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WHAT CAN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS LEARN ABOUT SUPPORTING AND RETAINING AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS FROM AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN LEADING IN PUBLIC CHARTER SYSTEMS?

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WHAT CAN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS LEARN ABOUT SUPPORTING AND RETAINING AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS FROM AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN LEADING IN PUBLIC CHARTER SYSTEMS?

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication

I am dedicating this research to my grandmother, who made her final transition on April 11th, 2021, a year ago to the day I am making my last submission. She was strong, sweet, and loving. She provided me with guidance, comfort, and wisdom. Her presence exemplifies the nature of Black women, a nurturer, a protector, and a woman of God.

I also dedicate this research to my mother, who encouraged me to keep working, write, and finish the process. Years of watching her work and navigating systems as an African-American woman also made me wonder why African-American women have to work so hard compared to their peers.

Of course, I dedicate this to my father, who is my best friend and forever encourager and motivator. This is also for my supportive sister.

And this is for all Black women who were overlooked, tested beyond expectation, and were told they were too aggressive, bossy, or whatever the adjective may be. This paper is dedicated to Black women; we are the light in a dark world.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge all 12 women who took time out of their complex schedules to share their personal stories and provide insights into how African-American women experience the systems in which they serve.

I also want to acknowledge the late Dr. Ballard for encouraging me to get into OU Doctoral Program. Thank you for accepting me and seeing me enough to encourage me to apply to senior-level roles within the K-12 domain. In the same thought, I want to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Ford, who dedicated countless hours and research to help shape this research.

Table of Contents

Introduction……1

Statement of the Problem…….....5

Purpose of the Study …… .…….6

Importance of Study and Contribution to Literature…….……8

Chapter 2: Literature Review……12

The African-American Superintendent in US Public Schools …….14

History of African-American Superintendents…….17

Brown vs. Board of Education-School Desegregation……..19

Underrepresentation of African-American in the Executive Space…….……20

Systemic Barriers to the Superintendency for African-American Women…..……..22

Savior Complex of Systems Placing African-American Women……..……25

Why We Need African-American Female Leaders…….……..26

Strategies to Aid African-American Women in the Superintendent Role…….…....28

The Continued Growth of African-American Women in Professional Space…..…..30

African-American Superintendents in the Charter Space……...33

The Need for the Current Study…….…….34

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework…….36

Chapter 4: Methodology…….45

Study Sample ……48

Participant Selection……..……48

Participant Profiles…….…….49

Procedures and Methods……50

Data Collection and Analysis……51

Credibility and Trustworthiness ……52

Lens of the Researcher……54

Chapter 5: Results and Analysis ……57

Summary of Findings……82

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion……84

Summary of Findings……82

Emergent Themes……89

Limitations ……97

Future Research……98

References……100

Appendices……108

IRB Approval Letter……112

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Profiles……..……...50

Table 2: Participant Perspectives on the Effects of White Normative Culture on Psychological Safety within the Workplace…….70

Abstract

America is becoming more ethnically diverse, creating a significant demographic shift in the student composition in America's public schools. To respond to the increase in student diversity, America's systems and structures must evolve to support the unique needs of a nonhomogeneous population, including the dismantling of systems and structures that promote conscious and unconscious bias, discrimination, and unequal treatment for marginalized people. The purpose of this study was to assess how public charter school systems retain and support diverse leaders, more specifically African-American women serving as the most senior leader in their organization. The factors considered were: (a) attractors to the organization, (b) how they are valued in/by the organization, (c) their ability to progress in the organization, (d) the level of development they experience in the organization, while also (e) evaluating their social, emotional, and professional well-being. To provide context to the research, the researcher used the Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Intersectionality Theory (IT). Through these lenses, the researcher addresses the organizational factors and practices that have fostered an environment where African-American women in the senior-most level role in their public charter organization feel supported. The researcher used a qualitative, phenomenological study method to understand these factors and practices through the voices of 12 African-American women serving as the most senior leader in their charter organization. It was found that African-American women want to experience psychologically safe work environment, work in organizations that are inclusive, have established community and are making financial and professional development investments in African-American women leaders.

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

America is becoming more ethnically diverse, which is creating a dramatic demographic shift in student composition in the American public school system. For example, for the first time in the history of the United States, in the 2015-2016 school year, the public school system served more minority students than non-minority students; this trend has persisted in all subsequent school years to date (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; Census Bureau; 2018). In addition to the racial diversification of America, another important demographic shift is occurring with gender. The number of women of color in the United States is also increasing (Census Bureau, 2018). Women of color are projected to make up 53% of all women by 2050, while White women will decline from 61.8% to 47% of the total (Census Bureau, 2018). The demographic shift in the number of children of color and the number of women of color will impact American institutions that have historically supported White children and White men. In response, America's systems and structures must also evolve to support an increasingly diverse population, including the dismantling of systems and structures that promote conscious and unconscious bias, discrimination, and unequal treatment for marginalized populations.

While this demographic shift provides context for the current study, a more illuminating trend is found in the decision-making of families of color as it pertains to school selection. American families, 25% of whom are single parent families, are making notable changes in where they are enrolling their children for school. American families are increasingly advocating for school choice and are choosing non-traditional public-school options, while opting into public charter schools. American families are choosing public charter schools over traditional

public schools at six times the rate they did 20 years ago (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Between 2000 and 2017, public charter school enrollment increased by 2.6 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), African-American and Hispanic families are matriculating into public charter schools at a higher rate than any other demographic group—three times the rate of other demographic groups (Digest of Education Statistics, 2018)—so that African-American and Hispanic families now make up 59% of the American public charter school population. Twenty years ago, African-American and Hispanic students only made up 52% of the American public charter school population (Digest of Education Statistics, 2018). Notably, current public charter school enrollment, which includes 1.89 million students of color, does not even reflect the 43,000 families that are waitlisted for public charter school enrollment, meaning these estimates are low (Digest of Education Statistics, 2018).

The trend of African-Americans and Hispanics leaving traditional public schools and choosing the public charter sector is also seen in administration, in particular African-American and Hispanic leaders serving in public charter spaces. The number of African-American school leaders in the public charter school sector has increased to 16%, some 6% higher than the 10% currently serving in the traditional public school system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Furthermore, in addition to administration, data suggests that more teachers of color are choosing public charter schools compared to traditional public schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; 2018). In the public charter school sector, 30% of teachers are African-American, compared to 20% in the traditional public school system (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; Education Week Research Center, 2018).

There are several key factors that contribute to public charter schools having better representation than traditional public schools when employing teachers and leaders of color, according to the Project on the Next Generation of New Teachers (2015). Charter schools who participated in the Project on the Next Generation of New Teachers study made an intentional effort to recruit teachers and leaders of color by fostering relationships with human capital organizations that focus on recruiting teachers of color and supporting leadership opportunities for leaders of color, such as Teach for America (Teach for America, 2015). In 2014, 31% of Teach for America teachers identified as Black or Latino (Teach for America, 2015). These schools also created partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) to assist in the ability to recruit African-American teachers and leaders. It is also noted that schools are better able to recruit and retain African-American teachers when they have an African-American leader in place (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

The traditional public school system has long been a system in which leaders and teachers have, on the whole, not reflected the diversity of the students they serve. Many have argued that this is a significant contributor to the challenges that students of color face in schools, including their disproportionate rate of suspension and low academic performance (Khalifa, 2018). In 2016, the United States Department of Education released a study titled, *State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce*, which communicated the need to diversify the educator workforce, acknowledging the critical role that teachers and leaders of color play in pursuing equity in the United States education system. The U.S Department of Education's commitment to diversity in the educator workforce is critical to this project, but it is only a starting point upon which renewed effort of both scholars and practitioners is needed.

The traditional public school system disproportionately serves students of color and children of color have more adverse outcomes in traditional public schools compared to their peers. With the growing number of children of color in the American public school system, America has an educational crisis as it pertains to serving these students well. According to the National School Board Association, only 9% of African-American students perform at or above proficient on state civic exams compared to 31% of their White peers. Only 13% of African-American students perform at or above the National Assessment of Educational Progress in math compared to 43% of their White peers, and only 15% perform at or above proficient in reading compared to 41% of their peers (National School Board Association, 2019).

In addition, to unfavorable academic outcomes African-American students and other students of color experience more severe punishment for the same offense than their White peers. Research, using administrative datasets and longitudinal samples, shows that African-American students are more likely to be suspended or expelled and more likely to receive stiffer punishments for the same offense (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). These disparities are concerning and are associated with long-term outcomes, including employment, and involvement in the criminal justice system, which impacts the overall health of America (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). America cannot deliver on its promise to protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all Americans if our foundational institution, public schools, is not properly serving all students.

In order to alter the trajectory of African-American students, who help make up the growing number of children of color in America and American public schools, structural changes via policy, practice, and the administrator who shapes them have to change. The traditional school system, especially in urban areas where more than 50% of minority students are served,

should reevaluate who is in the leadership chair and what they are doing while leading that ultimately impacts children of color.

This study coincides with a profound shift in public school administrative personnel. According to a 2020 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, a number of superintendents are retiring or leaving their job, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). On one hand, this occurrence is directly impacting the number of superintendents in the role and is causing a superintendent shortage (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). On the other hand, this challenge is providing traditional public-school districts across the country with an opportunity to hire new leaders who can challenge the systemic "disproportionality problem" whereby an institution that serves predominately children of color is led by a substantially less diverse group.

Statement of the Problem

Successful school systems are those which are inclusive; their success is, to a large extent, dependent on the success, representation, and sustainability of leaders of color within the educational system (Khalifa, 2018). As a group, African-American women only make up 7% of the educators in the United States (School and Staffing Survey, 2011) despite being 10% of the total U.S. workforce and 14% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Moreover, working African-American women have played a critical role in America's various successes, yet their service has not resulted in a commensurate amount of personal and/or professional advancement. In order to create a sustainable system where students of all backgrounds can be successful, we must learn how to bring into the fold a more diverse set of educators, helping them develop their abilities to lead while also creating a culture in schools where they and marginalized children they serve can feel safe and valued.

There is plenty of evidence to support the claim that African-American women are qualified to lead school systems; they have the necessary education and degrees to uniquely certify them for central office roles. Out of all African-American degree earners, African-American women have earned 66% of bachelor's degrees, 71% of master's degrees and 65% of doctor's degrees according to the National Center for Education and Statistics (National Center Education Statistics, 2009). African-American women are the only race of women that have outperformed their male counterparts in attaining degrees. Despite the increase in degree attainment, the number of African-American women in central office roles and or superintendent roles in the traditional public school system has not increased despite the increase in those earning their master's in education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Even with the increase in degree attainment which can draw alignment to interest in the senior-level and or superintendent roles, African-American women only constitute a fraction of central office roles in the traditional public education system, which is less than 2 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

These disparities suggest a systemic problem where structural barriers to the advancement of women of color in traditional public school educational leadership could be playing a role. Yet, in the public charter space, the representation of women of color is much higher, suggesting there might be something to learn about this issue from their successes. The purpose of this study is to explore the organizational factors and or practices that have fostered an environment where African-American women serving in the most senior role in public charter schools have felt supported in their ascension to the leadership chair. The perspectives and journeys of African-American women in public charter spaces will be used as a focal point for

this research. The diversity in the charter sector presents a unique case for African-American women, living in the intersectional space of being a multi-marginalized group. It is hypothesized that, African-American women are able to share a unique narrative, and the understanding of that narrative could prove fruitful to other educational sectors, including traditional public schools.

In order to determine organizational factors and practices that support/supported African-American women leaders in acquiring leadership roles, this research will collect the narratives of 12 African-American women leaders in various charter school organizations, including nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs), single site charters and education management organizations (EMOs). In addition to the district's or charter school's organizational culture, this study will also examine the role social communities have on African-American women in the workplace. It is hoped that, by examining transformational African-American women leaders in public charter K-12 education systems, districts, both charter and non-charter, can garner perspective on how to effectively recruit, retain, and develop African-American women in their organization.

This study will gain the perspectives of African-American women charter leaders on: (a) attractors to the organization, (b) how they are valued in/by the organization, (c) their ability to progress in the organization, (d) the level of development they experience in the organization, while also (e) evaluating their social, emotional, and professional well-being. In meeting these purposes, the study will address the following questions:

1. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization attracted them to the organization and to which do they attribute their retention?

2. Concerning organizational advancement and development, how do African-American women in public charter schools perceive their journey to the role of superintendent and/ or senior-level roles?
3. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization are conducive or antithetical to an environment that is nurturing to their emotional, social and professional well-being?

Importance of Study and Contributions to Literature

Oftentimes, education researchers focus exclusively on African-American men or White women as minoritized study populations, perhaps unintentionally marginalizing the narrative of African-American women, their experiences, and their needs (Winters & Esposito 2010). Currently, studies of African-American women and their voices are underrepresented in the educational literature. This perpetuates the inequities prevalent in the education system and limits potential solutions when addressing systemic problems that demand attention.

Second, unlike that which exists for White men, there is a dearth of literature about women and/or minoritized groups in leadership positions. Due to the lack of literature or the interest in researching the topic, researchers lack understanding as it pertains to women in leadership, and minorities (Hall, Garrett-Akinsanya, Hucles, 2007). Historically, society has defined leadership effectiveness predominately based upon the performance standards and experiences of White men (Lorber, 1994). When such a standard is defined, systemic conditions tend to develop in support of it. Systematic preference and idealization of White men as leaders often create adverse experiences for African-American leaders, especially African-American women, and leads to African-Americans leaders who perform equally well being evaluated more negatively or else being overlooked or invisible (Coqual, 2019). Negative evaluations can hinder

one's ability to progress and undermine one's confidence that they are able to make a positive impact. If one does not possess the belief that they can make a positive impact, they will also have a hard time believing they can serve in a leadership capacity within that system. African-American women find themselves in a position of double jeopardy, being Black and not White and being a woman and not a man (Brunner, 2019). Because of their race and gender, African-American women face additional discrimination compared to their African-American male counterparts (Mayberry, 2018). This concept will be further explored in the Intersectionality theory.

Third, African-American women have much to offer the public education system that has yet to be explored in research. According to a 2018 Harvard Business Review Article, organizations that have an ethnically diverse leadership team experience an improved financial performance as seen by their earnings before interest and taxes margins compared to other organizations with homogenous White leadership teams by 33% (Gompers & Kovvali, 2018). This same logic can be applied to the educational sector. African-American women are uniquely positioned as a multi-marginalized group to contribute to the greater good of public-school systems as it pertains to serving students of color, which now are the majority of traditional public-school students.

Fourth, researchers have found that students of color benefit from diverse leadership (Wells, 2020). When students see someone like them in leadership it fosters a sense of hope and high expectations for success (Gershenson, 2019). African-American leaders are not being leveraged in a meaningful way, especially when far too often conversations regarding education focus on deficit-based statistics on African-American students. With the increase in students of

color in the public education system, it is that much more imperative to position the right voices to aid in the success of students of color (Gershenson, 2019).

One solution is to elevate the voices of African-American women in educational leadership roles, which this study aims to do. The necessity lies in the number of children of color and the potential exacerbation of the current realities that plague the education system. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, by 2029 the American public school system will serve 51.5 million students, most of whom will be minority students (NCES, 2017). The percentage of White students is projected to decrease from 61% to 48%, while African Americans and Hispanics will increase from 33% to 43% (NCES, 2017). Currently, African American and Hispanic students are experiencing the most disparities in the educational system. According to the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Data, only 57% of African-American students have access to the necessary math and science coursework that will make them college ready compared to 71% of White students and 61% of African-American students that took the ACT did not meet a college readiness indicator benchmark (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data, 2014). African-American students are four times more likely to attend a school where more than 20% of the teaching body has not met all state certifications and licensing than White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data, 2014). African-American students are 2.3 times as likely to be referred to law enforcement while in school (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data, 2014). Research has shown that teachers have a systemic bias toward African-American students resulting in lower academic expectations (Gershenson, Holt and Papageorge, 2015).

Fifth, the with the rise of children of color selecting public charter schools as their school of choice, limited research has been conducted on charter leaders of color, and no known

research exists on African-American women leaders serving in the most senior-level role in their charter organization. It is imperative that the literature is more responsive to this unexplored area of research, as African-American women leaders' voices and contributions in these spaces are quintessential to the evolution of public education both traditional and charter.

When the majority of students in public schools are students of color and less than 2% of our system's leaders are African-American women, we have an urgent need to act. Inclusion must be a priority, and structures and policies must be put into place to create a supportive environment for African-American women leaders. Representation matters and according to research reform efforts flourish and endure when the intended beneficiaries have a seat at the table and are also in the position to make decisions (Gershenson et al., 2015). Creating an environment where African-American women's voices are included and are shaping policies allows for all children to have experiences that best serve their needs. The result of not creating an inclusive environment for African-American women serving in the most senior-level role can lead to unintended consequences, which can range from continued disproportionate effects of a poor education for African-American students, stakeholder disengagement, and an overall system that is unable to adequately serve an evolving population that the changing demographics of America (Gershenson et al., 2015)

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The lack of literature regarding African-American women leadership profiles and narratives/studies of African-American women in K-12 leadership leads to an array of problems in a quest to understand the role African-American women play in the various organizations in which they work and how they contribute to society and more specifically the public education sector (Burton et al., 2020). It is even more concerning that literature does not exist on African-American women serving in the most senior-level role in the fastest growing education sector for children of color, American charter schools. In this chapter, a review of literature will identify trending topics that address the low representation of African-American women serving in the most senior-level role and organizational elements that create a supportive environment for African-American women. A body of literature does exist on African-American women superintendents, however, there is limited literature on the elements that are related to the recruitment, retention, and development of African-American women in the public-school sector.

It is important to acknowledge, despite the lack of literature on African-American women leaders serving in senior-level roles in charter organizations, literature does exist on African-American women superintendents in the traditional public school system. While the role of the superintendent is the highest level of leadership within a school district, it is important to acknowledge that each local education agency titles this role differently, and certain roles and responsibilities differ. Each district or local education agency has its own job classification system. It is generally known that each system creates an organizational structure that meets the needs of the organization. With this in mind, senior-level roles are explored to provide additional context to the practices, development, and support the organization provides African-American

women as they ascend to the senior-most level role in their organization. The selection of a senior leader reflects the internal culture of an organization. Since this role is not appointed by the board it reflects the hiring principles and values of the organization as well as reflects the organization's priorities. The study will be able to illuminate organizational practices of promotion efforts, hiring priorities, and aspects of organizational culture that will help ground recommendations from this study.

It is important to acknowledge, research on African-American women serving in senior-level roles or superintendents is limited to African-American women in the traditional public education setting and does not include the public charter sector, which is serving an increasing number of children of color (Kennedy, 2019). As the number of children of color served in public charter schools increases, literature pertaining to minority leaders should also be paid greater attention. Likewise, as the number of children of color increases in the charter sector, a closer look at how African-American women rise in the leadership ranks and operate in leadership roles in these organizations is an equally vital contribution to the literature.

This literature review will explore multiple layers of the literature that contribute to understanding the current and potential contributions of African-American women serving in senior-level roles and or superintendent roles in the traditional educational system. In doing so, the historical context of African-American women leaders in public education is needed to provide historical context for the evolving identities of African-American women senior leaders in relation to their experiences within the organizational structures of the traditional public school system. When reviewing the literature, it is important to note that African-American women superintendents, just like African-American women, are not monolithic; however, the

research shows trends and like experiences and characteristics that capture the identity of the African-American women superintendent.

The African-American Superintendent in the U.S. Public School System

The identity of the African-American women superintendent reflects a similar identity of the African-American women serving in the most senior-level role in the charter sector. For this study, superintendents are the senior-most executive in the school district or legal education agency (Chiefs for Change, 2019). The superintendent implements the school board's vision by making day-to-day decisions about educational programs, spending, staff, and facilities. The superintendent hires, supervises, and manages the central staff and principals (Chiefs for Change, 2019). As referenced in this study, the most senior leaders term is senior-level administrators directly managed by the board. Pending the size of their charter organization, they directly manage human capital, manage the organization's fiduciary responsibilities, and directly support senior-level administrators (Chiefs for Change, 2019). Throughout the research process, it was noted that different charter school organizations reference their senior-most leader differently. Therefore, the common term of the senior-most level leader is used instead of varying names. While little to no research exists on the profiles of African-Americans serving in the senior-most level role for the charter sector (Chiefs for Change, 2019), what we know about African-American women superintendents in public education spans over 80 years.

The researcher will use existing research on African-American women superintendents in the traditional sector to provide context for the identity and experiences of the senior most-level African-American women serving in charter organizations. This section, therefore, explores the identity of the African-American women in the traditional public-school sector as well as

provides historical context on how the African-American women serving in the most senior-level of her charter sector came to be.

As previously stated, there is 80 years' worth of literature on the African-American women superintendent. Despite this length of time, the profile of the African-American women superintendent has largely remained the same (Jones, 2003). African-American women superintendent are typical mothers between the age of 45 and 65 years old (Brunner & Gorgan 2019). They were raised in two parent households that were economically classified as middle class, with middle class values. Unlike their counterparts, African-American women superintendents, on average, served in the classroom as a teacher for 4 to 15 years before moving into administration. On average White men serve fewer years in the classroom and are an average of 50 years old. While White males have many different access points to "the chair," including being secondary leader or business leader, African-American women predominantly serve as directors/coordinators or assistants more often than male superintendents (Brunner & Gorgan 2019). According to the study participants, this navigation pathway to the most senior-level role was not the case. All 12 women stated that working in the charter sector accelerated their path. It was also found that most African-American women are assigned to the role due to availability and not their own choice or preference (Brunner & Gorgan 2019). African-American women who serve in the superintendent role are more commonly appointed to the position if they are located in urban areas compared to those seated in suburban or rural school districts (Chiefs for Change, 2019). Essentially, African-American women in leadership roles are most likely promoted to leadership roles when they work in a system that has more minority students and are appointed based on the need of the system opposed to the professional preference of the applicant. While this concept was not discussed specifically, it was noted that all 12 women

worked in districts that were majority students of color and more specifically African-American children. Also, most African-American women superintendents hold the highest degree in their field, a doctorate, which means they possess more credentials to qualify them for the leadership role.

In terms of the normative characteristics, African-American women leaders aspiring to become superintends, and those that are currently sitting in the seat of superintendent are noted as competent, they have the needed skills to effectively execute their responsibility, which includes tolerance for risk taking and knowledge about all components of district administration (Revere, 1987).

African-American women were also characterized by their resiliency. Resiliency can refer to the practice of operating with a strength perspective, which stresses the capabilities, assets and positive attributes of human beings rather than the focus on their weakness (Saleebey 2002). Due to institutional racism, sexism and bias, African-American women have developed the capacity to address adversity and prevail in order to obtain positionality and progress in their careers (Kelleher & Patterson 2005).

According to the National Alliance of Black School Educators, geography also influences the superintendency for African-American women (NABSE, 2013). Geographically, regions that are politically liberal and are located in the South hire more African-American women superintendents than other regions in the country (Johnson, 2017). As a southern state, Mississippi has the largest population of African-American women superintendents in the nation with 13 active superintendents (NABSE, 2013).

History of African-American Superintendents

The historic context of African-American women serving in the superintendent roles in the public education system is rich and reflects many informal and formal roles. The first African-American superintendent recorded in the United States was Velma Dolphin Ashley, who started her role as superintendent in 1944. While Velma Dolphin Ashley was the first recorded African-American women superintendent in the United States, African-Americans have informally served in senior-level roles while formally serving as teachers, community leaders, wives, and or assistants to those formally serving in the role (Kennedy, 2019). Historically, African-American women have served in informal leadership roles more so than formal roles. African-American women have served as matriarchs of the African-American community and have played other critical roles in the African-American community and the country. Despite the roles they play in society, African-American women still have limited prominence in senior-level, formal administrative roles. Even with the increase in African-American degree attainment, the number of African-American women serving in the superintendent roles has remained relatively stagnant (Alexander-Lee, 2014)

Velma Dolphin Ashley served as superintendent from 1944-1956, a total of 12 years in a rural all-African-American town of Boley, Oklahoma (Revere, 1989). Currently, only two African-American superintendents or superintendent-equivalent exist in the state of Oklahoma, Cecilia J Robinson-Woods of Millwood Public Schools in Oklahoma City and Kiana Smith of Tulsa Legacy Charter School. Historically, American society did not support the service of African-Americans in the senior-level role; similarly, African-American women were not sought after as senior leaders, therefore, did not widely serve in the position (Blount. 1998; Glass, 1992; Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999), unless such positions were in predominately African-American

towns. According to the study's participants, the notation of African-American women serving in predominately African-American communities is largely the same. All 12 women in the study served predominately African-American communities and for most this was an attractive attribute of the job.

Opportunities for African-American women to become superintendents before 1956 were limited and, therefore, were not frequently documented (Revere, 1989). By 1970, only three African-American women were serving as superintendents, by the end of the decade, five African-American women were serving as superintendents (Revere, 1989). By 1980, eleven African-American women served as superintendents, at the end of the decade twenty-nine African-American women served in the role (Revere, 1989). In comparison, by the end of 80s, 24% of the superintendents in the American public school system were White women, while 12.5% were minority men and about 6% were women of color (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2005; Glass, 1992; Tallerico, 1999).

Historically, White males have occupied the superintendent role in the same way that Black women have remained at the entry levels of the profession, most commonly as teachers, teacher mentors, and/or elementary instructional coaches (Alfred, 2001). Because androcentrism and ethnocentrism provide White men with positional power and institutional leverage, African-American women leaders often find their upward mobility in the K-12 traditional system adversely affected (Kennedy, 2019; Pruitt, 2015). Despite women making up 70% of the teacher population, White men still hold over 65% of the superintendent positions in the public system (Kennedy, 2019).

Brown vs. Board of Education-School Desegregation

The historical context of African-American superintendents is directly associated with the history of United States policy and law (Roy, 2019). One notable case that profoundly shaped African-American educators and the African-American community is the *Brown v. Board* case in 1954. When *Brown v. Board* declared segregation unconstitutional, this created an ambiguous pathway forward on how to desegregate schools (Tilman, 2004, p.297). Despite the ruling that local authorities were to proceed with all deliberate speed, between the years of 1952-1972, *Brown v. Board* resulted in over 38,000 African-American educators losing their jobs including 31,000 teachers in 17 states (Tilman, 2004, p.297). Teachers were either fired or demoted. In 1965, 67% of teachers were demoted (Lutz, 2017). Over time, the number of African-American educators decreased by 80% throughout the southern states (Lutz, 2017). According to Patterson, the number of African-American principals and leaders decreased from 209 to just 3 within a decade, 1963-1973 (Petterson, 2001). Within a six-year time frame, 1964-1970, the state of Alabama experienced a loss of 120 secondary principals that were African-American (Parker, 2017, p.1099). During the same time frame, the state of Kentucky lost 314 African-American leaders going from 350 to 36 (Bradley, 2010). In Texas, the number of African-American leaders declined by 600 (Bradley, 2010). This decline speaks directly to the lack of modern-day African-American superintendents as the direct pipeline for women of color is the principal level role.

Furthermore, in the years after *Brown v. Board* school districts experienced governance changes that resulted in a disproportionate number of White superintendents, school leaders and teachers serving school communities with predominately African-American students. Leadership shifts occurred due to both expected qualifications and certification requirements put into place post *Brown v. Board*, some argue these were policies intended to exclude (Tilman, 2004, p. 297).

Shifts also occurred due to regional racial expectations and beliefs. In the South, prevailing *de facto* segregation and White dominance were incongruent with the idea of White educators being supervised by African-American school/district leaders. This idea was also applied to the idea of African-American teachers teaching White children—a practice that was not accepted in other parts of the country, much less the South (Roy, 2019).

To date, the number of African-American educational leaders including superintendents have not reached pre-*Brown v. Board* numbers (Lutz, 2017). The results of Brown vs. Board have contributed to the 2020 landscape for African-American women senior leaders and superintendents, both in terms of the political barriers to overcome, the Whitening of leadership expectations in education, and the acceptance of African-American leadership with a predominantly White student body.

Underrepresentation of African-American Women in Executive Leadership

Representation matters. The underrepresentation of African-American women in senior-level roles reflects the absence of diversity needed not only to represent the growing diversity of students in general, but also the diversity in thought needed to improve outcomes for all students. The concept of representation speaks to the act of one standing on behalf of someone or something that has similar norms, values, or characteristics (England & Stewart, 1989). For this study, it is important to note that representation can come in the form of active representation (as defined above) or passive representation (England & Stewart, 1989). The idea of passive representation focuses on the idea of leaders representing those constituents of the same demographic background. This concept then gives birth to the idea that passive representation leads to other types of representation such as active and/or direct representation.

England, Meier, and Stewart (1989) argued that in school districts, passive representation is achieved when leaders hire a superintendent of color, who then hires school leaders of color, who then hire more teachers of color (England & Stewart, 1989). This idea applies not only to race but extends to one's gender, one's geographic location, and/or socioeconomic status. It is fair to say that majority of White school boards or boards that otherwise reflect the dominant culture are less likely to hire an African-American woman to a superintendent role, which directly impacts the percentage of African-American women senior leaders.

With this in mind, there is substantial research showing that women and, in particular, African-American women, are underrepresented in the role of school administrators (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013). In America, women of color represent 10.9% of the nation's teachers, 12.3% of the nation's principals, but only 2.2% of the nation's superintendents (Alston, 2005). Women of color, and more specifically African-American women, go largely underrepresented as superintendents. This can be seen in the early stages of the leadership pipeline. Teachers are most commonly the pipeline for school leadership; therefore, if there is a shortage of female African-American teachers, then there will be a shortage of female African-American principals and thus a likely shortage of African-American women at the senior leader level (NCES, 2019). This rationale can also explain the lack of African-American women superintendents. If the traditional pathway to the superintendent chair is through building leadership, then a shrinking pool of teachers of color would certainly influence the number of applicants able to serve in the senior-level role (Alston, 1996).

Despite the evidence of fewer African-American graduates applying for teaching positions, the number of African-Americans with school administrator certifications has increased; therefore, one could argue that the level of interest in leadership roles in schools and

districts among African-Americans is increasing (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2019). Despite the increase in African Americans receiving administrator certification, the number of African-American women appointed to the superintendency has not increased. This suggests that there are other barriers in place limiting their access to these highly coveted positions (AASA, 2019).

Systemic Barriers to the Superintendency for African-American Women

Structural limitations hinder African-American women in pursuit of superintendent roles. On average, the pathway to the superintendent role for African-American women is longer compared to their White counterparts (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). A quarter of African-American women applying for the role wait 5 years or more compared to only 8% of White women waiting 5 years or more (Alston, 2005). White men also experience a higher rate of first-time placement when applying to the superintendent role than African-American women. According to Tilman and Cochran (2000), on average 70% of White men are hired to the role of superintendent the first time they apply compared to 56% of African-American women. Furthermore, evidence suggests that superintendents of color, more specifically African-American superintendents, are more likely to be hired if the school board is relatively diverse (Gales-Johnson, 2013). Fifty-eight percent of superintendents are African-American on a board that includes two or more members of color (Allen, 2005). Board diversity is not a limiting factor for White women or White men, in which only 12% of White women and 9% of White men work for boards that have two or more board members of color (Allen, 1995).

African-American women, despite their qualifications, continue to occupy entry-level positions in the profession and in these positions, they face varied microaggressions which form significant barriers to their advancement (Pruitt, 2015). Microaggressions can come in the form

of punitive evaluations, labeling African-American women as difficult, and not providing access to training or development opportunities to increase their effectiveness (Pruitt, 2015). African-American women also experience a bias in leadership expectations, supported by findings that African-American women are promoted less frequently than White men due to the preconceived notions of their abilities to lead (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014). Tillman and Cochran (2000) stated that African-American women must work harder, be more strategic, and prove themselves by exceeding the expectations of their White counterparts and other minorities in order to be seen as an effective leader (Cochran & Tillman, 2000). These barriers are not unique to education leadership, but permeate other fields as well.

Furthermore, African-American women historically as well as today have experienced systemic barriers that take the form of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Progress has been made, however racial and gender bias still hinder the trajectory and acceptance of African-American women aspiring into leadership roles, especially those that reflect the highest organizational seat, like senior leaders or superintendent (Collins, 2010). Research continues to support the idea that there is gender and race preference in appointing superintendents. The ascension order for hiring superintendents is White men, African-American men, White women, African-American women (Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

African-American women experience leadership bias in the form of limited professional pathways not typically leading to senior-level or other leadership roles (Alston, 2000; Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan, 2000 & Shakeshaft, 1987). The pathway to the senior chair or superintendent role for women of color, more specifically African-American women, is not the traditional one experienced by other race and gender superintendents (Shakeshaft, 1987; Brunner, 1999; Vail, 1999). Oftentimes African-American women are positioned as elementary

level leaders which leads to district level instructional coaching roles, compared to serving as secondary leader which leads to the superintendency. Not serving in a secondary school role is a substantial disadvantage because staff not in highly visible positions are often not seen as superintendent material.

The American Association of School Administrators conducted a study in which they found that women who became superintendents spent more time as classroom teachers than men with the same qualifications and experience (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). The results of the study indicate that gender bias exists among certain positions and pathways to the superintendent chair, such as department chair bias (Colflesh, 2000; Glass, 2000). Limited pathways and limited positionality greatly impact the advancement and professional socialization of African-American women aspiring for administrative roles, excluding them from supporting networks of support, recognition, visibility and the right experiences to ascend to the top (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). African-American women also often lack professional socialization, which supports the notion that African-American women lack the networking, mentoring, and other professional relationships that assist in upward mobility within an organization (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000).

African-American women who aspire to the superintendent role are placed at a disadvantage due to the lack of mentorship and professional networking that provides the social capital to aid them in obtaining a senior role (Winn, 2013). The lack of social and professional capital is a systemic barrier that further hinders their professional leverage (Grogan, 2000). Due to the low numbers of African-American women serving in administrative positions, the probability of an African-American women educator aspiring to become a senior leader and seeking pathways of professional socialization is low (Shakeshaft, 1987; Gregory, 1999;

Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000). Lack of representation limits the number of mentors and supports that can help aspiring leaders of color connect and culturally navigate the organization. One systemic barrier that minority women encounter is a lack of sponsored mobility (Ortiz, 2008). Sponsored mobility is defined as the mentorship and sponsorship of a senior member to a person aspiring to the same professional role they have (Ortiz, 2008). Since most senior-level positions are held by White men, African-American women often do not experience sponsored mobility from someone who looks like them or who can culturally connect with them and help them navigate the organization and role to which they aspire (Ortiz, 2008).

Savior Complex of Systems Placing African-American Women in Superintendent Roles

On the rare occasion that an African-American woman is placed in a superintendent role, they are routinely placed in organizations where the environment is challenging (Hodge, 2017). "Messiahs, scapegoats, and sacrificial lambs" is a term coined by Maxine Downing (2009) to describe what African-American women serving in senior-level roles or superintendent roles experience in the urban public-school settings (Downing, 2009). When appointed to the superintendent chair, African-American women are expected to transform failing districts with limited resources. They are oftentimes appointed to take the fall for the previous administrator and can be scapegoated as the reason for failure. Furthermore, African-American women are asked to complete unprecedented tasks, expected to perform at unrealistic levels and meet unrealistic goals not expected of other leaders often for less compensation while experiencing the most environmental stress (Downing, 2009).

When given the chance, African-American women are often saddled with challenging superintendent circumstances and roles, predominantly located in urban districts that were once led by White men. Downing (2009) notes that African-American women are usually appointed to

the position of superintendent in response to a crisis the district was facing or when the academic performance of multiple schools in the district was extremely low (Hill & Ragland, 1995). As Hill and Ragland (1995) note, "Even a cursory observation can lead one to the conclusion that when the big city school systems went bankrupt and when they became overwhelmingly Black, Black men and women were recruited and became the messiahs, the scapegoats, or the sacrificial lambs" (p. 398).

In response to being hired as transformational leaders, along with a commitment to doing "whatever it takes," African-American men and women superintendents are presented with uniquely challenging experiences and are burdened with the nearly impossible tasks of addressing declines in academic achievement, deficient financial landscapes, and pressure from the community to act urgently (Banks & Townsel, 1975; Hill & Ragland, 1995). In the attempt to transform these failing districts, African-American superintendents are forced to clean house and shift practices in a radical manner that makes them seem difficult or tough. Despite the success, they are typically released after only moderate progress is made (Bjork & Rogers, 1999).

Why We Need African-American Women Leaders

As of 2020, the United States lacks a cohesive and comprehensive strategy to educate children of color, more specifically African-American students (OECD Library, 2014). With the growing population of students of color in the American public education system, and a corresponding decrease of non-minority students, it is important to have a corps of educators and leaders that reflect shifting student demographics (Plantyl et al., 2008).

It is commonly understood that leadership that represents the cultural and ethnic groups of American society is important for *all* students (Battle & Gruber, 2009). Representation and

cultural connections matter when making decisions on behalf of students. School leaders of color contribute to the motivation, expectations, and achievement levels of students of color (Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2008). A 2004 study conducted by Goldsmith, found that African-American and Hispanic students have higher levels of optimism and more positive attitudes towards school when they have a teacher of color and or school leader of color (Goldsmith, 2004). Multiple studies demonstrate the ways in which African-American administrators are effective role models for African-American students (Magdaleno, 2006; Tillman, 2004). This role modeling is significant to these learners' identity development and future aspirations (Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2008).

With the increase of students of color and the projected increase of women in America, the need to have African-American women in senior roles is important. African-American women have always had an influence on the advancement of education within the African-American community (Moore, 2013) and have always played the role of advocate and the carrier of justice for oppressed groups (Freire, 2007). It is because of their fight to persevere in an oppressive society and their fierce advocacy for the social justice of others that they may be seen as change agents and thus potentially alter the reality of students of color largely underserved by the current education system (Freire, 2007). It is partly because of these attributes that African-American women are often tasked with leading schools that are deemed “high needs”; schools that have a high percentage of free and reduced lunch and poor academic standing (Cole, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, African-American women often find themselves being appointed to urban schools requiring “transformational leadership” to improve the school and address its unique challenges. This phenomenon can also be seen at the senior-level, as they are often appointed to school districts that are in high need. There are challenging circumstances

associated with these types of districts and thus they do not typically attract highly qualified applicants. As a result, they often reach out to applicants seeking opportunities not often presented to them (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2001; Fultz, 1995; Loder, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 1996, 2000, 2003). Oftentimes, those that fill the position are people representing marginalized groups (Anderson 1988; Fairclough 2001; Fultz 1995; Loder 2002; Siddle-Walker 1996, 2000, 2003).

When African-American women are hired for and able to maintain the role of superintendent in the public school system, they are most commonly noted to be risk-takers; they embody grit, are resilient, establish high expectations, and have strong accountability measures (Quantz, 1991). It is, in part, because of these positive qualities that African-American women superintendents are twice as likely as White women to claim they were hired as transformational leaders and/or change agents to lead reform efforts (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2006; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

Strategies to Aid African-American Women in the Superintendent Role

Despite being underrepresented, African-American women serving in senior-level roles or serving as superintendents claim there are key strategies that can assist others in ascending to the senior-level roles and or superintendent (Alston, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Glass, 2000; Jackson, 1995; Ortiz, 1998). In order to ascend to the senior chair, African-American women point to professional positioning as a key strategy (Glass, 2000). Professional positioning speaks to the ability of carefully selecting career steps aligned to the aspired role. An example of professional positioning in school systems is an aspiring senior leader and/or superintendent first becoming a secondary leader which exponentially increases their likelihood of obtaining a senior-level role in comparison to serving as an elementary school leader.

The study of professional positioning details the critical nature of professional socialization to the success in achieving senior-level roles and or the superintendent role in the field of public education (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Professional socialization can be defined as the process by which people learn during their training—a common form of which is mentoring (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1987). In addition to professional positioning, African-American women benefit from mentoring. According to research, mentoring not only aids the facilitation of one navigating the pathway to leadership, it also helps them sustain the position. While mentoring is a key strategy for African-American women, finding mentors that reflect the same cultural connection is a challenge. Most mentors provide mentorship for those that share their identity (Alston, 2000). African-American women reported receiving professional socialization more often from other African-American women than other individuals in their field including those that had stronger career alignment with them (American Association of School Administrators, 2000). African-American women who have mentors and are able to maintain a positive relationship with their mentor and their monitor's professional network are able to ascend and sustain higher-level positions (Brown, 2014).

While taking advantage of strategic positioning and professional socialization, it is important for African-American women to maintain their identity—they must learn how to express their true selves in order to sustain their careers (Brown, 2014). African-American women must also continue to refine their interpersonal skills, as cultural barriers and misinterpretations of their ability to engage with others can lead to workplace bias that hinders their ability to ascend to the senior-level role (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000).

Other strategies to support African-American women in the role are creating a good working relationship with the Board, maintaining relationships with work staff and creating

emotional boundaries (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). However, there is still much to be understood about the strategies that African-American women employ to successfully maintain their positions (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Terranova et al., 2016; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

The Continued Growth of African-American Women in Professional Spaces

Even though there are a host of barriers that African-American women aspiring to the senior-level role of superintendent experience compared to their counterparts, there are a number of African-American women experiencing success outside of education spaces, in particular. When examining African-American women serving as directors or organization leads, studies have found that African-American women enter their organizations confidently and express an interest in leadership (Pace, 2018). In fact, according to a Nielsen survey, 64% of African-American women in America communicate that their career objective is to ascend to the top of their profession (Roberts & Washington, 2019).

During a study conducted by Cindy Pace (2018) in which she examined 23 African-American women at a Fortune 500 company, she outlines the various professional motivations, skills, and developmental strategies African-American women have used to ascend to leadership (Pace, 2018). The study illuminated the level of ambition that African-American women possess in the pursuit of higher career goals. The study found the career aspiration itself was motivation and allowed the studied women to make the necessary sacrifices to progress in their careers. These sacrifices included: engaging in lateral promotions, working extended hours, taking on undesirable tasks, and leaving companies for better opportunities (Pace, 2018). The African-American women in this study often had accepted roles and assignments that were beyond their expertise, which is congruent with the notion that African-American women often have to prove their ability beyond the traditional expectations. The African-American women in the study often

communicated that they have to go above and beyond other aspiring colleagues in order to be recognized and considered for leadership roles. In order for African-American women to access leadership, they need the opportunity to manage people, to negotiate, and communicate effectively. These opportunities allow for African-American women to become more intimate with strategy and development, which are important experiences needed to manage an urban district (Pace, 2018).

In another study, Carlton, Lagde, Smith and Watkins (2018) further explored how African-American women executive leaders navigate the landscape of an organization, overcoming invisibility as they lead in the executive chair (Carlton, Lagde, Smith & Watkins, 2018). During their study, they interviewed 59 African-American women executives who served in senior-level roles in large American corporations. The study examined the barriers, strategies, and skill sets they used to manage organizational change as they navigated their careers in organizations where leadership lacked diversity. The study noted that a key to African-American women's success is the ability to navigate "intersectional invisibility," or the concept of being overlooked or not seen due to one being a member of an underrepresented group (Carlton, Lagde, Smith & Watkins, 2018). They found that African-American women challenged this concept by accepting highly visible tasks or accepting high-risk roles that created a platform for them to be noticed and eventually ascend to higher ranks in the organization (Carlton, Lagde, Smith, & Watkins, 2018).

The challenge of this practice is the duality inherent in it. In tackling the idea of intersectional invisibility, African-American women have to balance the ability to be physically noticed while their cognitive abilities and performance continue to go unnoticed. They often have to physically overperform to be acknowledged while not receiving recognition for their

cognitive contributions (Carlton et al. ,2018). The irony of being an African-American woman in select organizations is that, while being highly visible due to lack of representation, they are nevertheless physically overlooked as are their value and contribution to the organization. In order to navigate in these organizational terrains, African-American women signal that they must develop increased self-awareness to recognize when they are being invisible as well as visible. They also note that as their professional journey progresses, African-American women would start accepting or volunteering for higher risk assignments to become visible to upper-level management. Districts can learn to first physically acknowledge African-American women as well as hire more to increase the level of physical presence. This particular study also shed light on African-American women disproportionately being given precarious assignments, which is a phenomenon referred to as the "glass cliff" (Haslam & Ryan, 2005). Glass cliffs can be seen as negative or punitive; however, most African-American women in the study interpreted the tasks they took on as strategic opportunities to challenge their invisibility and as an opportunity to prove their worth to their leader (Carlton, Lagde, Smith, &Watkins, 2018)—a point that Bloom and Erlandson (2003) also acknowledge in their study when they note that many African-American female principals lead the most troubling urban schools.

Finally, due to the paucity of available African-American superintendent mentors, African-American women need to look outside of their own identity group for mentors. They should look for and find other people of color or someone that shares some other identity characteristic to become their mentor and help them navigate the unspoken cultural structures of their organization and/or career path (Carlton et al., 2018).

According to Muir (2014), African-American women can seek an informal, formal mentor or receive mentorship from a leader preparation program (Muir, 2014). Bynum (2015),

notes that African-American women more often engage in an informal mentorship as the traditional roles of a mentorship reflect the structure of a White male-dominant structure and position marginalized people to conform to the norms of White male leadership (Bynum, 2015). Due to the lack of organizational diversity, African-American women seek mentors outside the organization to receive support and guidance (Celestin, 2003).

While forming the informal mentorships with mentors inside and outside the organization, protégés gain necessary unspoken and unwritten practices, skills, and understandings including being resilient, coping with complex emotions, and managing hypersensitivity and hypervisibility to navigate the leadership ladder (Carlton, Lagde, Smith & Watkins, 2018).

African-American Superintendents in the Charter Space

A greater number of charter school principals are now African-American and Hispanic compared to their peers in traditional public schools, according to Federal data (Scott & DiMartino, 2010). To date, public charter schools employ a more diverse leadership workforce than traditional public schools. Sixteen percent of principals serving in the charter sector are African-American, compared to 10 percent in traditional public schools (Scott & DiMartino, 2010). In just the past five years, African-American student enrollment in charter schools has grown by 200,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). African-American students now account for 27 percent of charter school enrollment (Maxwell, 2017). With the increase in students of color, charter schools and collaborative networks are making an intentional investment in recruiting and supporting leaders of color (Maxwell, 2017).

Non-profit charter organizations, such as *Charter School Growth Fund* and *New Schools Venture Fund,* are promoting grant funding to support African-Americans in senior-level roles.

New Schools Venture Fund supports over 27.9 million students in charter organizations. As an organization directly supporting over 27.9 million students, New Schools Venture Fund's vision is to reimagine learning so it works for every student, which includes incentivizing the diversification of leadership at the senior-level. NSVF acknowledges the need for diverse teachers and education leaders who understand the backgrounds and life experiences of the students they serve, so they are making a financial investment to charter organizations that have diverse leaders. Unfortunately, this is where our understanding of African-Americans in senior-level roles in charter schools ends. Limited literature exists on African-American women serving in senior or superintendent roles in the public charter sector.

The Need for the Current Study

Traditional public schools serving in the urban area would greatly benefit from developing an organizational culture where they are able to recruit, develop, and sustain the employment of African-American women serving senior-level roles (Harris, 2001). African-American women administrators, while maybe not formally declaring their intentions, are nevertheless frequently seeking and/or aspiring to lead in schools and districts; therefore, the perspectives of African-American women executives are needed to help build an educational ecosystem that supports and sustains their pathways to school leadership. The current literature does not adequately capture all voices across the varying sectors that include both traditional and charter educational organizations.

African-American women leaders are usually selected to take positions in urban settings where a large percentage of the students are minority (Gooden, 2005). Districts are not uniquely challenged because they have a high number of minority students; there are other variables that make working in a high minority district challenging. For example, having a high number of

economically disadvantaged students and the trauma associated with it, including achievement gaps (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011). There is an increasing body of literature that claims districts with a high African-American population need dynamic and transformational leaders who are capable and willing to take on the task of leading through myriad challenges (Noguera, 2015).

What is evident in this literature review is that African-American women are willing to embrace these challenging circumstances and should therefore be given an equitable opportunity to lead. Documenting the experiences and conducting more aggressive and aligned studies on African-American women executives will help urban districts develop stronger organizational structures to support African-Americans aspiring to and serving in senior-level roles.

This study will address the gaps in literature that persist between analyzing organizational structures, organizational cultures, hiring, development practices, and experiences of African-American women serving as senior and or superintendents in the charter sector compared to the traditional sector.

CHAPTER 3:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the experiences of African-American women as they navigate their experiences and how they internalize their experience as the most senior leader in the public charter school spaces is a critical component of this study. African-American women are different from other women and are different from African-American men. Understanding the duality of the marginalization that African-American women experience assists in grounding the study and understanding the unique barriers that they face in aspiring to the senior-most level role. Two distinct theoretical frameworks will provide a foundation for understanding the complexity of marginalization that African-American women experience: Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Intersectionality Theory (IT). These frameworks were selected as they speak directly to the narratives and multi-marginalization of African-American women. It is acknowledged that African-American women are not monolithic, however, the general experiences shared in these frameworks speak to the historical perspectives and the plights of African-American women in general. These frameworks also contextualize the stories shared by the research participants.

FST makes three principal claims. It states, that knowledge is socially constructed and marginalized groups, one being women, are socially positioned to be aware of things non-marginalized groups are not, and research should start with the lived experiences of the marginalized because "…the perspective of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than that of the more powerful (Harding, 1987, p. 142). African-American women oftentimes have to confront stereotypes related to their identity before they even interact with other people in personal or professional spaces. For example, African-American women have been labeled as

angry, bossy, pushy, and aggressive, many of which are all behaviors and dispositions that are expected, rewarded, and even sought after in leaders of other races/genders. The women in the study mentioned despite their seniority they often had to combat these stereotypes which created an environment where they had to become highly conscientious of their actions and how people in their organizations perceived them making them feel at times psychologically unsafe. The notation of psychological safety is often referenced in the

Furthermore, African-Americans have to suppress certain aspects of who they are in their work roles in order to be seen as acceptable to others. In response to an awareness of this, African-American women are often forced to mentally strategize in order to position themselves to counter the narrative. The energy spent engaging in this activity can be exhausting and takes away from energy that could be put into building their leadership work as well as tarnishes the overall experience they have in their leadership roles they play inside and outside the educational space.

In centering the perspectives of the marginalized, Feminist Standpoint Theory gives validity to the narratives of those experiencing marginalization and provides a starting point to understanding how to remove systemic barriers and better support them in their roles. This theory also provides non-marginalized practitioners with a framework and practical knowledge essential to address the systemic and institutional barriers that burden the recruitment and retention of African-American women in educational leadership roles.

In this study, African-American women participants were given the space to share their authentic stories and speak to the institutional barriers they have (and have yet) to overcome. Their narratives will be insightful and helpful to all non-marginalized systems leaders, and the education ecosystem in identifying institutional structures that limit growth for all. FST gives

their stories validity and allows for marginalized women to be the experts. The study elicited these stories through the use of open-ended questions to garner the perspectives of the participants and allow them to elaborate on their experiences and speak to the individual and shared social and political struggles they have faced as a collective group despite never having interacted with one another.

FST can be either descriptive or normative, allowing for data collection variation. In this study, the data collected will address both value judgments, defining what ought to be, and non-value judgments that speak to what is—in understanding their current realities or lived experiences. For example, women in the study described organizational structures that they thought would improve the organization, such as creating a more diverse and inclusive preparation pipeline or even having those in the organization and those governing the organization take diversity equity and inclusion course to make them more mindful of their privilege and how they treat people of color. In the same study, African-American women had the opportunity to share their day-to-day experiences and reflect on how they experienced organizational barriers based on the organization's embedded bias.

From the themes discerned in the normative data, it is hoped that the collective influence of the power structures within the traditional and charter education system can be understood enough to shift. The descriptive data will complement these by helping to understand the differences that bring nuance to the experiences of African-American women leaders in American education. Their insights and experiences can help evolve the organizational structures to better support people of color.

The resolution of what must be done to recruit, retain, and develop African-American women in senior-most level roles also lies in Feminist Standpoint Theory. As a central claim,

FST argues that it is only in the organization's ability to seek out the African-American experience that systemic problems can be solved (Hegel, 1967). However, the theory is limited in what it can help us uncover because it focuses primarily on gendered hierarchies and African-American women occupy a more complicated social position. Thus, Intersectionality Theory (IT) will provide an ideal complement to FST for the sake of this study. It takes a normative approach to show a particular group's experience in navigating the dynamics of interconnected systems of opportunity and oppression (Shine et al., 2017). As Bowleg (2012) describes, "Intersectionality provides knowledge of how multiple social identities cross at the individual level of one's experience to accentuate interlocking systems of opportunity and subjugation, such as racism and sexism, at the social structural level" (p. 1). For example, African-American women are burdened with two marginalized identities. While the FST speaks to the need for them to share their perspective as a woman, the IT, speaks to the duality of their intersectionality. Which provides a more complex layer of navigating that African-American woman must experience.

Several core tenets of IT ground this study. The first is that social identities are interdependent and interconnected (Bowleg, 2012; Gopaldas, 2013). The theory states that race and gender, for example, are interdependent and complement each other. Their identities cannot be separated in any meaningful way—in other words, the experience of living one identity cannot be fully explained without the intersection of the other. For example, an African-American woman cannot speak solely to being a woman without also discussing the ways in which her experience is also influenced through her racial identity. This also means and acknowledges that other identities may experience adversity, however, it is the intersectionality of living more than one marginalized identity that reveals the unique complexity of such an experience. For example, and White women may experience adversity because of gender, or a

Black man may experience adversity because of his race; African-American women endure multiplicative adversity as a result of both gender and race (Charleston et al., 2014). This complexity surfaces multiple times in the research findings. IT points to the reality that African-American women are positioned within structures of power differently from other women; they are so uniquely positioned within hierarchical structures of power that different oppressed groups often oppress them. This is brought to light with the African-American women referencing the need to have more diverse coaching pipelines for emerging senior leaders of color. Even though structures are needed, they need to speak directly to the complexities that women of color, more specifically African-American women, face. An example of this phenomenon is the fact that African-American women make up less than 1% of superintendents, however, are the most aggressive group of post-secondary degree earners (Katz, 2020). African-American women express they are often marginalized by White women in the education sector and are made to feel like a threat as opposed to an asset.

Similar to the Feminist Standpoint Theory, IT expands the knowledge and analysis of lived experiences to include the broader implications of social and institutional influences and will provide merit to the narratives of the participants (Strayhorn, 2017). As Breslin et al. (2017) states, “Intersectionality offers a critical perspective for potentially extending one’s understanding of leadership in the public sector as well as highlighting opportunities and challenges to leadership experiences” (p. 1). African-American women who transcend leadership pathways inside and outside the K-12 system have to display a level of resiliency to any obstacles placed in their path (Zweigenhaft, 2021). Kelleher and Patterson’s (2005) framework extends IT to help understand the four-phase process by which African-American women seeking leadership positions navigate adversity in their workplace they call the “resilience

cycle". Stage one of the resilience cycle, *deteriorating* is a stage in which an unhealthy tension or friction is created that positions the person in a submissive and or powerless position. While this phase may be noted as temporary, it can cause healthy discourse if the frustration and anger are constructively managed by the subject. This phase can be connected with the continuous state of being psychologically unsafe as it relates to the study. A vast amount of literature highlights the obstacles of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and intersectionality's influence on how African-American women navigate their organization's cultural space (Kennedy & Tate, 2019). African-American women in the study and outside the study note their identities often position them in a place where they are forced to sacrifice some of their autonomy, or their self just because they are both African-American and a woman. Some African-American women speak to the idea of having to be the sacrificial lamb as noted in the literature review "Messiahs, scapegoats, and sacrificial lambs" (Downing, 2009). African-American women often come to a decision-making table that was not designed to incorporate their voice; therefore, they are often subjected to microaggressions, unfavorable assignments, or subtlety forced into silence. These implicit and explicit structures that permeate organizational cultures and practices often create potentially unknown discord and make African-American women want to leave for another organization and/or not progress.

Stage two, *adapting*, is a stage in which one's personal actions and mindsets are used to change the situation in which they were positioned to be powerless. During this phase, one confronts the matter; they attempt to mitigate tension and to enter survival mode. Participants in this study will have an opportunity to speak to the moment in which they come to realize they were now using strategies to simply maintain their station or just survive. During the interviews,

the women spoke about creating a community to create a more sustainable environment; they shared they intentionally hired a more diverse team, specifically African-American women.

Stage three, *recovering*, is characterized by an attempt to return to normal or how things were prior to the adverse situation. During this stage, reckoning with adverse events takes place. Participants in this study will explore the impact of this moment and how its outcome shaped their leadership and or ability to lead. While activity in this stage can be questionable, the women in the study have concluded that their situation is unique to them. A part of their plight is to carry that burden and continuously push their organizations to shift their practices and bring to their attention when they are not acting as anti-racist and supporting hyper-masculinity ideals.

Sometimes, a defining moment from stage three allows for reflection and the priming for the fourth stage, which is *growing*. Growing is characterized by becoming resilient, using the adverse situation as a lesson. During this phase, the person moves towards a sustained level of strength. The person is able to surpass their initial level of functionality, ultimately benefitting from the suffering or adverse event. During this stage, African-American women also come to ask the question of whether or not the organization can serve and support them or if they need to leave the organization. Ultimately out of the 12, four transitioned from their roles.

In navigating these pathways, however, how do African-American women cope, and what supports are available to them to navigate and develop resiliency? While literature is limited in the public charter space as it pertains to African-American women seeking the senior-most level role, literature focusing on African-American women seeking senior roles in corporate America does exist. It is not vast; however, it provides conceptual understandings that can be applied to African-American women seeking leadership universally. It is noted that only 1.4% of the CEOs of American companies are African-American women; however, studies

reveal that African-American women seeking executive roles often use common coping strategies such as: shifting, creating support networks, obtaining mentorship, obtaining sponsorships, spirituality and self-care. The strategies have historically helped them combat exclusionary practices, negative stereotypes, the assumed universality of African-American women, invisibility, and environmental challenges (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015).

Shifting is the practice by which African-American women shift their perspective and shift their speech, their body language, and attire to challenge images of inferiority and stereotypes in the workplace (Allison, 2010). This also speaks to code-switching, which forces African-American women to use cognitive energy to shift as opposed to applying it to the work itself. Creating supporting networks is the practice of forming a trusted circle of advisors from the same intersectional identities who can help provide strategy and guidance on how to navigate microaggressions in the workplace. This network is often composed of other African-American women in senior-level roles in other organizations (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015). This study illuminates the need for such spaces and the opportunity to create a community that is linked to survivorship. As mentioned in the literature review, African-American women note community is a key structure in creating a sustainable organizational structure.

A study by Holder, Margo, and Ponterotto (2015) demonstrated that African-American women communicated that mentorship and sponsorship provided them with a feeling of empowerment, and validation. They also stated that the coaching was invaluable, noting that African-American women often are not offered quality mentors or mentors that have shared their experiences. This creates an uneven playing field and places African-American women at a disadvantage. Furthermore, because senior leaders mentor aspiring leaders that are most like them when creating space at the executive level, the fact that African-American women do not

have someone key mentors means that there is no one speaking for them, developing, or providing them with guidance on how to navigate the system.

In the same study, African-American women shared that focusing on spirituality and self-care such as physical exercise, vacation, spending time with family and therapy, were essential to decompressing and relieving the stress associated with the microaggressions associated with being an African-American woman fighting for upward mobility within their career (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015).

The Feminist Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality Theory provided the structural framework that supported the researcher's chosen methodology. Feminist standpoint theory allows the researcher to use the voices and experiences of African-American women, centering them as the experts of the system and organizational structures that create a supportive environment for leaders of color. FST allows us to better understand the lives of the marginalized within the K-12 public charter and traditional systems in a way in which systems can navigate change. Intersectionality theory allowed the researcher to amplify the credibility and experiences of persons with multi-layered oppressed identities. If public K-12 organizations can develop systems that support African-American women in multiple marginalized groups, they can become inclusive of other marginalized groups. In the next chapter, the method is discussed.

CHAPTER 4:

METHOD

Recall that this study explored the organizational factors and or practices that have fostered an environment that has attracted and retained a representative proportion of African-American women in senior-level roles and or superintendents' roles in public charter schools. Thus, this study captured the perspectives of 12 African-American women serving as the most senior-level leader in their charter organization in the public charter sector. The following questions will guide the study:

1. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization attracted them to the organization and to which do they attribute their retention?
2. Concerning organizational advancement and development, how do African-American women in public charter schools perceive their journey to the role of superintendent and/ or senior-level roles?
3. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization are conducive or antithetical to an environment that is nurturing to their emotional, social and professional well-being?

To address the research question in this study, the most appropriate means to capture the data for this study is through a qualitative, phenomenological research design. A phenomenological approach was taken to effectively articulate the experiences of African-American women serving in top-level roles. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for this study because it specifically seeks to gather the lived experiences of the target group—in this case, African-American women in public charter leadership roles. The phenomenological approach

allowed the participants to describe their experiences free from preconceptions and hypotheses (Husserl, 1970). This approach enabled the researcher to analyze and make meaning of the experiences expressed by the participants to arrive at a collective understanding (Moustakas, 1994). It is important to note that districts will learn from African-American women serving in top-level roles through this study. By reading and internalizing the experiences and perspectives of African-American women in charter spaces, traditional districts and other public charter school organizations can then use the views of these women to evaluate their organizational structure, the culture of their organization, and policies to support marginalized groups, more specifically African-American women. While it is crucial to capture the perspectives of African-American women serving in top-level roles in both the traditional and charter public school sector, it is noted that all experiences have an objective and subjective component. Therefore, establishing a comprehensive understanding, one must accept both (Harding, 2004).

The research questions were designed to uncover an understanding of the phenomenon and understand how organizational structures support or create barriers for African-American women in the public school system, especially regarding the senior-most level roles. As described in the previous chapter, Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Intersectionality Theory (IT) served as guiding conceptual frameworks to understand the experiences of African-American women in the senior-most level roles in their charter school network. The importance of the study was evidenced in the disproportionately low number of African-American women in the position of superintendent, even given the increased number of African-American women enrolling in educational leadership programs and attaining the credentials necessary to become superintendent. This study also showed the lack of intentional structures, systems, and prioritization of African-American women in the public K-12 system, and even can be argued

people of color. Suppose organizational structures are built to support African-American women in the most senior-level roles. In that case, it is understood that those supports can trickle down and affect other African-American women or people of color in different roles in the organization, which would demonstrate a more progressive, inclusive, and equitable system.

The current educational leadership of U.S school districts does not reflect the greater diversity of student populations. Seeking and analyzing the lived experiences and perspectives of African-American women senior leaders ultimately may increase the number of African-American women in the role, increase leadership diversity and improve education conditions for the education ecosystem. Taking into account and considering how the African-American women feel and incorporating their voices and thoughts into the design of traditional district practices for hiring, developing, and valuing talent will increase the system's overall effectiveness. For this study, three guiding questions help frame the conditions in which African-American senior-level leaders in public charter schools lead. Therefore, it can provide greater insight into improving and creating more inclusive and supportive environments for leaders who have multi-marginalized intersections.

A few empirical studies have examined a similar phenomenon from the perspective of African-American women superintendents. However, it was only limited to African-American women in the traditional space. This study gives insight into this phenomenon through random and snowball participant selection in the public charter space. This study used a broad, phenomenological, qualitative approach to understanding the lived experiences of 12 African-American women senior leaders/senior-most leaders within their charter network. This chapter details the following: (a) study sample (b) participation selection, (c) procedure and resources (d) data collection, (e) data analysis, (f) credibility and trustworthiness, (g) lens of the researcher.

Study Sample

As a qualitative phenomenological study with a highly-specific type of participant, referral sampling allowed for an intentional selection of participants, also known as snowball sampling (Evans & Rooney, 2014). All 12 participants were referred by another participant (i.e., snowball sampling) or someone in the Charter School Growth Fund network, Chiefs for Change network, Broad's Fellows network, or KIPP network.

Those who participated did so due to their ability to inform the study, use their lived experiences, and respond freely regarding their affairs within their public K-12 districts. All 12 participants met the study criteria of being African-American, a woman, serving as the most senior leader in their organization, and directly managed by the board. Each charter organization has a different organizational system. Therefore, naming a specific position can rule out qualifying participants, so the study set criteria to only engage leaders that were the senior-most leader in their organization, which is aligned to the study's wonderings about their unique perspective.

The participants represent different perspectives given their varied experiences with their organization. Out of the 12 participants selected, eight represent a single-site charter school district and four from a charter management organization. These women also represent various regions in the United States and have a wide variety of leadership experiences and certifications.

Participant Selection

As a result of the snowball sampling method and participant availability, 12 self-identified African-American women senior leaders engaged in a zoom recorded interview for this study. Each participant received an email and consent form to participate upon IRB

approval. A noted limitation of the study, while using the snowball sampling method, not all interested African-American women could engage in this study due to scheduling conflicts.

Of the 12 interviewed, nine are active senior leaders and are currently leading their district for an average of four years. Out of the 12 participants who are now in the role and those who previously served in the position, the average leader tenure was 16 years, ranging from ten years to 25 years.

Five of the participants were in their 30s, while the remaining seven were over 40s or older. According to previous literature conducted on the African-American women superintendent, the average age for the senior-most leader, the superintendent, is between 45 and 65 (Brunner & Gorgan 2019). Therefore, most women in this study accelerated to the most senior-level role in their organization at a quick rate which may influenced how they perceived palpable structural barriers to the role, such as specific licensing and certifications. This allowed for the researcher to further explore the concepts that other elusive systems and practices are in play (AASA, 2019). Six received doctoral degrees. According to the literature, African-American often hold the highest degree in their field (National Center Education Statistics, 2009).

Participant Profiles

Table 1 gives an overview of the 12 African-American women charter leaders selected for the study. The researcher gave each participant a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Two of the 12 leaders led systems that served 300 to 600 students, five led districts with 600 to 800 students, and five led districts with 800 to 5,600 students. Four participants lived in the northeast, five served in the Midwest, and three served in the southern region of the United States. Five of the 12 participants served previously as a principal in the same district. Ten were

mothers; nine noted a significant other in their life in the form of a husband or intimate partner. All participants verbally communicated they felt comfortable sharing their stories and experiences.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Highest Degree Earned	Type of District	Years of Experience	# of years in role	District size	Support system
System L 1	Doctorate	Urban	15	3	300	Husband
System L 2	Masters	Urban	12	6	500	Husband, Mom, Dad
System L 3	Masters	Urban	14	2	300	Husband, Former Colleagues
System L 4	Doctorate	Urban	20	10	800	Husband
System L 5	Doctorate	Urban	10	1	600	Husband
System L 6	Masters	Urban	11	5	1,200	Friends
System L 7	Masters	Urban	20	3	2,500	Friends
System L 8	Doctorate	Urban	10	1	500	Husband
System L 9	Doctorate	Urban	15	4	600	Husband
System L 10	Doctorate	Urban	20	5	800	Mother
System L 11	Masters	Urban	25	3	5,600	Husband
System L 12	Masters	Urban	15	5	4,500	Husband

Procedures and Materials

Each participant received an email informing them of the study and a request to participate. Once participants agreed to participate, they received a calendar invite with logistics. Participants engaged in a 60-minute interview over a video communication platform, Zoom; this

will allow the researcher to gain multiple perspectives across multiple regions without the barrier of travel. Participants choose their preference to interview with the video or without the video feature. Participants engaged in a 1-hour to 2-hour interview in which they were able to address the semi-structured, open response questions provided in the Appendix. The questions allowed each participant to verbally share their perspective, experiences, and journey navigating the system.

Participants received the interview questions at least 120-hours in advance to ensure each participant had processing time. Before each interview, the participant gave the researcher verbal permission to record the interview for transcription purposes and provide the transcription's accuracy. The interview was transcribed within 72-hours using Transcribeme, an online platform, which allowed for annotation of the interviews/data collected. All transcriptions were secure in the University of Oklahoma secure cloud.

Data Collection and Analysis

After transcribing all the interviews, the researcher re-watched all videos and compared them to the transcription to ensure accuracy. This process entails the researcher practicing close reading of the transcriptions in sections, then closely listening to the video and actively comparing the transcriptions with the video. To ensure accuracy, the researcher played the video while reading over the participants' responses question by question, often pausing and replaying the video to revise the transcription to reflect the participant's words.

Once accuracy was confirmed, this process totaled 38 hours of reading over the transcripts and matching them to the correspondence in the video; the original transcriptions were re-read three times in which patterns and repeated ideas emerge. The first reading was to verify coherence and comprehension. The researcher coded the transcripts in the second read and

noted key and repetitive concepts later highlighted by color. In response to the second read, additional codes were formed to help categorize the transcription data based on the preexisting codes. Immediately following this process, the researcher engaged in the third read. The research used a thematic analysis approach to accomplish this process. The researcher read the annotations, created additional annotations, and assigned codes based on familiar concepts, themes, and trends noted in the responses that align with the existing codes. After this step, the researcher conducted another round of code matching and link codes to reflect the more universal concepts repeated throughout the research and responses. Once all data was coded and annotated, the data would be placed into matrices aligned with the research question.

In addition to noting themes, the researcher had the opportunity to read deeper into the participants' responses and begin to document findings outside the research topic that may provide a unique perspective to the study. This often occurs through the researcher sighting information with a high level of relevancy that pertains to the research yet is not directly derived from an interview question; however, a common concept surfaced during the conversation that makes the idea worth noting (Hycner, 1985). Once this happens, new themes emerge, the old themes are reviewed and compared to the latest ones, and the patterns sighted turn into findings and essential data that provide a more comprehensive answer to the research question.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The primary purpose of the analysis process in a qualitative research study is to examine lived experiences from those who share such experiences— rather than viewing it through a secondary lens (Hycner, 1985). The phenomenological data produced by the interviews will allow the researcher to reveal shared insights and perspectives that enabled the researcher to develop findings and prepare final recommendations that address the research questions. When

conducting the qualitative inquiry, the data collected and the results derived from the data collected must be credible and support the integrity of the research (Maxwell 2005). Quantitative research is often noted as research that can prove its validity through data; it relies less on interpretation and more on factual findings from the study. When conducting qualitative research, it is essential to note that the researcher aims to verify all information, thus seeking verification since the data is derived from an individual's lived experiences.

Credibility is a critical criterion that validates the research and makes the findings trustworthy and meaningful. With this type of study, the researcher cannot just assume that the participants are truthful in their responses but rather inform them that the credibility of the research depends on their honesty. One must also note that specific reasonable steps need to take place for the qualitative data to have the necessary rigor while honoring and sustaining the individual's experience.

There are several strategies and steps the researcher should take to increase the validity of the research, to help create more valid qualitative research, 1) encourage participants to be honest -given the level of confidentiality often promised 2) triangulation of data 3) participant criteria 4) examine previous research and research methodology.

In this study, all participants were verbally informed that their identity would remain confidential and therefore should share with all sincerity and honesty without fear. Participants also did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering to uphold the integrity of their responses concerning the study. Additionally, participants did not receive compensation to influence their response or the way they answer select questions. To further verify the accuracy of the information, a copy of the findings was given to each participant as a

member check to clarify information and provide participants with the opportunity to provide feedback on data captured from the interviews.

The researcher listened to the tapes multiple times for the accuracy, voice tone, and body language for data triangulation. In addition to the data collected through the interviews, the researcher used information from the participants' district websites to gain more information about each participant's context and district to achieve a more holistic view of the participants.

As stated in the sample study section, the participants met the research criteria to increase the study's validity. Participants must be African-American, a woman, serving as the most senior leader in their organization and directly managed by the board. The researcher used several studies to create an exemplary process for data collection. Based on the footprints of other qualitative phenomenological studies, the above steps were used to guide the researcher. Therefore, the collected data should be taken for truth, and the process is noted as valid.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the data collection instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As stated by Krefting, 1991, credibility is "obtained from the discovery of human experience as they are lived and perceived by informants" (Krefting, 1991, p. 215). Moreover, because "the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research" (Patton, 1990, p. 14), the researcher's credibility is based on the research's skills, honesty, and integrity. To support the study's credibility, the researcher should describe "relevant aspects of self, including any biases and assumptions, expectations, and experiences that qualify her to conduct such qualitative research" (Greenbank, 2003, p. 87). Since the researcher is an African-American woman leading a charter school system, it is difficult not to have bias, preconceived assumptions, and expectations regarding the study.

The idea behind this study emerged from the researcher's experiences as an African-American woman in education. The researcher's journey in education started in 2009. In 2009, the researcher joined Teach for America and taught 6th-grade geography. After her first year of teaching, she enrolled in the University of Oklahoma's master's program for Education Leadership, Curriculum, and Development. During this time, the researcher knew that she wanted to make education a career pathway and pursue educational leadership. After teaching for three years, she became a building administrator at a middle school. At this time, she was the youngest school leader in the district. After leading the middle school for six years, the researcher became the executive director for a local charter school, where she is the most senior leader and is managed by the district's board.

Throughout her ten years of leadership, she became keenly aware of how race and gender influence people's engagement with her, her work, and other people of color. She can recall specific events where people did not believe she was the school leader and instead thought the assistant principal was the leader. She can remember times when she was in meetings with other district leaders, where her voice was silenced and overlooked. She would comment, and no one would acknowledge it, then a colleague repeated what she said, and it would have received praise.

As a school leader, she often remembered being very frustrated in not having access to specific development opportunities that she saw some of her non-African-American colleagues receive. In response to these experiences and side conversations with other African-American women aspiring to be leaders in the traditional space, grounded her research.

As a charter leader, the researcher began to see other women who looked like her in similar roles. She wondered if this occurs in response to her geographic location, where only one

woman in the entire state of Oklahoma was the most senior leader in her K-12 district, or was this trend nationwide. The research was then conducted to verify the diverse number of leaders in the traditional public-school sector compared to the charter sector. While White men predominantly lead both sectors, the charter sector has a higher percentage of diverse leaders than the traditional sector. With this understanding, the researcher wanted to explore why this phenomenon was occurring. Literature sighted, charter schools are attracting more varied leaders due to their ambitious visions, intentional recruitment, and the lack of bureaucratic systems. With this working knowledge, the researcher wanted to know how African-American women leaders were experiencing a system that appeared to be more invested in supporting diverse leaders.

With the intersectionality of her journey as an African-American woman experiencing the challenges of navigating leadership and value in the traditional school system, the researcher wanted to see if charter systems, while varied, are addressing organizational issues for African-American women differently. It should also be noted that her experience was not shared with participants to influence responses.

CHAPTER 5:

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This study aimed to explore and examine the organizational factors that have fostered an environment where African-American women serving in the most senior role in their charter network felt supported by their organizations. The participants' lived experiences were intended to inform future organizational practices, both in public and private charter and non-charter spaces, pushing the K-12 education system to understand and address organizational structures which can better support African-American women in the educational leadership roles. The research questions that framed the study were:

1. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization attracted them to the organization and to which do they attribute their retention?
2. Concerning organizational advancement and development, how do African-American women in public charter schools perceive their journey to the role of superintendent and/ or senior-level roles?
3. According to African-American women leaders in the public charter sector, what organizational structures or elements of the organization are conducive or antithetical to an environment that is nurturing to their emotional, social and professional well-being?

Each participant was given a pseudonym for this study to ensure confidentiality and protect their identity; further, information that might compromise the identity of the participant, the network, or the community was eliminated from the quotes and context provided in this chapter.

Overview of Findings

With respect to Research Questions 1 and 2, the findings provide insight to the phenomenon of psychological safety and the concept of community and inclusive organizational cultures. Exploration of Research Question 3 revealed that the experiences of African-American women in charter spaces are largely reflective of the social experiences African-American women face in society at large, where their identity of being Black and women created an unapparelled and adverse experience as acknowledged in the Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989). From the findings of the interviews, all participants acknowledged the overt complexities of racism, sexism, and misogyny that African-American women often experience even while serving in the most senior-level role in their network/district. Throughout the interviews, three themes surfaced that reflect the experiences felt and lived by the twelve women in the study. The first theme is the need for psychological safety within the organization and when operating with stakeholders who are extensions of those organizations.

All women in the study noted the need for systems to establish a culture that supports African-American women in feeling safe as their authentic selves and being acknowledged as valuable to the board. The concept of psychological safety was coined by Amy Edmondson, who defined the concept as: "…a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" (1996, p.32). The working definition of psychological safety is displaying oneself outwardly to others without fearing negative consequences to one's self-image, status, or career. The evidence discussed below suggests that African-American women do not have this safety or security even while holding the highest-level position in their organization.

The second theme from the interviews explores the idea of organizations creating space for a community and inclusivity for African-American women. The African-American women in the study expressed their belief that community is a necessary element of survival in the senior leader chair and as a member of the organization. Lack of community can cause a leader to self-isolate and leave the organization, while the presence of community can provide an additional layer of support. An organizational community offers connectivity, support, and space for engagement without judgment or need for social acceptance.

The third theme that surfaced was the need for professional investment in African-American women. According to the African-American women in the study, school systems should invest in development opportunities specifically designed for African-American women. Development opportunities that speak to who they are as marginalized leaders and develop them as senior-level professionals.

Research Question 1: Findings

Findings to Research Question 1 reveal the importance of psychological safety in an organization and the consequences of the lack of psychological safety. In this section, the researcher explored why African-American women were driven to their charter organizations, strategies employed by the charter organization to obtain African-American women as their senior-most leaders, and how psychological safety influences the way African-American women experience their charter organizations. The researcher also further explores the barriers African-American women despite the position in the organization as their intersectionality of being Black and a women influences how they experience organizational systems that were not designed to support their needs as marginalized leaders of color.

Purpose and impact drove. In the traditional public school system, a certificate and or a doctorate is required for the senior-most leader to qualify for the role and thus can be an access barrier. According to the 12 participants, a barrier to accessing the senior-most level role did not come in a tangible form, such as a superintendent certification or a doctorate. Access to the role alone can be an attraction to the role. While participants did not speak to this directly, it can be noted as an unstated contribution to the six that did not possess the certificate or doctorate and still became the senior-most leader in their charter organization.

The 12 participants shared they were attracted to their charter network due to the compelling need to serve where they felt they were needed the most and already knowing the community they would serve. In addition, eight of the 12 women mentioned the lack of bureaucracy made them feel they could have an immediate impact, this was more prevalent with leaders serving in a single site charter organization.

With the push of being purpose-driven, and more convicted to utilize talents to better serve a community more reflective of their identity, one applicant felt compelled to leave a governing body that authorized charters, (and ultimately had to close charters that were not compliant with state expectations), to serving as a leader of one of the underperforming charter schools in her portfolio. This is what she had to say about her desire to move to an organization and role where she could serve the community:

> I became a charter school authorized with the XXX Department of Education. We had a portfolio of about 50 to 40 schools. We were losing some of our schools. We started with 56, by the time I left we had about 40 independent charter schools, and I was running the team at the time, and then right after my role as an authorizer is when I became the second director at the charter school. I wanted to support these schools. Closing them was

not helping the kids or the community. My next step was to make a difference there, I know the system, so I wanted to use my knowledge, my network, and my passion to serve. (System L 9, November 22nd, 2021)

Women in the study mentioned one reason they chose to lead in the public charter realm was in response to the autonomy one would have in a public charter compared to a traditional public system. The women in the study referenced wanting to be trusted to do their job and make the necessary decisions to improve educational outcomes for children without being constantly questioned or having to jump through hoops to get things done, especially when some decisions are urgent. Eleven out of the 12 participants referred to the lack of working with or in opposition with a bargaining party; unions create a more desirable environment to get the work done, and how it needs to be done.

> I will add that all this work was really hard, but I can say in the charter realm that I don't necessarily see in the public-school room, it's just the autonomy. Now, with that autonomy comes a lot of room to fail forward, mistakes, a lot of mistakes made, but I also had the ability to hire fire, which is a huge, huge piece in this. I do not have to negotiate conditions with the union so that is also a huge bonus (System L 4, October 27th, 2021)

In addition to autonomy, African-American women in the study preferred an organization where they could impact change more directly. They did not want to be hindered by bureaucracies or the perceived organizational barriers, which include practices or policies that intentionally create a more stagnant process to change. Here is what one participant said: “I think if there is a system that we're going to influence more as probably charter, because public school traditional systems are giant machines, and Black women, we want to get things done” (System

L 10, November 23rd, 2021). Another participant stated:

> I don't think that my voice, my distaste with what they allow in terms of just the low bar for kids, I think that I would have been viewed as problematic and in this setting with what I've seen. The constraints around traditional public school to catalyze change, I think would have resulted in either me being disillusioned with what we're able to do, you know what I mean? (System L 10, October 27th, 2021).

They also mentioned the pathway to the senior-most chair in the organization was more straightforward and less prescriptive in terms of the prior experience that was needed. In addition to a path free from barriers and plentiful autonomy, participants noted that they believe charter schools have a higher turnover rate and, therefore, have more positions available to support younger and fewer tenured leaders. One participant said the following regarding her experiences leading to the most senior-level role in the organization:

> I was never a principal before I became a superintendent or Executive Director. I was not a traditional classroom teacher either, I had executive leadership experience in non-profit management, had left grad school and started a non-profit organization and then came into the classroom through XXX, so I knew, even in working in the classroom that I desired to go into executive leadership. So it felt like my process had to be, you become principals and you become an ED, but I ended up skipping this step when I became a Regional Vice President. I think it would have been much harder in a traditional system. And then the bureaucracy of the public school system and the stair steps, and there's no way I could have not been a principal and just ended up working at the execute education service center in the type of role in which I'm leading in the charter

> sector, but I think that's true about a lot of things in the charter sector. You can go from being a teacher to the principal, all these things... This turnover is so high. (System L 2, October 27th, 2021)

Courted to fill an organizational need. It is should also be noted that seven of the 12 women were sought after to fill an organizational need. Often, they were sought after by another person of color, acknowledging the community's need and/or a Board that was aware of the racial make-up of the community and the need to ensure that someone leading the organization who reflects the community was present. Once in the position, all participants noted they were highly aware of creating the space and bringing in other African-American women at all levels of the organization.

One participant recalls her experience being selected directly connected to her regional Vice President, seeing the value another African-American woman could bring to the organization. While seven of the 12 mentioned they were sought after, it is also the narrative that they were sought after by another individual who reflected their same gender and racial identity.

> My identity as an African-American woman influenced my ability to even get that role and position because there happened to be an African-American woman as the senior vice president, and so had had she not been in that position, a White man would not have taken that chance on me, I would have automatically been counted out based upon not having the principal experience, but what was really needed in that organization was community investment buy-in in relationship to opening schools, and they knew that I had those deep ties and relationships across the State of Oklahoma, and had exhibited the leadership traits to be able to lead in such a complex environment, so she took... She took a chance on me, and I think that had we not shared the same identity and similar

background experiences, I don't know that someone else would have. (System L 2, October 27th, 2021).

The charter organizations were evident in their search; the organizations where the study's participants served were intentionally seeking Black women to serve as the senior-most leaders. One applicant shared the following about her organization's reasoning for wanting and selecting a Black woman:

> I think one of the things that I had heard for the charter school in particular was they were looking for a Black leader, or at least somebody who identified as a person of color and their real preference was for a Black woman now, just for the heck of context, I think I was the third, maybe fourth Executive Director for the school, we were all Black women. They've never had a White school leader, they've never had a male sees this is something that they have consistently worked at, which is making sure that the person they hire is part of a diverse pool and they are a diversity hire, but to anything the same was true for XXX, very much wanting to hire more people of color. (System L 9, November 22nd, 2021).

While seven of the women recall their organization's intentions to hire people of color and, more specifically, African-American women or women who identified as Black, all seven also mention the lack of inclusion. While the most senior leader in the organization, the African-American women did not feel their organization embraced their whole identity. Some noted that while their organization focused on the qualitative aspect of diversity, meaning increasing the number of people of color in the organization, the organization did not focus on its attempts to foster an inclusive culture. To support this claim, one participant shared the following:

> But to your second point around the inclusion efforts, I think that's where many of the

> organizations fail is they want to think about the quantitative aspects of diversity, but they don't stick with the qualitative aspect, which is how you create a culture and climate that creates a sense of belonging for your staff, and they sort of figure it, we'll just hire more Black people, they'll do the job and that of that, but they don't consider all of the systemic barriers that we're keeping. You from hiring Black people before, we'll show up in the way that they experience the organization, so that was a huge blind spot for both of those pies.

To create a more inclusive environment that would make the environment more psychologically safe, the participants informed the researcher that they started the community by hiring other qualified women and sharing their identical identity makeup with the organization. While this can be noted as similar efforts of the organization, wanting to increase the number of people of color, the difference is the intent behind the hire. The organizations hired African-American women to support the organization's connection need instead of valuing all aspects of the hire. When the African-American women were in the position to hire other team members, they were intentional in providing opportunities to women who shared similar workplace expectations, demonstrated results, and culturally understood the barriers. They often select other African-American women who understood the assignment and could elevate the environment while still being connected to select pain points that would help them progress the organization. According to one participant: "I ended up hiring and promoting and building a team of Black women." (System L 2, October 27th, 2021)

The importance and priority of hiring a more diverse pool of applicants, more specifically African-American women or Black women, comes from embracing the idea that diversity adds value, as opposed to diversity creating a more diverse organization. The African-American

participants' intentions to create a more diverse and culturally-inclusive team stems from their understanding that more diverse organizations have better organizational outcomes. The following quote highlights her thoughts on hiring other African-American women:

> The mindset that they should be adopting is a mindset where diversity and uniqueness of the people who work here really is our leverage point, that's what makes us a smarter organization, and that it allows us to perform better because we have such a diverse pool of people to work here. And so that mindset is at play than people of color will feel more supported. (System L 6, October 27th, 2021).

Another participant noted the following about feeling a sense of responsibility in creating a pipeline for African-American women: “There's something other than the things that I have been focused on, which is bringing, ensuring that we have other Black women leaders moving up the pipeline, and that's the part that I keep my eye on is checking on the progress of specific people…” (System L 7, November 1st, 2021).

Psychological safety. While participants were called to serve their respective organizations given the mission, community, and pathways available, all 12 women noted that the system was not designed with their psychological safety in mind. Intersectionality theory states that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity. For the participants in this study, the lack of psychological safety felt can be attributed to their being a double minority within a system largely based in and supported by dominant race and gender (i.e., White, male) hierarchies and systems.

The women mentioned times where their competence was questioned, their identities were not acknowledged, and they did not feel valued as the most senior leader on the team as a Black woman. While all 12 participants served as the most senior leader in their organization,

they felt even their subordinates would often not honor them as senior leaders. They felt like their subordinates, White and sometimes other people of color, including African-American women, would question their decisions, not a complete task, and create a strained management relationship because they were Black and women. The women often noted that they felt like they would have received different treatment if they would have been a White man, a White woman, or a Black man. One participant shared the following:

> I often found that my identity as a Black woman... But even when I had subordinates who were White, would be like fact-checked or I was not completely trusted as they had other folks that were previously in this wall that were men, not even. They were of color, but they were men and found that it had its ups and downs, but I definitely saw the intersectionality of my race and my gender play out when they would defer to my White subordinates at times. (System L 8, November 19th, 2021).

All 12 women mentioned, that despite being the senior leader when outside stakeholders engaged with their organization, the stakeholders often acknowledged other individuals who were non-Black or sometimes non-female as the leader instead of them. This suggests, again, that African-American women were not seen as being enough despite their title, qualifications, and formal authority within the organization. The fact that the participants were overlooked as the senior leader based on surface identifiers such as gender and race add to the psychological complexities that African-American women have to face to serve in a high-demand service sector continuously. One participant noted her experience with her White subordinate being continuously acknowledged as the leader opposed to her:

> In several meetings where people refer to my White subordinates before they acknowledge me as a leader in the room, I have had to address on multiple occasions

> people—people's tone when they speak to me because it sounds degrading and when someone else brings up a similar comment their response to them is very different. Also being in this space I feel like I have to be resilient, be perfect, so feel these unhealthy stereotypes of what people always call Black women to be for the simple fact that if I do not deliver or if I do not succeed, I'm not just in this moment hurting me, I'm hurting the opportunity of other African-American women that look like me who aspire to be in this position. Also, just the stress and the emotional…trauma that Black women have to face and advocating for a community that looks like them to donors to board members to other stakeholders that have resources to help your community and you are the person who is advocating on behalf of your community because they're more than just a community to you. They are who you are and really having to always justify the need or justify needing a resource (System L 11, November 19th, 2021).

Another participant shared that external stakeholders judged the participant's potential performance based on her hair as an African-American woman. Despite the progressive declaration of inclusion in organizations, policies, practices, and social stigmas often hinder African-American women from fully present as their authentic selves. The unfortunate reality is that Black women have endured this irrational and discriminatory practice for centuries. Interviews for this study started in October 2021; as of March 18th, 2022, the House of Representatives just passed 235-189 the Crown Act, which makes it illegal for companies to discriminate against Black women's hair. While this concept has been and can be further explored in other research, it signifies that African-American women in this study do not have the opportunity to show up as their authentic selves without being judged. The participant recalled the following:

> One circumstance prior to going to _____. Well, even coming into the _____ space, there were people who weren't necessarily in the organization, but they were organizational partners who commented on me compared to another candidate for the role and commented on the fact that I don't necessarily have my hair straight and...or I did not wear suits all the time as a concern for my ability to do the job. (System L 3, October 28th, 2021)

Again, the women noted that despite their title and position in the organization, they often were silenced at the decision-making table. They often felt underheard by the board, internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, and subordinates. The constant message that Black women can be treated as subordinates despite their title/role surfaced in all 12 interviews. One participant noted the following, which provides an acknowledgment that this treatment extends outside of this study's sample:

> I've heard experienced Black women say, is the sense of not being heard despite their title, that in conversations where decisions are being made, that their opinions are not being heard, and so how does the organization think about sharing equal talking space amongst all the people there, and to what extent are we really elevating the voices of Black women during those conversations, and to what extent do they receive credit for the solutions that they bring to the table? (System L 5, October 27th, 2021).

Another subtheme under psychological safety that emerged was the concept of being free to be their authentic self at work. All 12 women shared they do not feel comfortable being their whole self at work. They feel like they have to selectively choose what part of them they want to share. This concept of not sharing one authentic self does not speak to duality. One is operating with internal opposition; it does, however, speak to the fact that African-American women, as

senior Black leaders are viewed, judged, and evaluated through a White normative lens. As a female leader of color, they have to shift their strategy and be mindful of their interactions, words, and even how much they smile so their work can be viewed with respect instead of an impediment or disruption of progress.

The White normative standard largely influences how African-American women senior leaders can show up to work and engage with others. Table 2 presents an array of quotes from participants which highlight the ways in which they perceived that White normative culture in the workplace was creating severe emotional and psychological internal conflict.

Table 2

Participant Perspectives on the Effects of White Normative Culture on Psychological Safety within the Workplace

Participant	Supporting Quotes from the Interview
System L 5	We uphold White supremacy culture, and that we need to examine ways that we uphold White supremacy culture, and as a result of that...Black women cannot drive. So our systems, consciously or unconsciously, are telling Black women they cannot lead as their authentic selves. That in itself is trying.
System L 6	Most people are going to roll this up into... Every Black woman is aggressive. I'm not even talking about that. I'm talking about stuff and like... You actually don't think I'm intelligent. Do you know what I'm saying? You don't think I'm competent. Like basic stuff that you don't have the confidence in me. Because of your perceptions of Black women and how to like my evaluation is based upon the expectation of a White man.
System L 7	Again, back to this White normative, it could be people trying to do... I don't have the right words, but it's like gaslighting... You know what I mean? A lot of gaslighting. And so I feel like the barriers are psychological, and the barriers are also what we would call title-based as well, is also questioning in meetings, it's also like other opinions being a value.
System L 10	Black women are not perceived in the same way as their Caucasian

	counterparts. I can say the exact same thing as a Caucasian woman and there'd be a very different response, Do not become the angry Black woman and just the Caucasian woman, she was expressing herself. So I also think that they need to be some training for everyone to understand some biases that they have against us.
System L 11	I know I can't fully divest from White supremacy…and maintain my job, that is actually what I know because I have to go in certain spaces, but that is still just difficult, and so I think there is some peace that Black women have to make with how they feel like they have to shed themselves to be at a certain table.

When African-American women do not feel comfortable being their authentic selves, they use energy to decide what parts of themselves are allowed to appear in space. This suppression of identity creates a psychological barrier. It creates tension associated with the work and impacts how one feels about themselves and their work. This internalization then becomes an internalization of how others perceive or receive their actions which creates severe emotional and mental stress and strain. One participant shared the following insights:

> I think Black women are always doing this dance on like how much can I be this and how do you have buttoned up, do I have to be. I'm tired of them like, Oh, can I say this professionally? I think Black women are always in this perpetual jungle gym of how much can I be myself and how buttoned up do I have to be... 'cause (System L 11, November 19th, 2021).

As expressed by the participants, the idea of psychological safety is a privilege that they do not feel like they have access to as women of color despite having positional privilege. The following was shared:

> I did not feel safe at the independent charter school; I did not feel safe at the network. I think what ended up happening was, I think, the challenge for a lot of Black women leaders. I certainly have this experience, is that we don't yet have the privilege of feeling

> safe. So, we have to feel great, so in the face of a lack of safety, we have to sum it up, the courage to speak up about the things that we are experiencing, and so I had to enact a lot of bravery in conversation with the board and in telling them the experience that I was having. And so, I was able to have those conversations, but I cannot say outside of the deal, I don't think there's ever been a job where I have felt truly safe and welcomed and valued in the way that I should. (System L 9, November 1st, 2021).

All women in the study noted the need for systems to establish a culture that supports African-American women in feeling safe as their authentic selves. The concept of psychological safety was coined by Amy Edmondson, who defined the concept as: a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. The working definition of psychological safety is showing and employing oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career. As reported, African-American women do not have this safety or security even as the highest-level member of their organization, despite being intentionally recruited for the role.

The need for psychological safety is essential. Psychological safety allows one to take risks, think creatively, and design strategies. When psychological safety is diminished, the amygdala reverts to survival mode, which varies from person to person. Four of the 12 participants report they experience some form of microaggression that places them in this state frequently, and 12 out of 12 say this is something that does happen. The brain interprets microaggression as a threat. In response, women are using their mental energy to self-preserve and therefore cannot put all their energy into the work.

As noted by the participants, the threat can be felt as a threat to their position, challenging their knowledge, silencing them at the table, naming their normal posture as intimidating, or

even the danger of being hypercritical. Despite being the head of the organization and the most senior leader, the women in the study noted that most of the challenges to this safety came from their Board, outside stakeholders, and horizontal colleagues on their pathway to the senior chair. This mental gymnastics that African-American women in senior spaces experience creates consistent emotional and professional barriers which make success in their work as a leader nearly impossible. Despite this, however, they continue to effectively lead their organizations and support students and families.

Research Question 2: Findings

Findings germane to Research Question 2 reveal that organizational structures in the public charter sector are not always conducive to an environment that nurtures African-American women. According to African-American women leaders in the study, lack of inclusivity created isolation and lack of acceptance within the organization. In this section, the researcher explored how African-American women in this study believe organizations can better build a community reflective of their needs and provide inclusive structures that can support African-American women in their senior leadership roles.

Creating Community. All women in the study noted that their organizations did not have existing structures that allowed for building a community for women in the organization and so they went to significant lengths to seek out community with women outside their organization. Some women in their impromptu communities shared similar work experiences, and others did not. According to one participant, she was forced to create her own community within her organization as well as reach outside her organization to create community.

> I think that a big part of it is other Black women, like we just have to support each other and... It's the informal networks, I would say. But you can formalize them, so when I

> started here, I started, she wasn't a good friend then I didn't know her, but I started the same time as another Black woman, we were in the same part of the organization, but eventually both sort of rose up through the organization together, and that really... And we had a core around us, it wasn't just her, but the two of us having each other and being able to laugh about it, like people confusing us 'cause they did. But being able to laugh about and sit together. Having those networks of support are so important to me, and now in my role, it's different because my network of support is more outside of my region, my peers are the leaders of other CMOS and just like that community (System L 12, November 22nd).

Another participant noted that the lack of community within the organization created a sense of isolation and lack of safety:

> It would be stuff like that, like opportunities to create a community and have that community, the continuous learners together, create safety together, without community the role feels lonely, you have no one to vent to, talk things through and feel safe around (System L 7, October 27th, 2021).

To the senior-most African-American women, the community is so important that it influences the ways in which they think about hiring, as one participant pointed out:

> I've brought in other Black women into the organization who I think right now, our chief equity officer is someone who I recruited specifically because she has been a principal before, and although she was on my team, she's like a person who can be really supportive to other Black women in our organization...Now that she is leaving to start her own region, I'm trying to, again, think about their needs and thinking about that senior-level person that I am bringing in (System L 11, November 19th, 2021).

The essence of community is essential, one participant shared that creating a community is an important step, however, we must be careful how we construct the community and for what purpose. One participant noted that their organization made an effort to bring to together all the African-American women leaders in the organization, however, it was only an annual convening. While this is a progressive step to address the lack of community, it does not fully address the need:

> After completing a study on retaining Black women in the XXX organization, they thought the solution was to create an annual meeting where they could get all the Black women together. I mean, it was a step in the right direction, but by no means do they have it right. Making a one-time connection once a year does not solve the problem. We need ongoing efforts, we need consistent community, and while people can say what is stopping us from doing it ourselves, we work in an organization that does it all the time for White men, so why do we not have the same expectation when it comes to back women. (System L 7, October 27th, 2021).

Community is an essential structure that supports the well-being of individuals in an organization. The need for community goes beyond having a group of individuals brought together around similar interests; it speaks to the concept of belonging, acceptance, and bonding that is not, at times, fully present in the organizations they serve. The African-American women in the study often referenced the need to have community and shared how the lack of community created an emotional deficit in their connection to the organization.

Inclusive Structures. Inclusion was one concept that participants often referenced. They mentioned time and again that, while their organizations were intentional in hiring them—which supports the organization's diversity efforts—the organizations did not create inclusive

environments to support them once they were hired. A general definition of inclusion references how diversity is leveraged to create a more fair, equitable organization where all individuals are valued, feel engaged, and contribute to organizational and societal goals are valued. According to all 12 participants, their organizations did not create inclusive environments, and each participant noted it as an organizational factor that led to burnout. One participant shared the following:

> I think what they did not see or could not see or decided not to see is how much more challenging it is for me to navigate the space as a Black woman, it was like well we gave you the job... So obviously, we don't have any bias, but they did not consider what does it look like to create a space where there is inclusion? They were fine on the diversity part, but they didn't get the inclusion fronts, they didn't understand what it meant to create a sense of belonging, they didn't know how to value the uniqueness that my diversity brings to the table and how that enhances the organization. it's not enough to just hire them, you have to create an environment that is... That embraces their full selves. I think that's where many of the organizations fail is they want to think about the quantitative aspects of diversity, but they don't stick with the qualitative aspect, which is how you create a culture and climate that creates a sense of belonging for your staff, and they sort of figure it, we'll just hire more Black people, they'll do the job and that of that, but they don't consider all of the systemic barriers that were keeping you from hiring Black people before, we'll show up in the way that they experience the organization.

Another participant shared the following regarding her organization's attempts to strive for diversity opposed to inclusion:

> He didn't know how to create psychological safety, they didn't know how to create psychological availability, and so all of those things are necessary when you're dealing

> with diverse folks, particularly Black women, it's not enough to just hire them, you have to create an environment that is... That embraces their full selves, and so I think that if you were to ask them if I were high performing, the answer would be yes, if you were to ask them, how did you celebrate or elevate XXX identity? They would not be able to have that.

Inclusion and community are necessary elements of creating a safe environment. The concept of belonging and being accepted is a foundational desire, especially when one is trying to develop a community to serve and support children.

Research Question 3: Findings

Findings to Research Question 3 reveal that African-American women do not feel or believe their organization makes the necessary investment in their professional development and their financial compensation. Throughout the study, comments and themes that emerged swirled around the idea of lack of investment. The lack of investment was most notable around professional development, however; 4 of the 12 mentioned financial investment. They stated they were not paid the same amount as their peers. In this section, the researcher will share findings regarding to how the participants felts about their organization's investment in their professional development and reveal findings regarding the organization's lack of equitable financial compensation for the role.

Professional Development. According to the African-American women in the study and existing literature, school systems must invest in specific identity-informed development opportunities for African-American women. They also must provide opportunities for African-American women to have formal and nonformal inclusive spaces in the organization and outside the organization where leaders have access to growth opportunities. The African-American

women in the study all claim their current system does not have clear pathways and strategies for targeting their leadership development.

According to the participants, their respective organizations and those like it must be intentional to provide African-American women with the development that acknowledges their identity and its intersection with various leadership competencies. People of color often face unique challenges within their organization and outside their organization while navigating the intersections of race, class, gender, and other identities; this must be considered when providing them with professional development. The lens through which we experience the world is how we must be taught to process it, supporting the notation that African-American women need intentional professional development opportunities as they are forced to process their reality through a non-White lens. One applicant said the following regarding this concept:

> I know I am not the person to feel that space, but hearing for all the African-American women that I had the opportunity to speak with, it's just that professional connection, that professional network, that specific development track that speaks to who we are because we can talk about all these other topics when you insert identity, it takes a whole other layer of complexity that we have to deal with that all we do with... And I think that's why I was just like, Man, I feel so privileged to be a Black woman, and there we add like the most adversity to the point where we don't go to realize it is adverse situations that we're facing just because it's full and that we deal with them. (System L 7, October 2nd, 2021).

Specifically speaking, the women in this study make mention of having access and utilizing Black senior leaders to develop the pipeline of Black middle-level leaders in their organization. While accessing specific development for their professional needs is important, nine of the 12 provided input on creating a more diverse coaching structure to support women of

color at the principal level. It was mentioned that the dynamic of having White women or White men manage and coach African-American women leaders create an unbalanced dynamic that often does not fully develop their leadership competencies. This quote highlights the participants' thoughts:

> I think there's a real thing around management for people who are managing Black women, but there's just like a hole. We have a guy that is really good, he manages Black women, he doesn't anymore, but he used to be directly managed by women, and we have had a lot of conversations with me, so helping him to recognize it, how he was coming across or being... Just like being, I don't know, just not being aware of his impact because of his race and because of the race his has limited leading experiences that they are bringing into that relationship basis like total blindness. And so that's real, and I don't know where people get that from, you know, there's a real impact to leaders who are managed by people who don't understand. Yeah. (System L 12, November 22nd, 2021)

In addition to establishing a more diverse coaching environment to develop African-American women principals, the women in the study also note the need for the coaches to create inclusive communities for women of color.

> I think executive coaching with coaches who share the identity of those women, building intentional communities and networks for them, investing in their development and being invested in their long-term plans. We deserve the investment, like invest in us, we show up, we put in the work. And oftentimes, we are the ones who end up burning out, we driven the most events and brought the most change and invest in us on the front end to build the environment to make this work sustainable, and that's when you'll see transformational outcomes for kids. (System L 8, October 27th, 2021)

While the women in the study mention the need for organizations to create more inclusive leadership pathway preparation programs, one acknowledged her desire to create those pathways; however, structural barriers stood in the way:

> I still think we are struggling to have stuff like mentorship programs, because see the conundrum that we now find ourselves in is like if there are not a lot of Black women in executive positions to mentor those other Black women, you are in this weird is slippery slope. I say some, because a good example of a lever we were able to pull is offering more coaching to Black women, so I coach five Black women and kid, I am kind of like... Me and a few other Black women coaches are like the coaches for Black women, and so do I know that we have a very intentional assignment in leadership coaching because of this research we do. (System L 5, November October 27th, 2021)

The consequences of not providing this inclusive, diverse coaching experience for African-American women were also noted. Participants mentioned the lack of these supportive structures leads African-American women to leave the organization and sometimes the profession, as mentioned by the participants:

> He is a White man and has three people that are managing principals, two of them are White women, and we have a lot of women of color principals, and so there's a real gap there that I've seen, that I'm super aware of, that I can fill in certain ways, but I've never been a principal, so I don't actually have that experience of. But it is, when you are not giving your principals at that level, like the right kind of development makes it really hard for them to stay and want to grow to that next level...(System L 4, October 28th, 2021).

Lack of financial compensation. Some of the participants mentioned being paid less

than their White counterparts; at least three mentioned they received the lowest compensation in their network. One participant recalls leaving her organization due to the inequitable financial compensation:

> The reason I stepped down from my role was because it had come to my attention pretty early on that I was not being compensated equitably. We participated in a compensation study, and this was a study that basically compared most of the salaries at my school to salaries of other schools across the city, and what we learned... Well, I guess what I learned, the board already did this, what I had learned was that XXX was paying the lowest for their executive leader than any other charter school of the same size and the same sort of make-up, if you will. So, when you look at other charters with this number of students enrolled, this number of teachers, and this grade scale, XXX was in the bottom 10% of pay, and we had learned about this pretty early, and to get them to adjust the salary was... It was a really, really challenging thing, and they still did not adjust it to the rate that it should have been, and then when we participated in the study again, 'cause you participate every two years, it was still showing that we were basically trailing the past, and it really ended up being. (System L 9, November 1st, 2021).

According to literature, it is true that women get paid less than men, despite the other discriminatory factors in organizations. Another participant offered her perspective:

> I knew what I was getting into, like I knew this job was going to be difficult, as a Black women I was going to have to work harder, I did not have room to fail. Knowing this, I somewhat expected certain fights like people treating me differently, people questioning me, I mean these things have happened before. Its not okay, but it happens to us. The thing that actually caught me off guard was the discrepancy in pay. When I found out that

> my other network collogues were making more than me and they did not have as much work to do in turning around their region, I was upset. When I brought this to my board and they choose not to match my salary demands, I told them I was leaving. I felt guilt for leaving the organization, but I cannot stay where I am not valued. (System L 1, October 26th, 2021)

One final participant comment summarized the needs with respect to financial compensation and the need to financially invest in African-American women:

> You don't pay us enough. We're doing way more than you know, we're doing way more than you know we're doing, and this is a choice for us, and this work is meaningful to us in incredibly deep way, it's like these are literally our children, if these are our kids, and yet this is of choice, this is not like an obligation (System L 10, October 27th).

Summary of Findings

All 12 women in the study communicated that they experienced microaggressions, did not feel psychologically safe, needed community, inclusive environments, and lacked investment from their organization in the form of intentional development opportunities and financial compensation. According to the 12 women participating in the study, while charter networks can offer an accelerated pathway to the most senior leadership role in the organization, those networks are not often set up to support African-American women once there. The lack of these structures makes African-American women feel like they are engaging in the work with limited support. The work itself is already more challenging than operating in a system that does not acknowledge or address the specific needs of the leader, which makes leading more complicated. As a result, African-American women feel like they have to be a superhero and work in unrealistic work conditions that negatively weigh on their mental well-being, physical well-

being, and ability to sustain the work. These women often pour everything into their work and want to create a system that equally invests in their quest to lead a charter system/school.

CHAPTER 6:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the organizational factors and or practices that have fostered an environment that has attracted and/or retained a representative proportion of African-American women in senior-level roles and or superintendents' roles in public charter schools. This final chapter presents the findings, implications, and recommendations for the study and will guide future research based on the study results. A phenomenological, qualitative research approach centering African-American women's voices was most fitting approach to this study. African-American women are disproportionately underrepresented in K-12 senior-level roles in the traditional K-12 system; at the same time, there is a growing number of African-American women in the public charter K-12 system. According to existing research, the current system is not designed to adequately support African-American women in leadership roles regardless of the system they serve.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African-American women serving in the most senior-level roles in the charter school organization. Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Intersectionality Theory (IT) did not just provide contextual reference to view and understand the findings, but it provided validity to the voices of the women and turned their lived experiences into vali evidence for change, including recommendations and solutions on how to support African-American women and other people of color. Intersectionality theory allowed the study participants to give voice to their challenges with respect to their social identities. FST leverages the voice/experience of those who have not had access to power and areas of decision-making to participate in the construction of knowledge

and the social structure of reality. The premise of this study was to provide African-American women the power to share their experiences which often go unreported or limited through the lens of objective theory, as opposed to the subjective. Objective theory reflects the pragmatic reality that the law must be based mainly on externals rather than the whim of subjective perception. Due to systematic racism and sexism, African-American women's voices have not always had access to power to construct knowledge. Even those who sit in the senior-most role have limited ability to access power and often yield to White normative structures. All recommendations will be made for this study with African-American women prescribing what they believe organizations can do to support them. During the interviews, each of the 12 African-American women participating in the study was asked to answer ten questions derived from three overriding research questions relating to:

1. Organization's value of African-American women.
2. Organizational structures.
3. Organization's investment in African-American women.

The first research question addressed how African-American women serving in the most senior-level role in their charter organization experience the organizational factors that attract them to the organization. While serving, ten of the 12 shared their need to transform the organization's human capital and hire more people of color and, more specifically, more African-American women. The participants provided insight that they felt compelled not just to serve but transfer their resources, network, and previously acquired knowledge to help transform their organizations. Being the most senior-level leader was not just a job but their civic calling to be the change for their community. As stated in the literature review, it is the fierce advocacy, connection to the community, and the will to be a change agent that makes African-American

senior leaders ideal system leaders (Hollowy & Shockley, 2019). According to Hollowy and Shockley (2019), African-American women largely serve underserved, predominately communities of color in order to positively influence the trajectory of students of color. According to the literature, it is important to note while African-American women are attracted to organizations that serve a reflective community, the reflective community benefits from having a woman of color as well (Blount, 1998). As mentioned early on in this study, with the number of students of color increasing, the importance of increasing the senior-most level leaders to reflect the population is imperative; this is true for both the traditional and charter sectors. Multiple studies demonstrate how African-American administrators are effective role models for African-American students (Tillman, 2004). African-American women have always influenced the advancement of education within the African-American community (Tillman, 2004).

The question then becomes, how can districts effectively know the value African-American women bring to the community? According to the literature, districts and organizations see it fit to hire African-American women when they seek transformational change (Downing, 2009). While efforts to court African-American women to be transformational leaders can mirror courting someone because you value inclusivity and them as a leader, it is very different in practice. Society must see African-American women outside of being the ones that fix a situation or complete a turnaround. The way we value someone to engage in such activities is a toxic relationship that influences how an organization can create systems and practices to support and ultimately appreciate the women once in the organization.

While literature supports the positive impact diverse leaders and African-American women have on the growth and achievement of children of color, those that occupy the role do

not feel like the role was designed for them and that their organizations do not do enough to support them (Greene, 2020). All participants acknowledged that their organization was not designed to support them as African-American women in creating systems that valued them financially, providing access to development opportunities that developed them holistically. The idea of African-American women being undercompensated is not novel.

Despite organizations not meeting the needs of the African-American women in this study, they were resourceful and tried to cultivated the environment they needed to succeed and sustain the work while doing the work. According to literature this is referred to as "resourceful and resilient" (Mayberry, 2018).

The second research question asked how African-American women perceived their journey to the senior-most level role in their organization. While participants could not accurately compare their pathway to a traditional K-12 public school superintendent, it is noted in the literature that before *Brown vs. Board* took place, African-American women found themselves informally serving the role without the title. They took on the task and responsibilities of the senior-most leader in the school community (Revere, 1989). Before *Brown vs. Board*, while the number did not accurately reflect the exact ratio of African-American students in the public system, it was significantly greater (Revere, 1989). Post *Brown vs. Board*, African-American women's upward mobility in the school system descended (Cochran & Tillman, 2000). In addition to certification criteria, the barriers for African-American women seeking the senior-most level role can still be felt today, in 2022.

In this study, the women provided insight into their journey, noting that the charter sector is known for placing personnel on accelerated pathways to leadership. This can directly address high turnover rates. The women shared they felt there was a preference to hire them due to their

stature as African-American women and the connection they could potentially foster with the community. Despite being pursued in some cases and being a preferential hire in other cases, the women shared that their organizations were not equipped to honor them as women or honor their Blackness in the organization.

The third research question was what organizational structures supported their emotional, social and professional well-being. All respondents informed the researcher that their organizations did not have formal organizational structures to help them develop as African-American women leaders. Two of the 12 mentioned their network acknowledged a need to create space for African-American women leaders and created a cohort specifically for African-American women leaders for them to build community. While this was acknowledged as progress and a step in the right direction, it was also noted that this was not enough. They said Black women need more than a cohort. They need intentional coaching; the organization needs to change its policies and practices that reflect a White norm. They need to invest in the professional growth of Black women and acknowledge that Black women bring cultural and professional capital that cannot be taken for granted. This concept is referenced in existing literature. It is stated that African-American women need informal and formal mentorship (Greene, 2020). As mentioned by the women, the concept of receiving effective development tailored to their needs as an African-American woman is rare. It is even more rare to be mentored by another African-American women as the stifled leadership pipeline that is often homogeneous in nature, cripples' African-American women from receiving these roles (Greene, 2020).

Emergent Themes from these Questions

During data analysis, three themes emerged from interviews: (a) psychological safety, (b) community and inclusivity (c) investment. These themes provided insight into the women's personal and professional experiences as the most senior leaders in their organization.

Psychological safety. The concept of being psychologically safe is often the language of privilege. Those who create the spaces often influence the structures and practices within the institutions that shape how people experience the institution. Some may believe it may be the senior-most leader who creates the organizational structures or has the most influence over the organizational structures. The African-American women in the study said they do not have the privilege of having psychological safety even as the most senior-level leader in the organization. The concept of psychological safety is explored in previous literature as it pertains to African-American women superintendents. It is noted that African-American women face microaggressions in the forms of being labeled as difficult and the lack of investment in professional development opportunities to increase their effectiveness (Pruitt, 2015). This impacts the way they are able to show up and be present. Also, the idea that African-American women must harder, be more strategic, and prove themselves by exceeding the expectations of their White counterparts be it internal or external stakeholders, places unhealthy pressure on African-American women to exist outside of themselves (Cochran & Tillman, 2000). According to the participants, all 12 mentioned feeling like they had to exceed expectations in order to be deemed effective or competent in their role.

The historical nature of this phenomenon creates great concern that African-American women in the senior-most level role still endure this treatment 80 years after the first research study conducted on African-American women superintendents. Now one must think if the

senior-most leader does not feel psychologically safe, what does this mean for other African-American women leaders or other leaders of color within their organization? In that case, the organization becomes vulnerable to potential threats, including loss of productivity and leader attrition.

Community and inclusivity. Community is essential to the resiliency, mental, and emotional well-being of African-American women serving in the senior leadership role in the K-12 system. All women in the study shared that they created community by reaching out to other African-American women in their roles. They said the community was essential to normalizing the role; the community also created belonging in a typically White, male-dominated role. The community provided a safe space for them to show up as their authentic self, it was a place for them to receive assistance, and it was a place to formalize support connections (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015). While it was only mentioned by one participant, the idea of community also spans to those who are mentors and sponsors for African-American women (Winn, 2013).

The concept of inclusivity is essential for African-American women leaders to effective in their role. While this topic was explored at the surface level, the idea of being invisible, highlights is a concept in the existing literature that is consistent with what African-American women leaders feel in their organizations (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015). While the word invisible did not explicitly surface in the study findings, the idea of being overlooked and underheard certainly suggests some level of invisibility.

Investment. In addition to wanting systems to invest in the professional growth of African-American women, participants also mentioned the financial disparity they experienced and, as a result, some decided to leave the organization. According to PEW Research Center, women earned 84% of what men earned, including part-time and full-time (PEW Research

Center 2020). Organizations with African-American women as the senior-most leader must assess how they are paying African-American women. Equitable compensation is a form of acknowledgment and value. Paying African-American women equitable wages is not only ethical, it is a moral obligation each organization has to commit to in creating a more fair and more progressive organization that brings their espoused values in alignment with their enacted values. For example, to create organizations that are centered around quality education for Black and Brown students and then to not pay their Black or brown leaders fairly is not ethical.

All women in the study experienced interest in having access to practical, executive coaching and development opportunities that honor them as African-American women and their work. The reality is that due to lack of access to the roles in public education systems, accessing executive coaching from someone who has similar experiences with an understanding of how ones' intersectionality and the overt racism and sexism associated with their identity influences their strategy to lead is difficult. Out of the 12 participants, only five mentioned having access to formal coaching structures where the person performing the coaching services was an African-American woman, or a person who has multiple marginalized identities. In addition to having access to professional coaching that reflects their identity, having quality coaching experiences that are not bogged down by social bias is imperative (Massey, 2008).

One participant mentioned that in a development pathway their organization created for emerging system leaders, she noticed Black women were being managed and not coached. When someone is managed opposed to coached, they are not developing essential skill sets needed to elevate their work. Another participant mentioned that all coaches coaching principals were White men or White women in their organization. This dynamic made African-Americans in their organization feel stifled and micromanaged. All participants believe organizations and

boards need to increase the investment in African-American leadership overall, and the findings here support existing literature in this respect (American Association of School Administrators, 2000).

Overall, the experiences and perceptions of the African-American women participants in this study highlighted the need for organizations to create organizational environments that are psychologically safe, and that contain formal communities that support African-American women leaders, inclusive organizational structures, and make intentional investments in professional development and financial compensation.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study has several implications and, as such, brings some important recommendations for practice that public K-12 education systems can explore to best support African-American women in the senior-most level role as well as those aspiring to these roles.

Racism, bias, and misogynoir are built into the very fabric of our institutions, policies, and culture (Shine et al., 2017). The concept of misogynoir coined by Moya Bailey in 2008, explains the idea of what African-American women face in their organization is a mirroring effective of society (Bailey & Trudy, 2008). Our society has told African-American women that if they want to "rise," they have to pay the price and accept whatever comes their way. And since Americans aren't socialized to believe African-American voices or question White systems, many sit in the insanity of dual consciousness—aware of what they receive and deserve. And that the only way out is going through an abusive process. As acknowledged by the participants in this study, despite their senior status, they experienced unfavorable treatment based on their gender and race. Through the shared experiences of the 12 African-American women who

participated in this study and the findings that resulted, the following recommendations are made.

The first recommendation is grounded in the theme of psychological safety. Despite their senior-level role, African-American women do not feel safe in their organization. It is recommended that organizations, regardless of demographic make-up, conduct equity audits and religiously and adjust policies and or practices that oppress marginalized groups. It is also recommended that organizations adopt an anti-racist approach and develop it with the diverse voices of the organization. Intersectionality Theory states that it is crucial to have someone at the table when decisions are being made that can speak about the oppressive systems that hinder the positionality of minority leaders. While organizations can attempt to create antiracist and anti-misogynoir environments, they must include the voices and perspectives of the African-American women in their organization. If they do not have African-American women in their organization, they should solicit the input of African-American women consultants and or partners in the work. According to Dr. Amy Edmondson, organizations aiming to create psychological safe environments should commit to the five strategies to psychological safety (Edmondson, 1996).

The first strategy is to make psychological safety an explicit priority in the organization—it cannot just be an espoused value of the organization, but must be an enacted value that is lived out (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). In order to act on the organization's espoused values of prioritizing the well-being of the leaders of the organization and other members of the organizations, organizations must foster a sense of empathy. The act of placing themselves in the experiences of the other. If organizations, more specifically the governing board, can create policy, practices, and organizational cultures that are rooted in

empathy, they are making a progressive step in creating more psychologically safe environments for all members of the organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). African-American women need others in the organization to see things from their point of view in order to create an environment that is supportive of their leadership.

The second strategy is to create an environment where leaders and other members of the organization are able to speak freely. This will require the governance board to be open-minded and support organizational structures that coach members of the organizations to communicate their thoughts and encourage them to authentically share their feedback about the organization and decisions made by the organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). African-American women need to be able to speak freely in an organization without feeling dismissed, silenced or having their credibility challenged (Downing, 2009). Participants in this study often felt silenced, overlooked, and labeled aggressive when they communicated with stakeholders inside of and adjacent to the organization.

The third strategy is for organizations to normalize failure (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). When organizations can normalize non-traditional behaviors, they can begin to normalize the actions and behaviors of African-American women that are often labeled as aggressive, threatening, or too forward. Often organizations that support cultures that allow African-American women to be evaluated and penalize them on leadership rubrics create an environment where African-American women do not feel psychologically safe.

The fourth strategy is for organizations to embrace new ideas and challenge themselves to incorporate the ideas of diverse others (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). The women in the study mentioned an attractor to the charter space was the autonomy they experienced to make decisions in the best interest of children. If organizations continue to operate in this manner and

employ other supportive strategies, they can create systems that effectively support African-American senior leaders.

The fifth strategy is to embrace productive conflict as opposed to labeling the conflict as unhealthy tension (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). In this dimension, it is noted that organizations should define how to have healthy conflict. Some of the study's participants felt disrespected by members of their organization and their Board did not always speak to them in a respectful manner. If the organization adopted principles on how to engage in conflict or engage with someone with opposing thoughts could help eliminate the tension that is often brought to the African-American women who serve as the most senior leadership.

The second recommendation addresses the theme of inclusivity and community. According to the Harvard Business Review, organizations can employ three strategies to become more inclusive. While some methods are similar to those that support a psychologically safe organization, there are different practices that the organization must implement to make progress and become more inclusive for African-American women senior leaders (Link, Kennedy & Bourgeois 2020).

First, traditional and public charter organizations should prioritize diversity and inclusion and community, rationalize the efforts from an ethical standpoint and a productivity standpoint (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2015). According to McKinsey and Company, diverse teams increase the team's ability to be productive (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2015). Once organizations note the importance of various groups, they can take actions to increase the diversity within the organization. While it was mentioned by the participants that their organization made progress in improving team diversity, they did not make progress towards inclusion. Therefore, organizations must also recognize bias within the organization.

The second strategy is for the organization to recognize bias (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2015). As one of the participants stated in her conversation with a board member, the organization must confront bias. The participant challenged her board member about how the organization treats African-American women. Due to the participant's position as the senior-most leader, he believed that her actions were the exception, not the norm for African-American women in the organization. During their conversation, bias surfaced that she was able to challenge. At the same time, she notes this was particularly emotionally draining for her; it forced a needed conversation with the board about structures in their organization and its inclusivity. Organizations that care about inclusivity must engage in crucial discussions about organizational bias and must do so without placing strain on those who are the targets of such bias.

As stated in the literature, sponsorship is important to establishing a pipeline of diverse leadership that can support the ascension to the senior-most chair for other African-American women leaders (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2015). Creating sponsorship programs can help African-American women who do not have access to or knowledge of leadership roles or non-publicized professional development opportunities. These are accessible promotional pathways for leaders of color or other marginalized leaders (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015). While sponsorship is important, according to the literature, formal mentorship programs are also important (Holder, Margo & Ponterotto, 2015).

To support the study's findings on the need to become more inclusive and the need for community, the recommendation is to implement the three strategies of prioritizing inclusion and community, recognizing bias, and establishing a sponsorship program for emerging African-American women leaders. In addition to organizational strategies, it will take an entire ecosystem to support the traditional and charters to become more inclusive and to create

community to support African-American women senior leaders. National education partners should invest in creating a community specifically for African-American women serving in the senior-most level role and financially incentivize districts and philanthropic organizations to create these spaces.

Lastly, organizations must invest in African-American women. They must pay them equally to their White male counterparts. Districts also must invest time in providing African-American women with development opportunities and speak openly about developing African-American women as they do White men or White women who might frequent their social circle or influence circles. Going a step further, organizations must evaluate who is leading the charge of developing their rising diverse talent. Are they selecting other diverse leaders, or are they solely allowing White men and women to develop diverse leaders? If so, they must ask what the unintended consequences are.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this research study. Since the candidate pool is a unique population, African-American women senior leaders of K-12 public charter school districts, the number of respondents was not robust. It is also noteworthy that an additional limitation was the time frame. Only qualified candidates available during the study and interested could participate in the study. Also, participation was limited as it was challenging to schedule interviews due to the participants' work and personal schedules and an abnormally strained year due to COVID-19 impact on personnel and system-related challenges.

The lack of available African-American women who were the most senior leader in their charter school network limited the study to only 12 women. Also, most women were recommended by a participant in the study as the recruitment efforts on Twitter, Facebook, and

LinkedIn had a limited reach. In addition, all willing and qualified participants had to feel comfortable sharing their truth. While each participant was encouraged to be as open and honest as possible, not having a previous relationship could have created unintentional borders. The women did not feel as comfortable sharing their true feelings and only shared professional reflections opposed to personal insights. Ultimately, the researcher did not have a lot of time to build relational trust with the participants to garnish their innermost thoughts around the matter.

Another potential limitation of the study was the potential for researcher bias since the researcher of the study is also an African-American woman in a similar educational leadership role. Patton (2002) asserts that for research to be considered credible, the researcher must remain neutral while conducting the study; however, the role of the researcher is more than just being an objective observer (Patton, 2002). It is essential to consider biases and preferences brought to the study as a researcher. To accurately identify the participants' lived experiences, it is the responsibility of the researcher to identify and understand their own biases and their role in the research process. I acknowledge that my experiences and perspective as an African-American woman may influence the data's interpretation. To safeguard against this, participants received a copy of the findings to confirm accuracy, and I remained transparent throughout the study to ensure its credibility and trustworthiness.

Future Research

Based upon the current literature and the findings of this study, several issues need to be explored in future research. This study should be expanded to African-American women sitting in the senior-most level role in the traditional sector and private school sector. More phenomenological research needs to be done for African-American senior leaders in charter spaces as well as public school spaces. There is a gap in the literature that excludes the voices of

African-American women. The concept of culturally responsive mentoring, more described explicitly throughout the study as increasing the number of African-American women who can coach and mentor emerging senior leaders who are African-American women, is documented. Literature does exist supporting the notation and importance of developing culturally responsive mentoring. However, more research must be done as it speaks to how this can transform the public charter space (Lloyd-Jones & Byrd 2018).

While this is not bound by geographic perspectives, this study was limited to 12, given more voices, future research could suggest new recommendations are solidified current themes and recommendations providing more validity to this study. Future studies can also explore how diverse teams respond to African-American women in leadership. Essentially, more research must be done to improve African-American women's conditions and realities in the K-12 public school system.

This study set out to explore the experiences of 12 transformational African-American women in the public charter sector. From the experiences of these 12 women, the researcher hoped to find a set of recommendations for how to improve their experiences in their charter networks. Overall, the experiences and perceptions of the African-American women participants in this study highlighted the need for organizations to create organizational environments that are psychologically safe, and that contain formal communities that support African-American women leaders, inclusive organizational structures, and make intentional investments in professional development and financial compensation.

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Appendix A:

Final Interview Protocol

1. Name
2. Role and organization, how long were you in the classroom, and how long have you been in your role?
3. Could you briefly describe the path you took to your current leadership position?
4. What type of organizations have you worked for? How did those organizations value your identity as an African-American woman? Did the way your organization caused your transition? Did the organizational structure of one foster a more supportive environment for AA women?
5. How do you think your identity as an African-American woman has influenced your ability to navigate your organization's promotion pathway?
6. What specific structures or practices are in place in your organization that support you as an executive leader or African-American women aspiring to be executive leaders? (Mentorship/Sponsorship)
7. Have you faced organizational barriers in your pursuit to your leadership position? Probes: examples of barriers (lack of mentorship/implicit bias)
8. How has your well-being been affected, do you think, by your experiences in your current position you have just described?
9. How did they make you feel and how did you react to that particular barrier? (Ask for each barrier they mention).
10. What organizational structures do you think would be beneficial in assisting African-American women ascending into executive leadership in your organization?

11. Do you feel your organization values your identity as an African-American woman? (Probes: Why or why not?)
12. Are you aware of special recruitment efforts to obtain African-American women in executive leadership?

Appendix B:

IRB Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: October 05, 2021 **IRB#:** 13805

Principal Investigator: Kiana Smith **Approval Date:** 10/05/2021

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: WHAT CAN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS LEARN ABOUT SUPPORTING AND RETAINING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS FROM THOSE SERVING IN CHARTER SCHOOL SPACES?

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Aimee Franklin, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board