement, when the Superintendent asked her to move to the elementary school where the demands for leadership were fewer due to the size of the student population, fewer afterschool activities, and a very involved parent community. She accepted the offer and became an elementary school principal after years of working in secondary, and that is where she is currently.

After listening to her stories about how she transitioned from retail to the classroom, to administration in three different schools, I go back to my first impression of her: tempered, demure and steady, and it all makes sense. She's had to face great opposition. She was considered incapable, and presented with many challenges because she was a woman, and a Black woman. Yet, she has become a pillar in the community, in Flint and in Saginaw as one of the first Black woman school leaders. She rehearsed her preparedness and qualifications to do the job in a way that felt like it had been ingrained within the fabric of her being. I imagined her telling herself these phrases in affirmations

on the way to work. You can see the impact of affirmation in her life presently, as much as it was in her formative years when her teachers told her she was smart.

Her experience being encouraged as a student had a significant role in her strategy as a teacher and administrator. She looks for ways to motivate and affirm students, knowing that this can reroute a student who is on the wrong path, or prevent them from the sometimes inevitable decline that students face.

> So when I have a student who's doing well, and I try to praise all my students, but if I have a kid who is clearly a head and shoulders above, I do mention that to them. "You're doing great." You know, because I try to instill that so they will have some pride as they get older. I know kids fall off in middle school, I know kids fall off in high school, but if they know that they are at a certain level and they want to maintain that then they're going to try a little harder, because I did.

When I asked Keisha about her identity, she named herself a woman, first, then Black. Since she's worked primarily in schools where the students were Black, and the leadership was Black, she hasn't had much experience in predominantly white spaces. Additionally, she feels like much of the resistance she gets is because she is a woman, more than because she is Black. In addition to snide comments, she often has highly charged exchanges with her Black male colleagues.

Although her race is not the primary identity marker, she notes that it is unfortunate that she is the only Black principal in her current school district that serves a majority Black population. Additionally, she adamantly advocates for the holistic supports of her children, and the impossibility of providing a quality education when the

"at-risk" and "low-achievement" "priority schools" qualifiers are leading the conversation about what needs should be met for the students. The challenge of leading a school that is among the lowest 5% of students is an insurmountable task, and she says is "exhausting."

> And I want to say before schools were ranked, and that was in 2009, we just went through and did our jobs. Some schools were rougher than others, but you had your bright spots in every school, you had your top ten in the class. And those were people who were expected to go off to college and to do well and were supported by the schools and were supported be lots of scholarships and things. But once they started ranking schools, then it became, "Well you're the top ten but you go to Saginaw high so that doesn't really mean anything." And so it just stigmatized the work that we do in education and it's an uphill battle and that's what I felt like since they started ranking schools it's just been an uphill battle.

She talks about the stigma that a district like hers faces when there is a high population of low income and a low population of high academic achievement, and the impossibility of success when test scores determine success. What keeps her grounded is the little battles she wins, one family at a time. But, after 11 years in education, the same conversation persists, with the same problems. She often speaks about going back to retail, because that was her first love. It is apparent that there is more about the work that is burdensome than blissful, but even when speaking about retirement, after a brief pause, she says, "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter 5

Discussion of Findings

Each of the participants shared stories about their childhood experiences, teaching career, leadership development, and their current philosophies on leadership, teaching and learning. From these narratives, I found consistent threads of their leadership principles, practices and perspectives that are connected to the conceptualization of Critical Visionary Pragmatism as an emerging way of understanding how Black women lead in schools. This chapter will draw out key components of Visionary Pragmatism, Engaged Pedagogy and Critical Race Feminism to present Critical Visionary Pragmatism as a theoretical framework to understand leadership from the experiences of Black women as well as provide a frame for Black woman school leaders who wish to lead their schools from a critical stance.

I approached this study convinced that each portrait would reveal a deep connection between participants and their dual identities as Black and woman, and I thought that this connection would be evident in how they described their racial and gender identities, their leadership practices and how they interacted with teachers, students and families. I was looking for critical leadership: leadership that was expressly focused on naming the oppressive structures within schools and finding ways to move these structures and/or their entire school toward liberation. Given that each of these principles were Black women, leading schools populated by Black children, in impoverished communities, I thought that liberatory education would be the goal for these women, and that producing students who were thinkers, giving them the tools to

cultivate a life without limits, helping them to obtain knowledge about themselves and their cultural identities, and instilling agency—a voice and the ability to advocate for themselves—would be their ultimate measure of success.

What I found was that the participants shared a common goal for students to matriculate successfully, but their efforts were not deeply rooted in critical analysis of the system of schools. The significant need for students to be academically prepared to survive and thrive outside of school was the actual focus. They reported the many scars associated with their sojourn from childhood to this juncture in their career. Trauma, discrimination from teachers and counselors, stereotypes and lost opportunities litter their narrative with deep wounds which shape their decision making, their advocacy, and their leadership practice. Their framework was powered by these experiences, which formed their conviction about what it takes for Black children to be successful in school and in life within the current system. Supporting students with attaining the tools to travel the path to success was their personal mission and they worked within the framework of the school system to make it happen. While their approach is aimed at navigating the system as is, it reveals their underlying assumption that without intervening assistance, students in their school population are not equipped to successfully navigate the system. This assumption when further explored, highlights the flawed system that is skewed in access and opportunity for marginalized populations, despite the fact that this flaw was not named in their motivations for their practice.

The aforementioned assumption is one of the necessary foundational components for effective critical work, and the data explores how each of the participants dance in the tensions of the system, and how they create paths for success for their students, staff, and

even themselves. Their positionality also deeply reflects the status quo, which dictates how schools create pathways of success for Black students. Whiteness reduces intelligence and success to a singular way of being and knowing, which is measured by merit, exceptionalism, and hard work (Leonardo, 2002). The Black woman leaders in this study align their practice with this pathway in order to support students with successfully matriculating through schools, and to attain success in their own careers. Although standardized testing, class ranking, and college acceptance are the offspring of systemic oppression, seeking to uphold whiteness as a way of being and as a means for attaining success, each of the participants matriculated successfully through the system, and are now in a position to help their students do the same. Herein lies the prevailing tension: an immediate antidote for poverty and opportunity is education, but the educational system is flawed, oppressive, and was never created for the liberation of the oppressed (Allen, 2010; Freire, 2000).

Black feminist theory examines the struggle of liberation from these problematic systems, and prescribes strategies to address the struggle, but does not offer a picture of what the end of the struggle will be (Collins, 1994). Scholars have taken up this issue to examine practices that disrupt oppressive forms within systems, both conceptually and empirically, but this work is not always applicable within the contexts of schools. Additional research is needed to examine how practitioners take up these issues in the field. A visionary pragmatist works within the tensions of the methods prescribed by the academy, and the structures within school systems, to pursue a leadership practice that meets the needs of students right where they are (Alston & McClellan, 2011). Therefore,

I extracted the following themes from the conversations with each of the participants, that represent how they go about leading their schools:

1. Leading Hands: Visionary Pragmatism (Collins, 1999) focuses specifically on the leadership practices that move schools to the ultimate goal of preparing students for success in the world, while also addressing pressing matters, pragmatically, along the way.

2. Holding Hands: Engaged Pedagogy (hooks, 1989) highlights how each of the women embody elements of this pedagogical approach in their leadership practice, and seeks to extend the teaching approach to application within the leadership context.

3. Juggling Hands: Critical Race Feminism (Berry, 2010), highlights how the women use their multiple consciousness as an informing tool for effective leadership practice.

Their leadership principles, practices, and perspectives present a comprehensive approach towards leadership that is centered around creating an environment that facilitates the successful matriculation of students, even within a problematic system.

Leading Hands: Daily Decisions with the Future in Mind

The participants' reflections during the kitchen table talks, highlight a keen insight about what needs to happen in order for students to be successful in 2020, during COVID-19, a global pandemic, while simultaneously, thinking "future-forward" and making strides to not only imagine a more equitable future for themselves and for

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students, but progressively working towards change as they develop the infrastructure of their school. Their leadership approach is embodied within the framework of Visionary Pragmatism, where leaders focus on the future vision while making pragmatic choices pertaining to present needs along the way (Collins, 1994). Each participant tended to the current needs of the school by way of building relationships with teachers and families, preparing future leaders, leveraging resources, and operating from a place of integrity that is often guided by faith as a form of strategic resistance, moving them towards the larger goal or purpose of seeing their students as thriving adults later in life. This practice is centered around intentional relationship building, attracting and retaining good teachers, cultivating strong leaders, educating the community, and identifying and utilizing resources in order to provide access to programmatic supports and services for their students.

Prepared Leaders

A critical component of leading pragmatically with vision is the presence of prepared leaders. The ability to make decisions about which battles to fight, how to fight them, and when to fight them, is imperative for Black women in leadership. Such preparation is accompanied by an assuredness that one is capable to lead, and for the participants in this study, is a combination of educational training, self-confidence and experience. Women leaders are more educationally prepared for their leadership positions than men, and Keisha, Stacey and Kay come to the job decorated with degrees (Watson & Normore, 2016). When asked about their experience coming to the leadership position, the participants talked about their own level of preparation, as well as their commitment to participate in the preparation of future leaders. Each of them possessed

bachelor's and master's Degrees, which are the traditional administration requirements. However, Stacy earned a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership, and Kay is a Ph.D. student, focusing on curriculum and instruction. At various times throughout the conversations, the participants shared statements that point to their self-confidence. Keisha, when speaking about being selected to fill an administrator position said, while shrugging her shoulders "I got the position because I have the skills" to affirm that her promotion was warranted, simply because she was more than capable of doing the job. Kay says, "I was full of myself, that was good" when speaking about her confidence in school as a student. Stacey shares about her personality in comparison to her siblings, "I was the bossy one" describing why becoming a teacher and administrator simply made sense to her. This self-confidence and assuredness of their capabilities and capacity to lead is seen in their decisive behaviors around what was best for children.

It was also evident that they rehearsed their belief in their own preparedness during times when their leadership is questioned because of their race or gender. Each of the participants speak about their race and or gender as a factor impacting how others interpret their preparedness for the leadership position. Keisha shares, "...And when I first became a principal in Flint, I hadn't done my time as AP. There are people who have been assistant principals in Flint for 15 years, had not been promoted to principal...and there were people who were hotter than July." Working in an environment where your level of preparedness is often equated to experience on the job, coupled with gender and race discrimination, creates the need for self-confidence, and reassurance, in order to effectively perform in excellence.

Preparing Leaders

In addition to a positive self-perception, Keisha also demonstrated an undertone of the desire to build the capacity of those serving underneath her, and develop future leaders. Building leadership capacity is among the many attributes of leadership that women bring to the table (Irby and Brown, 2004). When speaking about her teacher coordinators Keisha said that she consults with them regularly to say, "this is where I see you going and this is what will get you there." She was the only leader who explicitly stated that she is training her replacements. She is the more senior participant in her experience, and spoke often of retirement, so her plan to train replacement leaders compliments her posture as a visionary, because she is looking to make preparations for the future of the school and the advancement of the field.

Hiring Practices

In similar ways, the participants speak of the necessity to hire and retain good teachers as a means of leading a school that supports the successful matriculation of students. Kay talks about how her hiring practices focus on intentionally finding teachers who genuinely care about children. She says this creates within her teaching staff a spirit of determination, collaboration and dedication that goes beyond classroom instruction.

> There's this difference between who's applying to work here and then the students that come here. There's this difference in...in race, there's a difference in geography and you might be from the Thumb originally, or up north, you came to Saginaw Valley for college, and now you're trying to find a job and I have to

figure out do you really know our kids? Do you even care about our kids? If you

do, why do you care about our kids?

I've definitely made mistakes in hiring people who could teach a great

lesson. They have the content knowledge, and do not have the heart or what I

always say, you have to have this unyielding desire for our students to be

successful. If you don't have that strong desire, this is not the place because you

can't let a circumstance or whatever all these other things frustrate you to the

point where you just give up or like, "That's on them." No, that's not this place.

You have to want their success more than they want their success. So that's kind

of what I'm gauging when I'm interviewing.

Kay hints at some of the unaddressed challenges that occur when the teaching

population does not share the same demographics of the student population. Although she

paused before mentioning, she states race as well as geographic dissimilarity as some of

the categories that can cause a divide between teachers and students in her school

(Gershenson et.al, 2018). She finds that intentional hiring, with a focus on understanding

the candidate's ability to convey a strong sense of purpose in the field allows her to invite

teachers who sincerely care about the children and are willing to extend themselves for

the whole child. Kay's position suggests that intentional hiring is a significant factor in

pragmatically working towards a larger vision of a school that supports students with

successfully navigating the educational system

Maximizing Access to Resources

The participants each shared an intentional strategy that they implement in order to use these positions of authority to take advantage of the resources for their schools or to meet their needs (Normore & Jean Marie, 2007). I joined Keisha and Stacey in a meeting with the District Turnaround Network. From this meeting, Keisha brought new information back to her school and implemented the new policies right away so that she could take advantage of any funding opportunities or other resources. She shared that she was invited to the meeting because principals were asked to provide feedback on how turnaround initiatives will impact schools, and she did provide input at times, but she found the greatest value in being at the table and learning about the initiatives as they were presented and decided upon so that she could bring them to her school.

Stacey's position places her at the helm of many of the resources Keisha speaks about. As the director of grants and programming, she has the opportunity to oversee the allocation of Title I and Title II funds. In this role, she speaks about how she is privileged to bring resources to the underserved, or what she calls "at-risk" students who were just like her. She uses her position to monitor for proper implementation of programs and utilization of funds, as well as to coach principles on how to effectively evaluate teachers and their programming. This supervisory role aligns with her personal bend as a compliance-oriented person. She follows policies to the letter, and she feels this is a strength, which allowed her to be placed in such a position.

When analyzing this scenario critically, her disposition appeared to be the opposite of critical, but rather complicit, displaying little awareness of the negative

impact that sustaining these structures can have on marginalized youth. However, after interrogating the notion of how persons within a system can both retain their employment and challenge the system, it became clear that there must be some who within the confines of the system, advocate for those who are in need. Everyone in the system may not be able to challenge it, particularly those who are the direct handlers, and distributors of resources. That is the truth that is not often discussed in critical research. Stacey's role and how she navigates that role is important in order for Keisha to have the resources she needs to support her children and families. Each person plays a part in the larger picture.

Kay intentionally uses her grant funding to add positions that work directly towards the needs of her students. As she identifies needs, she frames a rationale for a new position that will directly address an identified need in her school.

> I've been fortunate too because over time we've been able to add other grant funded positions that could be more focused on the whole child and not just the academic piece. But they didn't all come together, it was just like, this year, you have a social worker. All right, next year, you have a social worker, and you have a behavior support. The following year, you know what? You got a family student liaison. So you don't know how the money rolls, right? Then as it starts flowing, then we can start talking about what's missing. What else do our kids need? How do we create a position? How do we fund this position? What do we have to call it? What are they really going to do? Because sometimes I'm calling it one thing, but that's not the job you're doing.

Visionary Pragmatism as a Leadership Principle

With their leading hands, I see women who have come to this work, for various reasons, motivated by their purpose, led by their spirit, and informed by their preparation to "get these kids ready for the real world," as Keisha says. That is their vision. That is what guides them, and what helps them to overcome obstacles along the way. They attend to the needs of their students, and their teachers by cultivating leaders and managing resources (Willet, 2002). While they know that they are Black women, they do not ascribe to identity politics, but rather they use their knowledge of the lived Black woman experience, as a tool to relate to their students, and to find ways to creatively meet their needs (Collins, 1998). They build relationships and foster connectedness within their school community, and center the communal need of the students, staff and parents within their community (Willett, 2002). Their leadership crossed boundaries because each of them was the first Black woman principal of their school. However, their leadership was not focused on crossing boundaries, it was focused on taking daily steps, toward a larger goal for the lives of their students. Although Collins' (1998) ideal of Visionary Pragmatism, when enacted by Black women, is a practice of justice, these principals were not focused expressly on social justice in their leadership. However, they were very concerned about making sure their schools were equitable, offering opportunities to their students, and treating students and staff fairly. While the justice focus was not expressly evident, at the center of Visionary Pragmatism is an ethics of care, and that was certainly present in the leadership principles of each of the participants (Willett, 2002). While their leadership is significant and impactful, the experiences and

practices of the participants inspire the question of what is necessary in order for their

practice to move into the critical, social justice-oriented space.

Holding Hands: Teaching Practices that Inform Leadership Decisions

Black woman educational leaders, working in the K-12 setting are not always at

liberty to lead a school in the ways that they imagine. Often, school districts set heavy

parameters around key areas of governance that dictate school operations. One of those

areas is curriculum and instruction. Navigating these parameters requires a particular

savvy and knowledge of the system, in order to preserve a commitment to meet the needs

of their specific population, which in the case of the participants is marginalized

populations, more specifically, Black and brown students living in communities that are

classified as low income.

In their various settings, the leadership practices of the participants embody

engaged pedagogy, placing a focus on curriculum that supports academic achievement,

de-centering the dominant voices, and centering relationships within the instruction

(hooks, 1989, Berry, 2010). These leaders dedicate themselves to scrutinizing what is

happening in the classroom, how instruction is impacting the students, what opportunities

are being made available to students, and finally, by placing value on the voices of the

students and experiences of the teachers while focusing on instruction.

Testing Tensions

Keisha often made reference to the need to pay close attention to curriculum and

instruction with a particular focus on how instruction impacts performance on test scores.

She explained that curricular changes often reflected standards-based instruction, aimed at improving student performance on standardized testing, which would impact the overall success of the school. She also argued that veteran teachers and school leaders should be open to the curricular changes introduced by the district.

> And when you look, you have to look at what...That's one of the things we did, even from being in Flint, what are we being tested on? You know you don't want to teach to a test, but you also can't teach something that's being completely different than what's being tested in the spring, because you will always have bad outcomes. Recognizing that, making that change. That's been difficult for teachers. The curriculums that we are using now are focusing on...They're linked to the standards, or they're aligned to the standards that we're going to be tested on if we test again next year. But also it's a different way of teaching for the teachers. It's a different kind of curriculum. And that's what some teachers are struggling with, that change. Even though they understand that the other one wasn't effective in teaching what they need to know for the test. For our teachers that are up there in their 60s or late 50s, 60s, that's how they came up teaching. They taught what they wanted to teach. Change is hard for a lot of people, but it is something that is absolutely necessary. And as a leader, I have to embrace change. And then you get criticized by the people who don't want to change because you won't change, because you won't align yourself with them. When I say to them, "Yes, you must use this new curriculum, you have to. You have to, because this is what we're doing," then I'm not a supportive principal. But I'm supporting the change that needs to take place for better student outcomes, I hope. I think. Okay."

Speaking adamantly about her teachers utilizing the standards-based curriculum, Keisha made a direct connection between success on the standardized test and academic achievement. In schools servicing marginalized populations, systemic inequities are manifested in the dismal reality that that performance on the standardized test often stands as the gateway between students and opportunities, leading to the perpetuation of vicious cycles. Students who do not meet the prescribed measures of success are relegated to opportunities that will lead to pathways that will not afford the resources for a sustainable life post-graduation. Keisha, knowing about these cycles, makes the pragmatic choice to focus her efforts on preparing students for the "better life."

In addition to student outcomes post-graduation, the success of a school, in Michigan, is very much dependent on student performance on standardized tests. In Keisha's eyes, success for a student is determined by their ability to earn proficient scores. While she supports success on standardized tests, she acknowledges the deficiencies of the standards-based curriculum as it relates to meeting the children where they are. She says that while the current curricula in her school is far from everyone's favorite, complaining to the superintendent is not going to accomplish anything, so she suggests that teachers supplement the curriculum. There is a clear tension between the presence and value of standardized testing, standards-based curriculum and the legitimacy of standardized testing. When speaking about the gravity of standardized testing on her success as a leader, and the success of the school, she shares,

> When you give them the standardized test, it doesn't look like they know what you know they know. But you're constantly trying to get from the bottom, so that's been ten years of a journey for me and that's extremely hard work as an

educator and you feel beat up upon. And you go to all these conferences, you're

with schools who are like you and as educators we're not the bottom 5% of

educators, so why is our school considered to be the bottom 5% based on test

scores?

Keisha places a high priority on curriculum that is aligned to standards for the

purposes of preparing students for standardized testing because the success of the school

is determined solely by student performance. This elevated focus on testing is central in

her leadership priorities. It defines for her what success in school looks like. In a city

such as Saginaw, where the sustainable opportunities are available to those who have

college degrees (Saginaw Demographics, 2017), she is working to try to prepare students

to be accepted in college. The curriculum, for her, is necessary to support students on

their journey towards college and a career post-graduation. While she promotes the

standardized test, she is not fully convinced that the test displays the best of what children

are capable of doing. So her work in the area of curriculum and instruction is not a heart

work that is focused on the importance of alignment, but rather a work that is focused on

student success.

Building Relationships as Humanizing Practice

Relationship building is among the more frequent leadership practices

implemented by women (Irby & Brown, 2004). In addition to curriculum and instruction,

the participants also focused on the importance of showing their humanity to the students,

and recognizing the humanity of their students. Stacey, in particular, shared that her time

as a teacher was greatly characterized by her commitment to show, to her students, her

humanity as a teacher. Even in the beginning stages of her career, she talked about how she openly relied on the guidance of the teacher next door. Kay debunks the notion that school leaders lead with their titles at the forefront and not their humanity. Her determination to build relationships with students is engaged pedagogy at work.

Keisha knows that her parents are struggling to support their children with virtual learning, so rather than penalizing them for not coming to their children's aid as she believes they should, she goes to great lengths to provide opportunities for the students when their teacher would not. She shares that if she only focuses on her tasks and responsibilities without taking the time to build relationships with her students and parents, she'll never know what they really need. Instead, Keisha sees her leadership role as an opportunity to serve more families in whatever capacity necessary. Her service is not the point of emphasis here, but instead it is her commitment to attend to her students' and families' needs, as human beings, in precarious situations in ways that most who are school leaders would not. Her disposition, then, as a leader, is not from an elevated position, reaching down "like" a servant, but is that of a peer, a fellow human being with access to resources, reaching out to hear and respond to the needs of her school community. In response to supporting families with technology, Keisha makes the distinction between how she supports her families and how some of her white male colleagues get involved:

> When I'm talking to some of my colleagues and some of who are white males and they're like, "I don't know what's going on. I don't know why they changed that program. I told them call IT." IT is not answering parents, they are not. I need to get my kids on, okay?

She shares adamantly that contacting the appropriate parties for IT questions will present a costly systemic barrier. So, she bypasses the systemic process and helps families herself. This commitment is representative of humanist practices, as theorized by Paulo Freire (2000), and his denouncement of oppressive educational structures which deny the oppressed the right to reclaim their rights as human beings. The COVID-19 environment highlighted the inherent struggle with the ways that systemic oppression prevents access to basic human needs for education, and Keisha is committed to dismantling this in her leadership practices by building relationships with her families. While the process she implemented eliminates a potential barrier, it will not be sustained if she leaves her position and her predecessor does not pick up the mantle. Principles who make transformational changes embed structures such as this one into school and district policy so that they are routine and not relegated to the practice of the person holding the position.

Celebration

One of the practices that rose to be integral in the leadership of each of the participants was this idea of celebrating students. Each of the participants shared that their own personal experiences in school, and the interactions with those who were fundamental in their development as a scholar and leader contributed to their journey, was greatly characterized by celebration. Principals who intentionally strive for the academic success of students incorporate celebration in their leadership practices as a tool to motivate students and teachers (Miller & Martin, 2015). Stacey shared that at various times in her childhood, she was told she was smart, and that she would be successful. She talks about how this shapes her perception of herself. Keisha and Kay also share stories

about how teachers affirm their intelligence which then boosted their confidence. As a result of these experiences, Kay and Keisha share that they look for opportunities to celebrate their students, Keisha within relationships, and Kay within ceremonies and programs in her school.

Keisha explains that celebrations are about seeing the pride children have in themselves, their work and their experiences, which helps parents appreciate what the school is doing. She highlights a particular scenario, when a student who came to her school at the beginning of the year, was significantly below grade level and could not recognize letters or count, and how she and her staff celebrated his accomplishment.

Yesterday [he] wrote his numbers from one through nine independently. We were celebrating him. I was like, wow, look at you. I'm so proud of you. We gave him ... We make popcorn on Friday even though the kids aren't there for popcorn Friday, he got a bag of popcorn at the end of the day.

This celebration, then, becomes a part of the fabric of their leadership practice. Kay, takes both a personal and a school-wide approach to celebrating success. She writes personalized notes to staff members, gives them a "shout-out" in a staff meeting, or sends an email to the entire staff to say, "Look what (staff person)" did! Such intentionality to celebrate the success and efforts of staff is a narrative that counters the ever-popular angry black woman personae that is often associated with Black women leaders (Watson & Normore, 2016). In addition to celebrating staff, Kay searches for opportunities to host events that showcase the academic achievements of students, such as math competitions

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or spelling bees. She says that she looks for any way to get parents out to the school to see their students compete and to celebrate their participation.

Social Justice-Oriented Teaching and Leadership

An emerging practice, shared by Kay, points to an intentional focus on issues of social justice within the teaching practice. This practice is seen implemented by teachers in isolation, and sometimes by schools, but is less supported by institutions, and is likely not implemented with a systematic structure (Gorski & Parekh, 2020, Dover, 2009). This includes text selections, thematic concepts, discussion of current events, and departure from curricular recommendations. Kay's coursework as a first-year Ph.D. student includes a phenomenological study using a focus group and interviews with teachers on their decision to include or exclude issues of social justice within their instruction. Her new status as a Ph.D. student, she says, has given her a newfound inspiration to continue in this work. She feels that being able to advocate for incorporating issues of social justice within her building will allow her to make the kind of systemic change that brings sweeping impact. Kay can identify teachers who are courageous enough to teach issues of social justice, but she cannot point to any leaders who take up this frame in their leadership stance. She sees herself as potentially being one of the first.

Creating a Reciprocal Learning Environment as a Teacher and a Leader

In the classroom, Stacey encourages her students to view her as a learner, working alongside them in the learning process, representative of the practices within the frame of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1989). She modeled the practice of asking for help, and allowed space for the students to demonstrate their expertise on the subject matter. In

similar ways she works with her colleagues to create spaces for them to learn, and to demonstrate their expertise in their leadership. It is her ultimate goal that the leaders will be proficient in their processes, particularly in data analysis, and this was a strength of hers as a school leader. Stacey pulls on her disposition as a teacher who learns with her students to create an environment in her school and in her district-level department, where she teaches new content, but also allows for others who are experts to share in the opportunities to teach.

Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities

Stacey, a mother of a child who is diagnosed with autism, speaks a great deal about the needs of diverse learners. Within her leadership practices, she places a great emphasis on programming that includes students with special needs and students who are from marginalized populations. She says, "If you surround them with opportunities, they will not be hindered by disabilities." Even in her current role, she is involved with securing and distributing grant funds for Title 1 programming. Much of this work is aimed at supporting programs which support the needs of those students who are not meeting the performance standards. Historically, these groups have been heavily populated by students with disabilities. School leaders often take up programming as a pathway to providing access for underrepresented students (Miller & Martin, 2014), however Stacey is motivated by her own personal experience, as she approaches this work (Dillard, 1995).

Engaged Pedagogy as a Leadership Practice

In their own ways, they care for their staff and students, and their leadership is not absent of their connectedness to those they are leading. With each participant, we see how their own experiences, Keisha as a mother of two sons, Kay as a mother of three, and Stacey as a mother of three, one being an autistic child, we see their lives and their experiences come through in their practice, and we see them bring themselves and their humanity to their practice. Engaged pedagogy moves away from methods that enforce dominance by centering the voice of the students, focusing on reciprocal learning, allowing the students and teachers to have a shared learning experience, and act in ways that cares for the souls of the students (hooks, 1989). The primary focus is on how students learn and in this study, on the spirit of learning that is facilitated in the school environment, including personal confession to facilitate bonding and connectedness (hooks, 1989). Engaged pedagogy, a framework that is typically used to describe teaching and learning, resonates within this study because the motivations behind why teachers would employ engaged pedagogy within their practice are also the same motivations that the participants share when they discuss their leadership practice. Stacey describes an incident with her white woman co-teacher:

> When she wrote the test, they all, most of the kids failed. So we came to an
> agreement. She realized the kids would rise for me. I'm a product. I am one of
> them. I don't believe that you enable kids. I don't believe that you coddle them. If
> you have expectations up here, they will rise. If you keep on having a deficit
> mindset, we don't have enough money for this. We can't do that. They won't.

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They will give you exactly where you set the bar. You set the bar up here. They'll

rise.

This frame of mind shapes how she leads. She understood students' needs because

she was one of them, and so she shared herself with them, told them her story frequently,

and she says, that the reason she was able to reach her students was because she "built

relationships with kids." She shared that these teaching experiences inform her leadership

practice because:

Building culture is not about power…I am a teacher, I'm an educator at heart, at

my purest form I love to teach. I love to help people. I love to pull people up. I

love to give them the tools they need so that they can feel good about what they are

doing and continue to move forward.

I saw this same passion in each of the participants: the deep desire to empower

their students and staff, and to feel connected to them as principal, as a colleague and as a

human being.

Juggling Hands: Multiple Identities and Double Consciousness

The participants led with a deep conviction of how their identity as a Black

woman impacts how they are perceived and received in their work. Although they were

able to share their perspectives on how impactful it is to be a woman, and Black, and a

school leader, their practice did not correspond to the pride they expressed about their

racial and gender identities, which is affirmed by Critical Race Feminism (Evans

Winters, Esposito, 2007). Critical Race Feminism (CRF) also focuses on the lived

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experiences of women of color and makes clear that their experiences should be named in scholarship (Berry, 2010). In this study, I center the experiences of these women, and their perspectives on what it means to lead schools as a Black woman. As it related to their perceptions of themselves and their identities, Keisha said that because she has always taught in primarily Black populations, with Black leadership, her leading identity is woman. Kay spoke about how her families within the school community were proud that she was Black, but worried that because they were enamored by her racial identity, they were not critical enough of her leadership. Stacey had a racial awakening when she sat in class while getting her bachelor's degree, and realized that what she thought was a preparatory education still left her with significant gaps in knowledge. They each share that being Black, and woman, and principal is unique and significant, and allows them to have a special way of knowing what is good for their Black, underprivileged, school populations (Berry, 2010). With their intersecting identities, they find ways to maximize their double consciousness to the advantage of their school populations.

One of the most jarring assertions was the idea that for them, radicalism must exist outside of the confines of the school system. During the kitchen table talk with all three participants, I asked them to identify a radical Black woman leader. They could not identify one in the public school system. The consensus among the three was that the radical women they knew struck out on their own, separate from the district, because they could not work within a system that already exists. Keisha and Kay have radical ideals when imagining schools, however they feel confined to the current framework in schools and find ways to transgress quietly within the system (Alston, 2005). Stacey feels that her radical work lies within her complicit nature to the system as-is, because she believes that

the system provides the mechanisms to meet the needs of the child holistically. When asked what she felt was the purpose of schools, she said:

> I think not only are we educating them in math, reading, science, social studies, but now we are counselors, we are social workers, we are psychologists, we are nurses, we feed them at school. Even right now with the pandemic, due to school not being in session, we literally focus more on making sure that the children get their lunches, when we're supposed to be focusing on educating them. But we know that a lot of our students come to school to eat. So it's more than just educating them with core curriculum. We're now educating them. MDE, the Michigan Department of Education hit the nail on the head when they said we are now focusing on the whole child, because that's truly what we do, we focus on the whole child. It's no longer just come to school and we're going to teach you math, English, science, social studies, health, and PE.

Her role in the central office, managing millions of grant dollars, allows her to see the significance and outcomes of funding student support programs. While she is complicit to the system, she is critical to the work, because her mission is to ensure that she uses her skills for the benefit of the children in the community where she was raised. These women work within the system as they seek to accomplish their goals for their schools and school districts (Alston & McClellan, 2011).

While working towards these goals, the women's perspectives on their work and their mission are impacted by their lived experiences which are understood from their multiple identities as Black and woman (Collins, 1996). With these multiple identities

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come various challenges such as threats to job security, muted voice, unfair treatment by colleagues and supervisors, trauma, and dealing with stereotypes. These multiple experiences serve the participants by means of creating a way of knowing that connects them to the voices in the community and the ability to navigate various workspaces informed by what they know for themselves, when otherwise, this knowledge would be invalidated. Collins (1989) affirms this notion in her discussion of the Afrocentric epistemology knowledge production process, which affirms that knowledge can be derived through experience and dialogue. Although the participants report a myriad of challenges, they also share some of the ways that they have an advantage as Black women leaders. One of the first is their ability to access the voices of the community to inform practice. Keisha shares that she talks with women in the beauty salon about their experiences with virtual schooling, and she is able to gauge in an informal way, what the needs of the community are, by way of the accounts of women in her extended network. Additionally, the women talk about how they are able to leverage their identities, and the knowledge that is associated with sitting at the table in leadership, and being at the "kitchen table" in their community. This abundance of knowledge gives them a superpower, in a sense, and with it, they have cultivated the skill of sitting in a space, knowing when and how to react, and when and how to speak, based on the role one decides to play.

Secondary Themes: Shackled by Injustice

This next section focuses on secondary themes drawn from the experiences of two participants who are situated within the same public school district, excluding the third participant who is situated at a charter school in the city. While the themes here are not

experienced by all three participants, I find it important to draw the distinction between the experiences of Black women in public and charter schools. Stacey and Keisha share dynamics that resemble the historically recurring marginalization of women in workspaces where men more frequently occupy leadership positions. Additionally, while charter schools are not absent from systemic injustices, they are typically more liberal in their human relations and advertise themselves as the change that is needed in public education (Payne & Knowles, 2009).

Job Security

The women shared, on several occasions, their feelings of being forced to be complicit with the dominant culture in order to protect their position. When asked questions about speaking out and sharing their opinions on certain topics, Keisha and Stacey, who are both in the same district, shared that speaking out was practically career suicide. I also observed them sit quietly in a district meeting as the men and white women discussed the matter of standardized testing. When I asked Keisha about this meeting, she shared that her primary purpose for sitting on that committee is to collect information. She does not go there to be heard, necessarily, even though she speaks up when she is asked. She really values being at the table to get information first, before it is passed along in the district. In these spaces, her voice is muted for the sake of survival. They call speaking out "career suicide."

Gender Discrimination

The participants shared instances where they experienced discrimination that they felt was directly associated to being a woman. One of those instances was pertaining to

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how they were treated by colleagues and supervisors. Stacey shared that her challenge was related to her school board's perception on her ability to be successful as a principal. She shared that she was reassigned from principal to an academic achievement officer position because she was a woman, and it was expressed that one needed to be a man to effectively lead the High School in the city. Additionally, Stacey talks about issues that she had with the acknowledgment of her credentials, namely her status as "doctor," and that her male colleagues who earned doctoral degrees were easily addressed by their new titles.

Keisha, when asked about her identity, lead with woman as the primary marker, because she felt like that was the one that she had to contend with, most often. She recalled times on her job, where she would engage in quarrels with men in ways that she would not with women, and even when she was principal at the high school, she shared that many of her encounters were challenges that she had with men. Her recollection of these experiences supports the enduring notion that women who lead among men are often subjected to contentious interactions that are a result of the historic preference of men in leadership. Unlike Stacey and Keisha, Kay did not report any experiences related to gender discrimination, however, she also shared that she does not think about interactions or conflicts with her identity in mind.

Trauma

Disappointments linked to job transitions, position assignments, and being placed in challenging scenarios with little support had a marked impact on the participants. Stacey, in particular, shared at great length, how her experiences in her leadership roles

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silenced here to a certain degree. She talked about how her colleagues would speak over her, in areas that were within her oversight, and she would just sit back and not respond unless she was called upon to speak. These instances point to the impact of traumatic experiences on her voice, and aptness to be fully engaged in the work in the way that she was before the incidents occurred.

One of the career-defining moments for Stacey was when she was removed from her position as principal so that the school could receive a school improvement grant.

When the new superintendent came in, he didn't know me from Batman, but he had marching orders. He told me that I was being moved because we were on the persistently low-achieving list. That's what it was called back then. It was called the PLA list. He told me that in order for us to get the school improvement grant, in order for us to get the SIG grant, the principal had to be replaced if you had been in the seat two or more years. Well, I mean, what can I really say? I mean, new superintendent came in and said he's going to move me. I just have to move. I was upset because they put me in the seat because we were on the list and it was to move, because I was getting the scores. The scores were starting to increase. The previous superintendent put me in it, but our board member didn't know all that. They just saw me. I was a woman. He said, so I'm sending you over here, but with everything you're doing over here, because you've been in the seat over two years, I was in the seat two and a half years. I started in January. I'm going to move you over there, but I need you to do the same thing that you're doing over there…I was bruised. I was hurt because you're moving me. Then I haven't, I'm still in the seat as the principal, you've hired my replacement and I'm training my

replacement. I'm sitting in Lansing at a PD when they announced, now the male, my counterpart, who was put over at Arthur Hill, we both, all four schools were low-performing, but the two East side principals got replaced. The two West side principals did not. Sitting in Lansing, the principal who was at Arthur Hill, my counterpart, black male. His wife was in my position at the time, the position I'm in now. She went up there and asked the question. She said "is it a requirement to replace the principal?" in Lansing. I'm sitting right next to my replacement. They said, no. It is not a requirement. If the principal was put in that position to make change, if you've already replaced them and the person who's currently in that seat, even if it's been two years, if your data shows that you are making improvements, you do not have to replace the principal. Can you imagine how I felt?...I was hurt. I was so hurt. I'm sitting there just hurt because the two West side principals didn't get, so anyway, they moved me over there. I go over there. I'm now a quiet, I'm just quiet. The new superintendent that came in, I don't know what kind of picture they did painted about me. I'm afraid to do anything because I don't know what's real and what's not real because you told me I had to be moved. You know what I mean? So now I don't know where I stand. You send me over here with him. He's treating me like dirt. I found out why. Even when I went over there, and it was because the board member the building was named after, and she told him what I said. When I saw her in the parking lot and I found out that I was being replaced. She walked up to me and she was just like, I don't want to tell a lie, how did she say it? Congratulations. I heard you were, she was like excited about it. You're going over there. That's my legacy. That's my legacy

over there. Everybody talked about how you are a strong curriculum person. I need you to go over there and clean it up. I need you to go over there and get it together because you know so-and-so don't have a curriculum person over there. I need somebody to go over there and get that school together. She's happy about me being put over there. So it was a compliment, but I looked at her and I said, so you the reason I got moved? Yeah, they talk. They said, you're a strong curriculum person. I said, wait a minute, let me make sure I get this straight. So when I was the principal at Saginaw High, and I needed an assistant principal, you took my strong curriculum person. You took mine and you gave me an 80 year old, 77 year old, who you knew couldn't do curriculum. So I'm good enough to go hold up the man, but I'm not good enough for you to send me a strong curricular person to hold me up. I realized you're talking to a board member, you better check yourself.

Stacey went on in this conversation, sharing her frustration with the decision of district leadership, and ultimately how these challenges led her to take a different approach to her leadership. These shifts in her career led her to be silent, and only insert herself when she is asked. In one particular portion of the kitchen table talk, she speaks about her choice to remain silent when people speak in ignorance about her work.

And so I think with this being my eighth year, I do agree that yeah, it's to the point where I don't really have to say anything. Because one, I've trained all of you now. And you're losing money anymore. You know what I mean? So I must be doing something right, so you're right. We've got some people down in our finance, there're some people they always got to be the loudest voice. But what I

notice is Dr. Roberts, I don't have to interrupt because I won't say anything. I'll just sit there, Dr. Roberts will now say...Because they'll step into my lane and I just won't say nothing. I'll just let them step right into it. And Dr. Roberts will say, "Stacey what do you think about that?" Because he knows, you know what, they got to be the smartest person in the room, it's my lane and you're going to tell me how to do, so I'm just going to let you say everything you need to say. And y'all invite me into the conversation when you feel like I can help considering it's my department. I don't have to anymore, because there's now enough people who I think...I think me being quiet has actually highlighted other people...putting their foot in their mouth because I'm just sitting back, letting you be the smartest person in the room.

And when you feel like you need my help, you'll invite me in. But then what happens is everybody just sitting there being quiet, because they're thinking the same thing, "That ain't even your department. Why are you answering all the questions?"

This response of silence is one that is born from challenge, but also speaks of confidence, and that is one result of trauma that is consistent with the participants. They emerge from the trauma with a resolve that they belong in the field, and are purposed to continue doing this meaningful work.

Stereotypes

In addition to the trauma of being abruptly transitioned from a position, and silenced because of their identity, the participants also talk about the impacts of

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constantly dealing with the stereotypes of Black women. They talk about the fact that

they have been accused of being too emotional when they are articulating their opinion

with passion in meetings, and that there is a general consensus that women are incapable

of leading schools as well as, and certainly not better than men.

Keisha: I always feel there's more second guessing about, my abilities or
             what I'm able to do because I'm a woman not because I'm a Black
             person, because I'm around a whole lot of black people. But...and
             also particularly in my district now from the time I came there and
             I know Stacey was the first black woman principal of Saginaw
             High ever. Am I correct? Stacey?

Stacey: Yes. Ma'am.

Keisha: So, when I got there, I was the second. 2015 when I got here.
             Okay.

Stacey: Yeah.

Keisha: That's okay. That's not my chance because they've had some black
             men, but in what heard all the time. "Well, you're a woman." So I
             finally I think my third year there, I said to a male person on the
             staff who had been saying that since I got there, "You can't keep
             saying that to me, right?" "Okay." Because-

Stacey: Okay

Keisha: "Okay." And that's the last time I heard it, but that certainly isn't
             the end, and I could be wrong. But from that feeling that I get from
             some people in my current district, being a woman is, you're going
             to have to prove yourself more, you're going to have to do more.
             And most of the principals at the elementary level are womans but
             I know from coming there in secondary, that's how I felt. Well,

you're the second black woman principal at Saginaw High after all these years. And so I know that being a woman has more impact on my life than being a black person in my job. And I will say probably in Flint as well. There were a lot of black men, in the situations they have one black woman superintendent. I know you have one now, but when I went to Northern, I was the first black woman principal at Northern, when I went to central, I was the second woman principal as a teacher. So, as a woman, it seems harder to break through than just being a black person.

These women are continually met with barriers, not just to their advancement in their careers, but to their efficacy in their role, their liberty in leading and expressing their leadership styles. Each of the participants explain that these barriers exist in differing ways, but greatly impact how they lead and how they advance in their careers. These barriers are most expressly present within the public school setting.
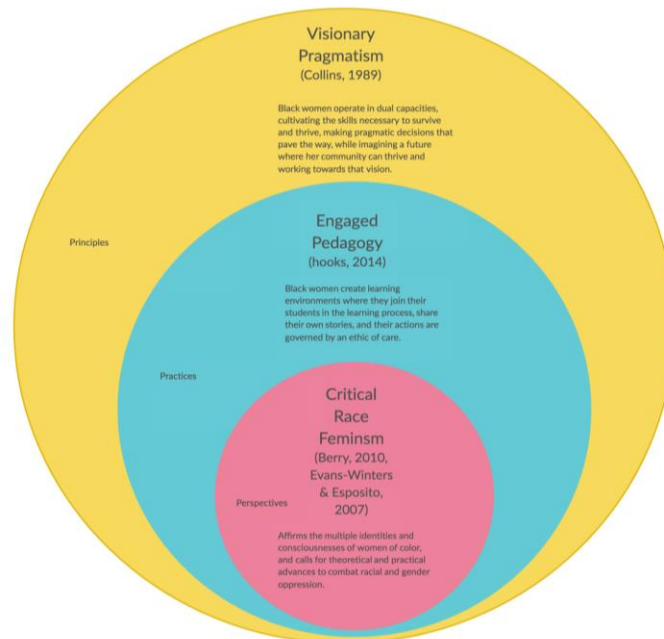
Implications for Practice and Future Research

The leadership practices, principles and perspectives of Black women who lead schools can be a tool to support leaders who serve schools located within marginalized communities. While Black women have a double consciousness that allows them to operate within a space in the fullness of the intersections of their lived experiences, we see, from the participants in this study, a leadership approach that can inform the practices of those who aim to make a meaningful impact in communities similar to the context of this study. Particularly, school leaders who have an interest in critical educational work, navigating system inequities, connecting in a meaningful way with school communities, allocating resources effectively, and creating a caring environment for students, might build their leadership practice around a leadership practice that makes daily decisions with a future focus, a leadership approach that is informed by teaching

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practice, and a perspective that centers the experiences of marginalized populations.

These three critical components comprise a leadership framework, that can be further

developed with future research, Critical Visionary Pragmatism.

Figure 3

Critical Visionary Pragmatism

Visionary
Pragmatism
(Collins, 1989)

Black women operate in dual capacities,
cultivating the skills necessary to survive
and thrive, making pragmatic decisions that
pave the way, while imagining a future
where her community can thrive and
working towards that vision.

Engaged
Pedagogy
(hooks, 2014)

Black women create learning
environments where they join their
students in the learning process, share
their own stories, and their actions are
governed by an ethic of care.

Critical
Race
Feminsm
(Berry, 2010,
Evans-Winters
& Esposito,
2007)

Affirms the multiple identities and
consciousnesses of women of color,
and calls for theoretical and practical
advances to combat racial and gender
oppression.

Principles

Practices

Perspectives

My exploration of how the racial and gender identity of Black women principals

informed their practice lead to a continued interest in the work of moving leaders from

acknowledging a need for addressing particular needs within a school system to enacting

a critical leadership practice. CVP as a framework calls for Visionary Pragmatism

(Collins, 1989) to understand their leadership principles, Engaged Pedagogy (hooks,

2014) for understanding the practices that guide how they interact with teachers and

students, and Critical Race Feminism (Berry, 2010) on how they honor their own

identities and advocate for women of color in the field. CVP highlights the pragmatic

decisions leaders make, daily, that is based on the knowledge afforded to them by their

intersecting identities, in order to create equitable educational spaces and advocate for

equitable workspaces for themselves and their staff. In this study of the participants are

acutely aware of the intersections of their identities, as well as the challenges that

marginalized populations face and have, in their own way, taken opportunities to address

these oppressive practices, however their attempts were mostly within the confines of an

already problematic system, and were not in any way transformational or liberatory. In

this setting, the participants were subjected to respectability politics if they wanted to

keep their job, and rarely challenged problematic practices such as standardized testing,

streamlining resources for high achieving students, and access and opportunity for low

performing groups. CVP provides an opportunity for critical research to explore the

socio-political development of school leaders and the development of their critical

consciousness, to examine how their consciousness impacts how they lead schools, and

their choices about how to navigate school systems. It allows for an analysis of how they

interrogate and challenge systems and processes that impact marginalized populations of

students, teachers and leaders without the fear of losing their jobs or being covertly

penalized for their advocacy. CVP is also a tool that can be used to support the

development of aspiring and emerging school leaders from marginalized populations, to

disrupt the idea that they need to push their race and gender aside and lead in neutrality.

Using CVP, I hope to extend the extensive scholarship of leadership theories to center the

practice of Black women and offer a critical approach to educational leadership that both

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addresses systemic inequities, and guide to support leaders with day-to-day planning, within the requirements of the governance of a school system.

Higher Education and Scholarship

As colleges and universities explore the inequities in marginalized populations, the experiences of Black women in leadership positions and their unique leadership practices highlights transformative ways to meet needs of the students within these populations that are critical inclusions to future scholarship. Additionally, scholarship should include ways to support Black women in school leadership positions so that as they employ double consciousness and their natural knack of meeting needs for students in their schools, they are not shackled by the bureaucracies and systems which are designed to restrict their freedom, and sustain social order.

1. Leadership and teacher preparation programs must prioritize the recruitment of Black women in order to diversify the teaching and school administration workforce.

2. Leadership and teacher preparation programs should include a course of study that focuses explicitly on the contributions of Black women in the field of education in the way of scholarship and praxis. Among those frameworks, Critical Visionary Pragmatism is a framework that can be considered among those that are studied as contributions by Black women.

3. Leadership and teacher preparation programs should place a priority on the recruitment of Black women in leadership certification programs that center the

leadership practices of Black women. As Black women matriculate through leadership and teacher reparation programs, this framework can serve as a tool to illuminate how racial identity, gender identity and leadership approaches can work in intersecting ways to inform their vision as well as the day-to-day decisions they will make in schools. Students who are not Black women can also glean from this framework an approach that centers building relationships, leading with vision and making every decision move the needle towards liberation and not just impressive data, acknowledging that there is a special way that Black women have when dealing with children in marginalized populations, and honoring the nuance about how they go about their work.

4. Leadership and teacher preparation programs should incorporate a course that examines the institution of school, along with other public institutions, and how oppressive practices are embedded within these systems. They should equip students with the tools to identify and disrupt oppressive structures in public systems through an Action Research Project as the culmination of the class.

Critical Visionary Pragmatism can serve as a tool to illuminate the significance of the work of Black women in schools but also, as a model for the practices and perspectives that are employed by instinctive advocacy.

K-12 Environments

Black women who lead schools serving marginalized communities must have the support of the district leadership, as well as the school community. Their role should be seen as critical for the success of the district, and their voice integral for the decisions that

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are being made within the district. The experiences of the participants in this study

highlight the historical presence of male dominated district leadership which privileges a

system of patriarchy and excludes, even the women in district leadership, from truly

having a seat at the decision-making table. Even if they are invited to the table, their

history of being overlooked, scandalized, and diminished muted their voice. It is my hope

that this study will provide for district leadership and opportunity to see how their

treatment of Black women hinders the progress of the district and upholds decades of

stereotypical, sexist and exclusive behavior. District leaders who are committed to

centering the voices and experiences of Black women principals must address the areas

of school governance, curriculum and instruction, and culture and climate.

School Governance

To address this matter, districts must establish a culture that embraces the Black

woman principal and all aspects of her identity as a leader by enacting policies that

prohibit gender and racial bias, and by creating a process that is fair and reliable for

Black women and persons from other marginalized groups to share concerns when their

work is being hindered by persons without substantial reason.

1. Public school districts must place a priority on hiring Black woman
    principles.

2. Public school districts must institute norms that allow principles to have
    localized governance over their schools. This enables Black women
    principals to enact policies that will best suit her student populations, and
    have the support of district policy on these localized decisions. Black

women should not have to leave public school districts in order to have the liberty to enact systems in their schools that serve Black children.

3. Public school districts must self-assess and correct any unspoken norms related to respectability politics and identity politics for Black women, and create space for the CVP leader to create systems, structures and resources that best respond to the needs of the students within her school population.

Historically, Black women have not been privileged to lead with their identity out front, but when Critical Visionary Pragmatism is implemented, and Black women principals place their identity in the forefront, the identities of the students in marginalized communities are also placed in the forefront, and processes that uphold the status quo are no longer centered, thus creating a space for any person from marginalized populations in the school community to see their identity centered.

Curriculum and Instruction

School leaders have the responsibility to evaluate the efforts of schools and the quality of the outcome. In doing so, there are many opportunities to make improvements, so that schools progressively become less oppressive and more liberating. Revising curriculum to include new pedagogical approaches, and pairing them with powerful instructional strategies is one way to begin making progress in schools. I would like to recommend four considerations for school leaders as they seek to reform their curriculums:

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1. Establish the expectation for the content across disciplines and text selections to be fluid and diverse.

2. Monitor for knowledge acquisition and simultaneously pursue relevance in the pedagogical approach and content.

School Culture and Climate

Black women principals were, at one point in time, students sitting in chairs, in classrooms. Schools are where children learn how to think, and also where they are framing the ways that they will navigate the world. Black girls will need a liberatory learning environment that affirms their identity and allows them space to express themselves and make meaningful connections with the world around them. In order for this to happen, school districts must implement the following:

1. Establish the roles of adults and students as humans, needing a reciprocal relationship in the classroom.

2. Establish the school as an affirming place, where students explore self and make connections with the world around them.

Black Women Principals

This is, perhaps, the most important conversation of all conversations. Black women who find themselves in school leadership positions have already defied many odds. They have overcome imposter syndrome, stereotypes, racial and gender discrimination, and have arrived in a position that will allow them to shape the minds of future generations. I hope this study will inspire them to:

1. Adopt a leadership framework that places their identity out front, postures their Blackness and gender identity as a gift encouraging them to own and use them both to inform leadership practice.

2. Consciously consider their vision for their school and their students with every single practical decision they make. Know that they have the opportunity to tear down the mountain one stone at a time.

3. Critique school structures and think about ways that they, as a building leader, can reconstruct the school to a). meet the needs of all the students and b). incorporate academic programs that intentionally address systemic inequities.

4. Embed elements of critical visionary pragmatism in the mission of the school so that the shared vision will be represented broadly.

5. Create opportunities to connect authentically with students and families in the school community. Consider cultural diversity as essential and integral in their own leadership practice, and create environments that encourage the expression of cultural diversity.

6. Commit to scrutinize the ways that the status quo frames measures of student success, and reframe the definition of success to elevate the voices of students and families in these outcomes.

Conclusion

inside of every line

is the joy of her ancestors

the groans of her grandmothers

the tears of her mothers

the hope of her children

every plan she makes

forges a path towards

the unknown

illuminated by the dreams

she holds near

informed by the roles

she plays

strengthened by the pain

she endures.

with a gentle fist

she grips the magic

to unlock the doors and give access

to mend broken pieces

for scars to facilitate healing

she bandages her wounds

and

adorns her lips to flawless perfection

to face it all

the answer

the remedy

the future

is in the work of her hands.

      I envision a day when our gifted Black woman principals are celebrated for their

strengths and supported in areas where they have room for growth. I look forward to

contributing to the field in ways that forge a visible pathway between the theoretical

understandings and the practical application of leadership for Black women principals. I

find joy in the thought that children from marginalized communities will one day attend a

public school that both centers their culture and identity and evolves to meet the ever-

changing needs as society changes, at the hands of a Black woman principal. I long for

the day when the status quo no longer exists as a measure of success because, like Toni

Morrison says, there is no need to look outside of Blackness to understand the

experiences of Black people. While there may be challenges, the work of the unfettered

hands of Black woman principals will forge a path that leads us to liberation. I believe

that this study joins the aggregation of many others, in contributing to the thought work

to actualize this vision.

I'm inspired by this quote: "We become closer to our humanity and agents of our

own development when we reflect and act to transform the conditions influencing our

existence (Ginwright and Cammorota, 2002)." My intent with this study was not to

highlight leaders who "serve" and "temper" their actions, reifying the whiteness stance

which places Black women in the dehumanizing subservient role of needing to appease

the master, or a system, in order to accomplish their goals. I chose to examine ways that

women crossed borders, broke down boundaries, and used their influence to disrupt

without centering the sacrifices and the lowered position or stance they needfully and

sacrificially assumed to get there. This does not expunge their history from such sacrifice,

nor does it diminish the value of humility and a focus on accomplishing the goals above

all else, but through scholarship, it provides a frame that can be used to discuss the work

of their hands in ways that are uplifting and empowering. It disrupts the narrative that

celebrates trial before triumph, as a means of envisioning a future where pain and progression are not competing characters in the narrative of Black women's journey to leadership. It propels the notion that women can be prepared, confident, fully embrace their identity, and make powerful moves and decisions for the children in their communities. It acknowledges the challenges that arise, but it elevates the outcomes and speaks louder about the successes than it does about the trials. As a product of the teaching, principalship and mentorship of Black women, I know how their magic can impact the lives of students, and I hope that this study joins the aggregation of other studies that elevates the powerful work of their hands.

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