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This study is an examination of the barriers that prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems. Black women do not have a clear path to educational leadership positions like many of their White counterparts and encounter barriers that could limit their promotion to higher level positions. The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers that hinder Black women from advancing in educational leadership positions and learn about the strategies that Black women have implemented to overcome barriers that could have hindered their ascension to central office leadership positions. I relied on a theoretical framework of Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory.

The barriers that Black women described as part of this interview-based study are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as their White counterparts, Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing. Participants regarded the lack of access to information, opportunities, and networks of support as the most pervasive barrier for Black women leading in educational leadership positions. What has been most helpful to the participants in maneuvering the barriers was becoming good at relationship building, developing good communication skills, mentally preparing to be judged more critically than peers, personally seeking out supportive networks, and striving for positions where they can advocate for equitable hiring practices. I describe these findings using comments and examples from the interview participants and ground them in the context of Black feminist thought and Critical Race Theory (CRT). This study adds to the conversation of educational leadership from the perspective of promoting the voice of Black women and bringing to light the barriers Black

women encounter in educational leadership positions. This research adds to the collection of leadership literature that helps educational leaders and hiring supervisors to think more about equitable leadership practices, stereotypical biases toward Black women, and support for Black women leaders. This study extends current research by providing a lens of understanding the experiences of Black women in central office leadership positions as well as presenting strategies to reshape the way that new and experienced Black women leaders are supported with seeking promotions to higher level positions.

Keywords: Black women educational leaders; barriers; Black feminist thought

BARRIERS THAT LIMIT BLACK WOMEN FROM RISING TO CENTRAL OFFICE
LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN K-12 SCHOOL SYSTEMS

by

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Dr. Kathryn Hytten
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, sisters, friends, and mentors who have been my source of inspiration and strength.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Tyneka S. Holley has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This research study is centered around barriers that prevent Black women from rising to executive leadership roles in education settings. I care about this topic because I am a Black woman who at times has been frustrated with barriers that I face in progressing through my own career. One problem that motivates this study is that I don't see many women who look like me in senior or executive leadership roles in my school district, or even nationwide. I have personally experienced the need to prove myself as competent while being criticized more often than my White peers. Research around this topic is necessary because other women of color in my school district, as well as Black friends and colleagues, have shared similar experiences of struggling to secure higher-level positions and could benefit from the findings.

As I have progressed in my educational career, I have regularly experienced the feeling of being overlooked and undervalued. At each level of my career, I have experienced the feeling of having to do more and appear overqualified to progress into more substantive leadership roles. I have also witnessed racism in hiring practices. For example, I served on interview teams where some members referred to Black women candidates as appearing unpolished because of appearance or cultural matters, such as their hair style or nail color, despite having all the required qualifications for the position. I have experienced being overlooked for promotions and left out of decision-making meetings without an apparent reason. There are instances where I make suggestions in my professional role that go unheard, and minutes later someone else suggests the exact same thing and everyone in the room agrees with it. Often times, I find myself being the only woman of color in the room and have felt that my ideas and opinions are looked over because I am a woman and Black. I now understand this experience of being a double minority has been theorized in terms of intersectionality (Collins, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

The frustrations that I have experienced personally throughout my career as an educator, and that my Black female friends and colleagues have shared with me, have greatly influenced my interest in this topic. My review of the literature on Black women and leadership has convinced me of the need for this study. Given the limited numbers of women of color in leadership roles, it seems like it is more difficult for women of color, particularly Black women, to obtain promotions and rise to executive positions, as compared to their peers who are White. The barriers in place are influenced by historic racism in the U.S. that is still prevalent and societal stereotypes of Black women held by those making hiring decisions for organizations.

For many Black women in the U.S., racism is not something that exists in distance; it is encountered in everyday situations (Collins, 2009). Racism has been the part of the experience for Black Americans for hundreds of years. However, modern forms of racism are often different from blatant acts of hostility from the past. Modern racism takes the form of covert or ambiguous acts that are more challenging to identify while still impacting oppressed groups in profound ways (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Modern forms of racism include racial microaggressions that are intentional or unintentional; these are brief and common racial slights and insults that target people of a particular group. Black women are members of two marginalized groups – Black and female – and are likely to experience overlapping microaggressions and systems of oppression, which Collins (2009) refers to as intersectionality. A problem still exists in society where women of color must break through the barriers of being Black and a woman, to obtain and excel in leadership positions. In educational leadership, the issues of race and gender are still critical barriers in rising up the leadership ranks (Reed, 2012). Deeply entrenched social inequities will not disappear overnight for women of color, but

researchers should still look for different ways of solving social inequalities (Collins, 2019). In this study, I explored various dimensions of the problem of limited avenues to leadership for Black women and discussed the barriers that exist for women of color aspiring to educational leadership positions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers that hinder Black women from advancing in educational leadership positions and learn about the strategies that Black women have implemented to overcome barriers that could have hindered their ascension to central office leadership positions. I wanted to learn more about how Black women perceive and experience disparities in hiring and promoting women of color in K-12 school systems. I also sought a better understanding of how Black women navigate such barriers and what supports are in place to keep them in high level positions within school districts' central offices.

This study provides necessary insight into barriers that exists for Black women. Through the data I collected, I identified societal stereotypes that women of color are experiencing in educational leadership positions and strategies that support women in working through the weariness of being judged on their race and gender. The findings from this study will contribute to related literature by providing strategies that could assist society as a whole in breaking down barriers and systems of oppression that could limit Black women from rising to leadership positions.

Research Questions

I answer two research questions in this study:

Research Question 1: What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems?

Research Question 2: How have Black women leaders overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?

Background Context

Women of color have experienced challenges in American society for centuries. There are a number of controlling images of Black women in this country that date back to slavery. The authority to define societal values lies with powerful and elite groups and those in power during that time manipulated ideas about Black womanhood by exploiting them as symbols of objectification (Collins, 2009). Controlling images of Black women, such as stereotypical mummies and hot mommas, have been around for so long that some make racism, sexism, and other forms of social injustice appear to be normal and part of everyday life. Black women are still feeling the effects of controlling images today, especially in their workplaces and the broader society. I will explain controlling images and societal frames in chapter two.

To provide historical context for this study, it is important to start by noting that the number of Black educational administrators has been significantly lower than White administrators since the mandate to desegregate schools in the 1960's and 1970's. When schools were desegregated, Black men and women who were leading in all-black schools found few opportunities to lead in integrated schools (Alston, 2005). Eleven years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, more than 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in 17 southern and border states lost their jobs. Many who found employment could not find administrative leadership positions and accepted subordinate positions instead. Another problematic consequence in the aftermath of desegregation efforts is that in the 1970's, the number of female school superintendents dropped to 1.3% and remained at a low percentage for a decade (Alston, 2005). In 2018-2019, the percentage of female superintendents increased to 33% (Education Drive, 2020).

Presently there remains a gap between Black and White educational leaders in terms of obtaining high-level administrative jobs, with an even wider gap between Black women and white leaders. We need to study why this gap persists for Black women in order to counter societal stereotypes and intersectionality that limits their climb to senior level or higher educational leadership positions.

Brief Description of Methods

I designed a basic qualitative study, including aspects of narrative analysis, to answer the research questions for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I interviewed five Black women who hold school district central office leadership positions to identify the barriers and enablers to their success. In my findings chapter, I tell their stories of overcoming barriers by discussing their educational leadership experiences, career aspirations, and how they navigated obstacles to reach their positions in leadership. I interviewed each of these women two times to uncover the barriers they have faced as Black women and what strategies were most effective in helping them overcome barriers.

Theoretical Overview

Because I am interested in the ways that women of color experience discrimination in leadership positions, I draw on two key theories: Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory. Black Feminist Thought, at the core, is a theory that helps scholars to analyze and create imaginative responses to injustices experienced by Black women (Collins, 2009). Black feminism is important and relevant because Black women in the U.S. are still members of an oppressed group. Collins (2009) explains "...the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and ideas that justify it" (p. 25). Black feminist thought would not be necessary if oppression of Black women did not exist. The

barriers that women of color experience when rising to educational leadership positions are aspects of this oppression. Black feminist thought emphasizes that when Black women and other marginalized groups see little hope for group-based advancement, the situation becomes a social injustice (Collins, 2009).

It makes sense for me to use Black feminist theory in the analysis of barriers experienced by Black women educational leaders because the theory highlights the nexus of race, class, and gender as controlling forces in Black women's struggles (Brock, 2011). The perspectives of Black women, told by Black women themselves, provide a long-denied voice that is articulated through Black feminist theory. Brock (2011) reports "Negative images of African American women... can best be understood within an ideological framework which produces an understanding of the connection between ideology, stereotypes, and African American women" (p. 386). Black feminist theory provides the space for a self-defined Black woman's point of view by challenging current approaches to studying the oppressed and by centering the lived experiences of Black women. Brock (2011) argues that the oppressed often identify with the powerful and thus see themselves as less intellectual and therefore less capable of interpreting or articulating their own oppression. Specifically, Black women's stories have been discussed and analyzed by White men and women, and even Black men, who have too often ignored the influence of race, class, and gender on the experiences of Black women.

Black feminist thought also contributes two significant views towards understanding self and designing a pedagogy of empowerment for Black women. First, Black feminist theorists foster a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. In embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as overlapping systems of oppressions, Black feminist theorists reconceptualize the social relations of domination and resistance. Secondly, Black

feminist thought addresses ways of assessing truth and reality of Black women. Empowerment is manifested when Black women can define their reality and name their truth (Brock, 2011).

Black feminist theorists amplify the voices of Black women by providing forums for them to tell their own stories, enabling an interpretation of Black women's reality by those who live it. The educational leadership experiences of Black women featured in research studies can be examined by race and gender positionalities, perspectives, and the intersection of marginalized identities in school or central office contexts (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). The lens of Black feminism also helps researchers to assess how Blackness, womanhood, age, professional experience, sexuality, ability, and context contribute to the challenges faced by Black women leaders (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). Horsford and Tillman (2012) contend that this unique lens of analysis is important in fields of study where maleness, whiteness, and/or ladyhood have dominated theoretical and epistemological perspectives, consequently limiting the richness of research informed by a diversity of racial, gendered, and intersectional points of view. Drawing on Black feminist thought in this study allows me to frame the unique location of the Black woman, at the intersection of race and gender, and how their identities influence their lived personal and professional experiences in education and society.

Since the 1960s Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used by scholars and activist to combat the stalled progress of the civil rights movement. Early CRT theorists, such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, realized new theories were needed to fight an emerging, subtler form of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical race theory is a lens that helps scholars examine issues of race and power in society and culture (Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglas, 2013). Some of the basic tenets of CRT are racism is ordinary, interest convergence,

racism are socially constructed, differential racialization, intersectionality, and voice of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Based on CRT, Black women encountering barriers that prevent them from advancing to higher leadership positions is a social issue and contributes to the normalization of racism in U.S. educational systems. Throughout my study and data analysis, I looked to see if and how the tenets of interest convergence, differential racialization, and intersectionality are useful to examining the relationship between race and power for Black women in educational leadership positions. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe interest convergence as the dominant or elite group taking an interest in race matters only when it benefits their group. That is, dominant cultural members are only interested in challenging racism when it advances their own interests. Differential racialization means that Black women are racialized by the dominant society in varying ways. Historically in America, Black women are racialized as mothers and nurturers while also being stereotyped as aggressive and angry. Intersectionality identifies the overlapping identities or allegiances that Black women carry, being Black and a woman.

Analyzing the findings from my interviews with the frames of Black feminist thought and CRT allowed me to expound on how Black women are marginalized in educational leadership because of the history of racism in this country. CRT and Black feminist thought connect to provide insight into the relationships between power, construction of social roles, and the invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up patriarchy and other types of dominance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Racism in the form of microaggressions, interest convergence, differential racialization, and intersectionality and other systems of oppression are enduring issues for Black women. Analyzing my data with the lenses from these two theories helped me to

understand the barriers that they face as well as provide insights for how to support Black women with overcoming barriers to leadership positions.

Much of the current research related to Black women in educational leadership positions is grounded in Black feminist thought and CRT. For example, in their study of how 10 Black women school leaders cope with the challenges of gendered racism and the cost for doing so, Burton et al. (2020) draw upon theories of intersectionality. The influence of sexism and racism could not be divided as individual experiences in the descriptions, stories, and narratives told by the Black women in the study. Weiner et al. (2019) used the concept of microaggressions to frame their study of how Black female administrators experienced identity, discrimination, and leadership in school administrator preparation programs. The perspectives of CRT are considered by Agosto et al. (2015) to study how institutional racism is mediated by faculty negotiating power and privilege in the selection of Black women in educational leadership preparation programs. They analyzed and discussed the application process to show how institutional racism was supported by racialized discourse in the areas of policy, practices, and conversations. Brown (2014) grounds her study of the recruitment and retention of Black women school superintendents in the CRT tenet of interest convergence. Interest convergence helped her illustrate how the Black women superintendents interviewed in the study understood that them obtaining the executive educational leadership position also benefited those in power. I mention a few studies here to illuminate how some other scholars have used these theories in their research, however, there are many more articles that reference Black feminism and CRT to highlight how racism effects Black women in educational leadership positions.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the experiences that successful women of color overcame while advancing to executive positions is significant because the findings will help other women of color navigate barriers and bring an awareness to organizations who do not support and promote diversity. I anticipate that the findings will help organizations understand disparities that might exist in hiring and promoting women of color. The findings could also benefit all women and people from other marginalized groups who have historically been discriminated against in seeking upper leadership positions.

This study will contribute to the sparse research base on Black women leaders in central office positions and how their presence can positively impact schools within their district. Black women have much to offer as leaders in central offices. For example, the intersection of race and gender as experienced by Black women leaders in some instances results in them serving as a bridge for, to, and between others (Horsford, 2012). Black women in central office leadership roles are positioned to bridge social and organizational change between schools and central office departments. The promotion and retention of Black women in central office positions could have trickle down effects on the hiring practices for schools, increasing the hiring of Black principals and teachers. According to a study by Bailes and Guthery (2020), the presence of a Black principal significantly increases the probability of hiring Black teachers and reduces Black teacher turnover rates. Moreover, they showed that students of color benefit from Black principals and Black teachers as math achievement and assignment to gifted and talented programs increase when they are taught by Black teachers.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One – Introduction

In the first chapter, I have provided an introduction, overview, and background context for the research study. This research study is centered around barriers that prevent Black women from rising to executive leadership roles in education settings, particularly senior level central office positions. I designed a basic qualitative study to answer the research questions. I analyzed the data I collected through the lens of Black feminist theory and Critical Race Theory.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Chapter two provides the research foundation for my study. In reviewing the literature, two themes emerged as barriers encountered by women of color when trying to advance to leadership positions: societal frames and intersectionality. Researchers argue that mentoring is a strategy that has helped women of color overcome barriers. Because the research in education related to executive level leadership is limited, I also explored literature from the corporate world. The studies in educational leadership and corporations revealed similar trends. While there are certain levels that women of color are permitted to rise to, often referred to as glass cliffs, there are very significant barriers that hinder women of color from progressing into executive roles (McGirt, 2017). However, women of color are capable of leading at the executive level. When given the opportunity, proper supports and mentorship, women have been able to excel in executive leadership roles.

Chapter Three – Methods

The problem this study addresses is the disproportionately low number of women of color who hold educational leadership positions in school district central offices. I used a basic qualitative research methodology, with interviews as the primary method of data collection, to

answer my research questions. I describe my methods in detail in this chapter. I collected interview data from women of color who hold senior level positions in school district central offices and include brief participant biographies. I describe how I transcribed the interviews, coded the transcripts, and looked for commonalities and themes in the interview responses. I used member checking and peer review as ensure trustworthiness.

Chapter Four – Findings

In this chapter, I share the overall finding of my research study. I revisit my research questions in relation to some of the codes and categories I identified while analyzing my data (which I organize in a chart), present the three key findings from my analysis of the interviews, and review major themes that deepen our understanding of the barriers experienced by Black women educational leaders while trying to rise to higher level leadership positions. The key findings are that prominent barriers that emerged from the participants' shared experiences are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as their White counterparts, Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing. Participants regard the lack of access to information, opportunities, and networks of support as the most pervasive barrier for Black women leading in educational leadership positions. What has been most helpful to the participants in maneuvering the barriers was becoming good at relationship building, developing good communication skills, mentally preparing to be judged more critically than peers, personally seeking out supportive networks, and striving for positions where they can advocate for equitable hiring practices. I describe these findings using comments and examples from the interview participants and ground the findings in the context of Black feminist thought and

Critical Race Theory (CRT). For anonymity when sharing quotes and events, I have assigned the five participants the pseudonyms of Anita, Brenda, Carla, Danecia, and Eboni.

Chapter Five – Analysis and Recommendations

Chapter five focuses on the findings from the study in relation to my primary research questions and implications of how they contribute to larger literature. I answer my research questions and discuss how my findings connect to other research studies related to the topic of Black women in educational leadership. I also explore implications, limitations, and recommendations for practice and future research. I describe how my research adds to the collection of leadership literature that helps educational leaders and hiring supervisors to think about equitable leadership practices, stereotypical biases toward Black women, and support for Black women leaders. I discuss how my study extends current research by providing a lens for understanding the experiences of Black women in central office leadership positions as well as presenting strategies to reshape the way that new and experienced Black women leaders are supported when seeking promotions to higher level positions. Finally, I offer my final thoughts on what I personally learned most from the study, what surprised me, and what I am left still thinking about.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

For centuries women have been tasked with caring for children and families, maintaining households, balancing budgets, and handling many other domestic responsibilities. Now, as more and more women enter the workforce, their skill sets often lead them to be relegated to lower-level jobs while their male colleagues are promoted further and faster. Women of color are promoted at a lower rate than both their White male colleagues and their White female colleagues (Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019). Black women specifically have experienced societal practices that restrict them to inferior jobs and public treatment. This differential treatment is connected to common negative thoughts about Black women's intelligence and work habits (Collins, 2009).

Minority populations have made significant gains in the workplace since civil rights laws made segregation and discrimination illegal, however there is evidence that people from minority groups are still advancing at a slower rate compared to White populations. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that women made up 55.4% of the total U.S. workforce in 2019 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Despite the increasing diversification of the workplace, people of color are underrepresented at the executive leadership levels in corporate America and K-12 school systems. This is particularly evident among professional Black women, who currently make up only one percent of U.S. corporate office leadership (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015).

The numbers of Black teachers and administrators continue to grow, however 21st century data reveals that numbers of Black men and women in upper-level educational leadership positions fall far behind their White counterparts (Alston, 2005). The 2020 American School Superintendent Decennial Survey administered by the School Superintendents

Association reports that the role of Superintendent is still held mostly by White males, the number of women superintendents increased from 24.1% in 2010 to 26.68% in 2020, which is double the 13.1% documented in 2000. The number of superintendents of color is increasing at a slower rate with 8.6% reporting in 2020, 6% in 2010, and 5% in 2000. Of the 8.6% reported of superintendents of color in 2020, 42% are women. The percentage of women and leaders of color in the top educational leadership positions is above that of Fortune 500 companies that has only four Black CEOs in 2019 (Education Dive, 2020).

As Black women ascend to executive level leadership positions, they encounter serious challenges that limit access and their overall career advancement. Some companies are hesitant to appoint Black women to positions of prestige and high visibility, often because of the assumption that they lack the skills, leadership ability, savvy, and drive to compete on the executive level (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). In this literature review, I examine barriers that women of color experience in corporate and educational leadership work settings, the impact of such barriers on women of color, and strategies for supporting Black women in overcoming barriers to excel to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems. I describe how the barriers faced by women of color are similar in both corporate and educational leadership settings. I draw this comparison because of the limited research on women in senior leadership positions in the education field.

Barriers Faced by Black Women

Barriers exist for Black women that limit their access to top leadership positions. Black women on track for leadership positions are more likely than their white female peers to aspire to be leaders. However, relative to White women, Black women's advancement opportunities remain constrained. Some reasons for the slow progress of Black women in leadership include a

perceived lack of experience, inadequate career opportunities, racial differences in speech and socialization, ethnosexual stereotypes, “old boy networks,” and tokenism (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Popular culture and the media perpetuate stereotypes of women of color that can make it difficult for them to be perceived as effective leaders. Women of color in leadership roles can experience triple jeopardy because of the multiple stereotypes associated with gender, race, and ethnicity that they trigger in others. They are required to display leadership competence while simultaneously conforming to European American prototypes representing traditional ethnic, racial, and gender behavior (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Race-based stereotypes in the workplace adversely impact Black women’s careers and relationships with colleagues at work. At the intersection of race and gender, Black women have a history of being subject to negative societal frames or stereotypes such as mammy, superwoman, crazy woman with an attitude, hostile, or aggressive, which all contribute to the barriers faced by women of color (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Patricia Hill Collins (2019) draws upon Kimberlé Crenshaw’s introduction of the term intersectionality to describe all the ways systems of oppression overlap. Intersectionality is a term that points to the structural convergence within intersecting systems of power such as racism and sexism. Racism and sexism are two oppressions that significantly foster social inequities for women of color (Collins, 2019). The traditional views that society holds of Black women work against them in the workplace. Some people in society see and tell one story of Black women, which leads to the problem of those stereotypes becoming the only story for Black women. The story that is usually told of Black women has them perceived as workers and laborers only, not as executive leaders (Patton & Haynes, 2018). In the next three sub-sections, I further detail challenges Black women face in the education and corporate work world. I describe how societal frames, intersectional

invisibility, and exclusionary systematic practices create barriers for women of color rising in leadership positions.

Societal Frames

Patton and Haynes (2018) describe how societal frames are a major barrier for women of color attempting to rise to executive leadership positions. Societal frames are controlling images and stereotypes pervasive for groups of people. The prevalent societal frames assigned to Black women that I discuss throughout my review of literature include mammy, sapphire, and superwoman. Black women are rarely at the forefront when organizations consider promoting employees to leadership positions, in due part to societal frames placed on them. Collins (2009) noted:

Portraying African American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought. As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones. (p. 76)

Patton and Haynes reference the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) when describing the roles of mammy, sapphire, and superwoman. The idea of *mammy* is one frame to which Black women are externally confined. Mammy is someone committed to caring for others, especially White others, and their children. She can make everyone feel better by soothing and comforting while abandoning her own needs. This stereotype leads women of color to become stuck in lower paying positions. Mammy is also the ultimate example of selflessness and is less likely to be

seen as attractive because of her larger physique and dark skin. Collins (2009) explains: “The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior” (p. 80). Black women who make it to executive leadership positions can be hindered by mammy expectations and penalized if they do not appear warm and nurturing.

A second frame is sapphire or jezebel which presents Black women as sassy, angry, loud, disrespectful, and disruptive regardless of context, representing a deviant Black female sexuality (Collins, 2009). A jezebel stereotypically uses her body as a tool to get what she wants no matter the consequences, similar to a gold digger or manipulator (Patton & Haynes, 2018). A third frame is the notion of superwoman where Black women are viewed as superhuman and with supernatural strength. A superwoman maintains a consistent grind to get the job done, without succumbing to any psychological, physical, and emotional pain (Patton & Haynes, 2018). The superwoman, also referred to as “Black lady,” is a hardworking Black professional woman who works twice as hard as everyone else, is highly educated, too assertive, and typically has an all-consuming job, leaving no time for men, or they are assumed to have forgotten how to treat them (Collins, 2009). Both jezebel and superwoman frames operate to emasculate Black men; sapphire through her words and superwoman through her actions (Patton & Haynes, 2018).

Building on the work of Collins, particularly the idea of social frames, Anita Brown (2014) conducted a narrative study on issues of recruitment and retention for Black women in public school superintendency. The study included eight Black women superintendents who shared how they overcame racism, sexism, and oppressive sociopolitics. The Black women shared stories that give credence to society viewing Black women as everything but intelligent

and highly capable of leading as public-school superintendents. Brown (2014) shares the thoughts of one of the participants in her study:

Not only are we expected to be mammy maids but we are also seen as sapphires (women who holler and scream) thus making us women who will jump all over you. I haven't come across the whys for that kind of thinking but from my own personal experiences some of us (Black women) must play into this kind of thinking. Maybe, it's because there's not enough of us at any one time that look like the rest of them. White women have always been revered, protected, they keep their hair blonde or whatever color it is, they wear red nail polish and you know they got the suit on all the time and they know their place. Nobody's ever protected an African American woman throughout history and then all of a sudden, we're telling White people what to do... I still have the issues of White men who want to challenge me, and they never do it overtly, but the challenge is always there. They would rather see a White man in front of them talking than a Black woman and I understand that and I'm not going to make it my problem. (pp. 579-580)

Brown (2014) found that despite progress Black women superintendents have made, they must be aware that stereotypical beliefs regarding Black women still exist within society, carry themselves to a higher standard of excellence in order to dispel myths that have circulated for generations, and continue to work harder than their peers in order to prove their leadership capabilities despite their education and experience.

Societal presumptions about the role of men and women that continue to persist where women are viewed as still primarily responsible for household matters and not matters of work also impact Black women. Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016) describe a concrete ceiling as a barrier that cannot be penetrated by African American women and other minorities. The concrete

ceiling constitutes a career limiting factor that affects women of color's ability to ascend to leadership positions in an organization. An organization's failure to make strategic employment choices, such as implementing a strategy targeting specific biases to obtain incremental change, also impacts the ascension of African American women to leadership positions (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016).

The societal frames of Black women are intended to break their dignity and get in the way of them reaching top leadership positions (Patton & Haynes, 2018). The superwoman frame could help explain the statistics that show that Black women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles in corporate America. Currently, they make up 12.7% of the U.S. population, yet they represent only 1.3% of senior management and executive roles of Standard & Poor's (S&P) 500 firms, 2.2% of Fortune 500 boards of directors, and after Ursula Burns left Xerox in 2016, there was not a single Black female CEO in Fortune 500 companies (Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019). This trend continued until May of 2019 when Mary A. Winston was named interim CEO of Bath and Body Works for six months, March 15, 2021 when Rosalind Brewer was hired to become the CEO of Walgreens, and May 1, 2021 when Thasunda Brown Duckett was hired as the President and CEO of Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA). Currently there have only been four Black women hired as CEO for Fortune 500 companies (Black Entrepreneurs & Executives, 2021).

Intersectional Invisibility

Intersectional invisibility is another barrier for Black women advancing in leadership positions. In studying this phenomenon, Smith et al. (2019) interviewed 59 Black female executives about their senior-level positions in U.S. corporations. The women shared the barriers they faced, strategies for ascending through the organization, and the tools they drew upon to

manage significant organizational change efforts and navigate career risks. One main driver of their success was their ability to navigate the challenge of intersectional invisibility, which is the tendency to be overlooked, disregarded, or forgotten because of one's status as a member of two underrepresented and devalued groups. Consistent invisibility is one way that women of color are discriminated against by being ignored rather than actively recruited for leadership (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015).

The phenomenon of intersectional invisibility is present in educational settings too. For example, Reed (2012) conducted a study on the intersection of race and gender in school leadership for three Black female principals. In this interview-based study, Reed concluded that Black women principals are still living with the challenges of race and gender. All three school leaders in the study thought that they were not taken as seriously as their male counterparts, perceived disrespect from parents, and dismissive actions from some of their superiors and colleagues (Reed, 2012). Negative perceptions of women of color contribute to a sense of invisibility and limit access to critical networks of influence in educational as well as corporate workplaces (Holder et al., 2015).

In their study of five African American women in universities, Davis and Maldonado (2015) explored the intersection of race and gender through their lived experiences and how they developed as leaders. Davis and Maldonado conducted interviews with five African American women in senior leadership positions of president, vice-president, or deans in four-year and two-year colleges. The participants confirmed that race and gender informed their development as leaders and influenced their career trajectories. All of the participants experienced race and gender bias at various points in their careers. They believe that the combination of race and gender hinders the potential for their ascension to senior-level positions. They provided

examples of race and gender bias such as being talked over by White men in their work environment and exclusion from informal social networks, such as the “good old boys” club.

Holder et al. (2015) describe how women tackled the barrier of invisibility by taking on visible, high-risk roles that helped them ascend to the upper echelons of their companies. The barrier of intersectional invisibility is ironic to the Black women in executive positions because they felt physically visible yet cognitively invisible. Their underrepresentation makes Black women highly visible and easily noticed in their workplaces, while at the same time many of the women in Holder et al.’s study expressed feeling invisible in terms of being taken seriously as a colleague. Mostly all of the Black women executives interviewed discussed the need to adapt to the invisibility and applied different strategies to do so based on their career stage. For example, the women acknowledged that earlier in their careers, they had to develop greater self-awareness to recognize when they were visible and invisible. By mid-career, they started strategically taking on risky assignments to become more visible. Edwards (2016) calls these *glass cliff* assignments as they are risky and typically no one else in the organization wants to do them. In educational leadership, Black women are at times found in glass cliff positions, leading school districts in under-resourced and high-needs urban school districts with high minority populations (Alston, 2005). Black women leaders accept these positions to show that they have agility. By the time they become executive leaders, they focused more on making a meaningful impact in their organizations, their communities, and supporting junior employees.

One challenge of intersectionality is that Black women have to consider if they are being discriminated against because of their gender or skin color. Women are likely to find themselves dealing with situations that have high risk and can potentially set them up for failure, hence they are placed on glass cliffs. Although men are also placed in challenging situations, women of

color are typically more isolated without mentors or a network of support and are less able to garner the help that they might need when facing extraordinary challenges (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Systematic Exclusion

Studies related to Black women's plight to achieve leadership positions in education over the last fifteen years have similar findings related to exclusionary practices toward Black women leaders, which seems to be engrained in the culture of this country. Current attitudes towards Black women in American society are profoundly influenced by past and current racial oppression (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Black women in educational leadership encounter systematic exclusion before beginning their leadership journey. Agosto et al. (2015) conducted a case study based on how institutional racism is mediated by faculty negotiating power and privilege in the selection of Black women into educational leadership preparation programs. The researchers used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze faculty influence in the candidate selection process. The study revealed that in order to battle inertia in the advancement of Black women into educational leadership positions, society must challenge what impedes their admission and progression through the pipeline.

Educational leadership preparation programs are a point of entry into the leadership pipeline that factors into the production of a diverse leadership candidate pool. They can also be a barrier, contributing to inertia in the advancement of women into administrative positions of leadership. Agosto et al. (2015) included a review of the factors affecting the entry of Black women into educational leadership programs in fall 2009 and spring 2010. These included rate of rejection, consistency (inertia) of that rate, and the forces that impede the change needed to increase their rate of acceptance and representation across the ranks of educational leadership.

The researchers used the lens and tools of CRT to analyze the applicant process to illustrate how institutional racism was supported by a racialized discourse. Agosto et al. (2015) suggest that the race-neutral approach to the selection of candidates resulted in a disproportionate rejection of applicants of color. The results of the study were shared with the application selection committee with the thoughts of having social justice discourse around areas of improvement, however they encountered forms of resistance to developing a selection process that would reduce disproportionality in the rejection rates. The selection committee drew upon racial ideologies, such as colorblindness, and someone implied that the inclusion of a more diverse range of students would reduce the overall quality of students in the program. Examined through a CRT lens, this combination of comments signifying a decline in the quality of the program and advocating for racial segregation, points to the historical construction of race and racism as fashioned through notions of racial inferiority/superiority and race-based exclusionary practices (Agosto et al., 2015).

More recently, Bailes and Guthery (2020) concluded a 16-year study focused on assessing the probability and time to promotion for 4,689 assistant principals. Bailes and Guthery (2020) found that race and gender are associated with the probability of promotion to school leadership and that there were systematic differences in wait times for promotion associated with race. The school districts in the study have programs to make access to principalships more equitable, however, despite the pathways, there were still exclusionary practices that did not equalize outcomes for women and people of color.

The data collected in the study suggests Black assistant principals are 4% to 5% less likely in the first 4 years of an assistant principalship to make principal as compared to their White counterparts, but by years 5 and 6, the gap is widest, and they became 9% less likely to be

promoted in year 5. The average time for a Black candidate to make principal is 5.27 years, while White assistant principals wait an average of 4.67 years before promotion for a 0.6-year gap attributable to race. Men spend an average of 5.06 years as an assistant principal and women spend an average of 6.27 years in that position (an average gap of 1.21 years). Black women assistant principals have double-identifiers, both Black and a woman, which could further lengthen their average tenure as an assistant principal. This study builds on the research base showing that race and gender systematically influence promotion to school leadership positions (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

A primary source of stress for Black women in leadership positions in higher education stems from their experiences with racism and sexism (Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009). Black women leaders in historically Black and White institutions encounter situations in which their authority is undermined, competence compromised, and power is limited. For example, Jean-Marie et al. (2009), studied the life stories of 12 Black women administrators in higher education who held the roles of president, academic dean, vice chancellor, vice president, executive director, and university attorney. Utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect the life stories, the data suggest that even though the participants backgrounds were different, they all participated in the struggle for equality during the Civil Rights Movement; they all experienced institutional patterns of racism and sexism; and their leadership focus was on social change, institutional reform, and structures and processes of power and influence. Black women still battle racism, sexism, or both, however modern discrimination is difficult to discern, tough to navigate, and hard to prove (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Progress has been made in American society; however, racism and sexism still thrive, often in subtle ways.

In describing systemic exclusion in the educational sphere, Lewis (2016) argues that African American administrators in higher education have limited access to structures of opportunity for career advancement. A practice that is intended to promote social interaction for African American women is proportional representation, which can sometimes result in tokenism. Proportional representation as the numerical representation of one group over another based upon race or gender, adds to the problem of social interaction and the construction of social reality in organizations. Proportional representation by Black women and White women is handled differently by dominant groups. White women have been treated with stereotypic overprotection in contrast with African American women who deal with denigrating stereotypes as welfare recipients and burden bearers. Tokens have a high degree of visibility and are universal representatives of their race or gender for work and social activities, for example serving on various committees as a means to show those committees are diverse, which often results in role overload (Lewis, 2016). Carrying the load of their race and having their characteristics exaggerated through stereotyping could overwhelm African American administrators. Tokenism is an exclusionary practice that some educational institutions implement with the intentions of being inclusive, however, without critical attention to how it positions the people being placed in those positions, it could further ostracize African American women. Black women should be asked to fill leadership positions based on their experience and ability not solely on their race and gender.

Impact of Barriers

In this section I explore some of the ways that barriers to professional advancement impact Black women when rising to leadership positions in educational settings. Common reactions that Black women could experience are cognitive depletion and double-consciousness.

Cognitive depletion is similar to emotional tax and can create social distancing between Black women and their peers. Double-consciousness is the double awareness that Black women experience when living as both a racial and a gender minority in a White dominated society.

Cognitive Depletion

A result that intersectional invisibility sometimes has on Black women is that it induces cognitive depletion (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Cognitive depletion is mental exhaustion that could have an effect on one's memory, performance, and motivation. Mohr and Purdie-Vaughns (2015) explain "Women of color might experience more cognitive depletion than White women because disambiguating attributions of discrimination based on multiple subordinate identities are more effortful than making attributions on a single subordinate identity" (p. 393). The magnitude of cognitive depletion differs as a consequence of intersectional attributes of discrimination.

Cognitive depletion is similar to what some Black women executives describe as emotional tax. Emotional tax is experienced when Black women are in environments where they are continually overlooked; their accomplishments diminished; and they are subject to cultural slights, usually about their hair, appearance, and even parenting skills. The burden of being on guard at all times affects their lives in negative ways (McGirt, 2017). Adding to the emotional tax, McGirt (2017) suggests that many Black women feel as though they are hitting a "black ceiling," which leads to a gap between women of color and White men in power. The black ceiling effect leaves women of color shut out of the informal networks that are constructed among White men; these often lead to mentorships and sponsorships.

Cognitive depletion can create a feeling of social distance among Black leaders and their peers. Shaban (2016) reports that in order for all employees to function in a productive way,

they have to learn to realize their differences as assets, rather than liabilities. Black women who realize they are treated equally at work become highly motivated to work. Situations in which individuals are isolated because of differences in appearance could lead to social distance, which entails some level of unwillingness to interact with other members in the group. A reason for social distance is that people are most comfortable when they interact with those whom they perceive to be similar to them. In an interview study of professional development, Shaban (2016) found that people tend to like those whom they feel are similar to them and dislike those whom they see that they are dissimilar to them. Beckwith et al. (2016) also reveal that African American executives are a minority in executive positions, with few to no peers of their race and gender. This may leave them with a feeling of being the “other” in the workplace. This feeling of otherness is another form of isolation which may also reflect in few friendships or limited social activity at work. Experiencing social distance and otherness could induce adverse feelings that could lead to conflicts in workgroups, contributing to the cognitive depletion experienced by women of color.

Exposure to the daily assault of racial microaggressions has major psychological implications and consequences, also leading to cognitive depletion. Sue et al. (2007) describe microaggressions as: “brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to target the person or group” (p. 273). Holder et al. (2015) explain the serious implications racial microaggressions have on mental health: “The most common symptoms that are likely to manifest in employees who experience chronic microaggressions are anxiety, paranoia, depression, sleep difficulties, lack of confidence, worthlessness, intrusive cognitions, helplessness, loss of drive, and false positives” (pp. 165-

166). In a study of ten Black executive women, Holder et al. (2015) identified five themes of microaggressions in their experiences: environmental manifestations, stereotypes of Black women, assumed universality of the Black experience, invisibility, and exclusion. The same study revealed six themes of coping strategies: religion and spirituality, armoring, shifting, support network, sponsorship and mentoring, and self-care. The racial microaggressions that women of color are subjected to contribute to the cognitive depletion experienced by many.

Microaggressions are experienced by Black women at various levels of educational leadership. Weiner et al. (2019) conducted interviews with 10 Black female school leaders to examine how identity, leadership, and discrimination were explored in their administration preparation programs. They found that racial and gender difference discussions were ignored or silenced. The researchers framed their study around the concept of microaggressions, illustrating how racism and forms of discrimination are present in brief or commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environment indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights towards targeted persons.

The Black women in Weiner et al.'s (2019) study experienced environmental microaggressions and microinvalidations during their administrator preparation programs. The lack of demographic diversity in administrator preparation programs, with one or a few Black women enrolled and few instructors of color, could create hostile spaces for people of color to engage in discussions around racial and gender issues and difference. Some of the participants felt isolated and that others were unaware of the experiences of Black women. The Black women school leaders also experienced microinvalidations, such as silencing, identity blindness, and tokenism in their administrator preparation program. They were taught to utilize culturally competent and socially just practices while leading schools for K-12 students, however they were

not encouraged to have discussions on how their identities as Black women might impact their leadership experiences. Some participants experienced forms of silencing and marginalization, including being told by their instructors and classmates that discussions regarding their race and gender were off limits. Weiner et al. (2019) found that their programs engaged in a number of microaggressions that negatively impacted their experiences and reinforced discriminatory ideas about school administration as well as who is best suited to be effective in such roles (i.e., White males). They felt like their programs glossed over or even ignored the discrimination Black women face as school administrators.

In a similar study, Burton et al. (2020) interviewed 10 Black women school leaders in K-12 education to examine their experiences with gendered racism and the toll it takes on them. The researchers in this study also used a frame of intersectionality as the experiences of the Black women school leaders are influenced by both their race and sex which cannot be separated. Experiences of gendered racism are linked to negative health implications including increased psychological distress. Burton et al. (2020) found that Black women school leaders coped with exposure to gendered racism and microaggressions in their leadership setting by using affirming (adaptive) strategies and less-affirming (maladaptive) strategies. The less affirming strategies or maladaptive approaches entailed the Black women disconnecting from, or avoiding racism by denial, avoidance, boundary setting, and in some cases exiting the school or profession all together (Burton et al., 2020).

The most prevalent less affirming strategy was avoidance of addressing the acts racism. One participant explained that she ignored some of the microaggressions because she didn't want to be seen as always bringing up race and dwelling on it would take away from her important work as a school leader. Even though the strategies helped the Black women survive, the cost of

the coping strategies had an impact on their personal lives and physical and emotional health. Their tolls of coping included internalizing gendered racism as a burden they had to bear, doubting their leadership skills and competence, exhaustion, anger for leading in a gendered racist context, and resignation. This study adds to other work that is critical of the expected stereotype of the strong Black woman because of the negative impact it has on the well-being of Black women (Burton et al., 2020).

Research from the corporate world shows similar challenges and barriers for Black women. Drawing on survey data from 1735 women of color in Fortune 1000 companies, Giscombe and Mattis (2002) show that African American women believe the following: they need to adjust their styles to fit into the corporate environment (36% agree), many stereotypes exist about women of their racial group (56% agree), and other employees feel uncomfortable around members of their racial group (36% agree). The same survey data show general agreement among women of color concerning major barriers that have prevented them from advancing in their companies: not having an influential mentor or sponsor (47% agree), lack of informal networking with influential colleagues (40% agree), lack of company role models who are members of the same racial/ethnic group (29% agree), and lack of high visibility assignments (28% agree). Similarly, in a study of 32 women administrators, Christman and McClellan (2008) found that women of color leaders find themselves fenced in by the expectation to behave according to feminine social constructions of gender. Those feminine social constructs are teaching, role making, openness, working through people, caring, nurturing, and listening.

This data I shared from several different studies reveal that many women of color are aware of the barriers that exist and also the lack of support from within their workplace to address the barriers. Women are at times expected to either adjust to desired stereotypes to be

successful or risk judgement and pressure. While African American women executives are under additional pressure to confirm to those same stereotypes or resist them, the more powerful women are the less likely they are to conform to the stereotypes. However, even after women join the executive track for career advancement, they often decide to jump off due to frustration and disillusionment (Beckwith et al., 2016). In educational leadership, Alston (2005) uses Peterson's account of the cognitive effect on Black female superintendents to explain that they feel as though they have an embedded responsibility to pass on to the next generation a capability to withstand mental anguish and assaults on their dignity.

Double-Consciousness

Black women in the United States are exposed to certain common experiences that stimulate distinctive consciousness concerning their own experiences and society overall (Collins, 2009). Double-consciousness is something that most Black people experience in everyday life. Black women are aware that they must navigate this construct while rising to leadership positions. Black women feel they have to understand a White male mindset in order to survive and thrive. Bell (1990) conducted a study with career-oriented women of color in leadership positions and discussed this idea of double-consciousness as part of her findings. The study included self-assessment workshops, network maps, and interviews. Race and gender are key reference points of the study to explore the socio-cultural processes of Black women's professional mobility. Bell found that the women perceive themselves as living two distinct cultural contexts, one Black the other one White. The challenge for Black women is to manage the tensions between the two cultural worlds as what leads to acceptance and fulfillment in one context often does not in the other.

W.E.B. DuBois coined the term double-consciousness to describe both the external world and the internal, intrapsychic dynamics that are the result of living in an oppressive society (Bell, 1990). Black people are seen as second-class citizens, a subordinate group by White America, the dominant cultural group. A bicultural life structure is the way most Black women chose to organize their lives culturally, which allows them to hold on to Afro-American rootedness without being totally assimilated into the dominant White culture. A complex life structure such as this requires a woman to be highly flexible so she can manage multiple roles.

In her analysis of the self-assessments, network maps, and interview transcripts of women of color in leadership positions, Bell (1990) reveals that complexity breeds greater complexity. The more a woman of color is involved in her professional, kinship, and social networks, the more she appears to acquire access to new people and social arenas, often with more responsibility or additional obligations to perform. A reoccurring theme from the study is the constant competition for attention among their many life contexts. For example, as a Black woman is constantly trying to prove her competence in the dominant White community, she must also exert equal, if not greater, amount of energy in maintaining ties to the Black community. The effects of double consciousness are emotionally and psychologically draining for women of color and take away from the mental exertion that could be used to be more productive in fulfilling their leadership role, as well as help them to maintaining a good balance between work and other home and life commitments.

Supporting Women of Color

The literature based on how to best support Black women leaders in central office positions is very limited. However, the number and variety of research studies conducted on how to support Black women as developing leaders in higher education and principalships is growing.

Black women face many challenges in obtaining educational leadership roles, yet establishing mentoring relationships is one of the most promising ways to support them in career advancement and in leadership positions. Providing a variety of mentorship experiences for Black women is a significant strategy to support them in overcoming obstacles to excel in educational leadership positions.

Mentorship

A review of the literature shows that barriers do not disappear for women of color after they reach the top leadership positions. Establishing mentoring relationships for women of color is one way to support them, as well as a way for them to develop the social capital needed to be successful in their positions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). In her narrative study of the recruitment and retention of Black women superintendents, Brown (2014) found that establishing mentor relationships and networks was critical to them being recruited and retained in the public school superintendency. The Black women superintendents spoke about how their paths in educational leadership would have been different had it not been for their mentors' providing opportunities for growth and learning through leadership experiences and encouragement which opened doors to superintendency. Their educational leadership preparation programs provided educational knowledge about the role of superintendent; however, their true learning came through experiences, professional associations, and mentors.

As mentioned earlier, Reed (2012) conducted a study with three Black female principals on how the intersection of race and gender influenced leadership practices. She found that influential mentors contributed to the principals' decision to ascend to school administration positions. In educational leadership, the role of principal is already one in which many people

feel isolated. Adding the intersection of race and gender furthers isolation for many Black women principals, making it difficult for them to build mentoring relationships.

In their study of systematic ways in which principal promotions are delayed by race and gender, Bailes and Guthery (2020) found that mentorship can be a mechanism for increasing diversity among assistant principals who are then hired as principals. Mentoring has a positive influence on assistant principals of color such as increased promotion rates when mentors and mentees share characteristics like race and gender. Mentorship for urban schools' leaders can in turn have an impact that reaches minority students. Reed and Evans (2008) conducted a study on how race and gender affect the way African American female principals perceive and enact their roles of being Black and a woman in predominately African American urban schools. They found that urban school leaders benefit from the help of African American community leaders as mentors who can help them unpack racism, sexism, classism, and elitism with staff and students. This type of mentorship helps principals develop a resistance to racial and socioeconomic stereotypes and address and remove structural barriers that might prevent the academic success of Black students.

Positive mentoring relationships can yield desirable outcomes in helping women of color cope with microaggressions, increase positive self-identity and efficacy, and contest oppression and negative stereotypes (Tran, 2014). Mentoring is an important factor contributing to the career advancement and personal development of minority female leaders. The lack of mentoring opportunities could cause them to perceive that their career choices are circumstantial and unplanned. Tran (2014) interviewed women of color leaders in institutions of higher education in the United States to examine various dimensions of mentoring, explore new models of mentoring, and consider how the role of mentoring shaped their leadership work in faculty

positions. Tran (2014) found that modern models of mentoring emphasize non-hierarchical, collaborative, and cross-cultural interactions between mentoring partners, which is different from the traditional hierarchical relationships between mentor and protégé. When asked about the role mentoring plays in their professional development and growth, the women of color reported that while their mentor relationships varied in structure and format, all attributed their professional success to having mentors and greatly valued those mentoring relationships (Tran, 2014). Tran summarized the mentoring experience for the women in the study as not always visible, constant, self-initiated, and multi-dimensional.

One type of mentor approach is not appropriate for all; some of the women of color in Tran's study relied on informal relationships developed with individuals in their family or the social network in their community while others benefited from formal relationships in academia. When supporting women of color leaders with the development of mentor relationships, it is important to find out who has access to mentoring relationships and what mentoring models work best for them. Not doing so could result in improved support for some while excluding others. Tran (2014) recommends that women of color create a "portfolio of mentors," which is a range of mentors who help them throughout various phases of their career, providing multiple mentoring relationships among individuals. This allows for mentoring to be a fluid process that involves movements across different social planes (Tran, 2014). For example, these kinds of mentoring relationships might entail mentoring up to supervisors for experience questions and strategy for how to handle situations, mentoring across to peers for opportunities to dialogue, and mentoring down by paying it forward to Black women coming behind. Tran (2014) points out that Black women might have to take the initiative to develop mentoring relationships with those

in positions they aspire to hold because individuals might assume that strong Black women are not in need of mentoring.

Mentoring relationships for Black women leaders in higher education can have a positive impact on their working conditions by shaping their daily interactions with colleagues, exert influence on the collaborations with colleagues across departments and divisions, and mobilize structural and organizational change (Tran, 2014). Some African American women give credit for career ascension in higher education to personal drive and sponsorship from an unexpected group: White men (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Perhaps surprisingly, most of the Black women in Davis and Maldonado's (2015) study received sponsorship from White men. White males occupy most senior level positions and therefore have decision making authority to provide opportunities for Black women. These men can help Black women by granting them access to networks of power which make them visible to leaders, offer connections to higher career opportunities, and provide cover when trouble arises (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

In another study related to mentoring, Lewis (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of the social capital of African American women and men administrators in higher education. Lewis (2016) found that African American women are often excluded from interactions that would help them acquire cultural capital. In this study, Lewis measured cultural capital by variables such as how often African American administrators have been asked to apply for a position, sponsored or coached for a position, engaged in networking, and held offices or served on committees. Moses and Wilkerson (as cited by Lewis, 2016) point out that dual effects of racism and sexism contribute to the devaluation and isolation of African American women and recommend countering those damaging effects with mentoring opportunities and strategies to recruit and retain them.

Taken together, the research studies I have reviewed in this section illustrate that mentoring is one important way to address the barriers that women of color face in career advancement. Burns (as cited in McGirt, 2017) shares how important it is to invest in the careers of women of color early and often by providing quality mentorships and sponsorships. Women of color should not feel as though they are double outsiders because they are neither White nor men. Implementing mentorships and sponsorships will encourage natural spaces for women to interact with White men who dominate executive leadership positions, broadening their opportunity for making connections. It is equally important that women of color receive high quality and honest feedback on how they can improve at work.

Conclusion and Further Implications

The literature indicates that Black women in educational and corporate leadership positions are still facing challenges related to race and gender (Reed, 2012). There is limited research on specifically supporting women of color with identifying and overcoming barriers to reach upper level and district office educational leadership positions. The studies in educational leadership and corporations revealed similar trends. While there are certain levels that women of color are permitted to rise to, colloquially known as glass cliffs, there are very significant barriers that hinder women of color from progressing into top leadership roles. However, women of color are capable of leading at the executive level. When given the opportunity and the proper supports and mentorship, women have been able to advance in these roles.

My study focuses on barriers faced by Black women in K-12 school systems when seeking central office leadership positions and strategies that have helped them overcome barriers. My study contributes to the scholarly conversation by including interviews of Black women working as Directors and Senior Directors in K-12 school systems. I explore the specific

challenges these women of color have faced in seeking leadership positions and how they have overcome these barriers. I ask about how they think we can best support other women of color who wish to lead. I anticipate the results of my study to be beneficial for not only women of color but all marginalized groups who are experiencing barriers when trying to rise in ranks to top leadership positions.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The problem this study addresses is the disproportionately low number of women of color who hold educational leadership positions in school district central offices. This study is centered around barriers that prevent women of color, specifically Black women, from rising to educational leadership roles of Director and Senior Director in K-12 education systems. Women of color are not promoted to executive leadership positions at the same rate as White men and women.

The purpose of this study is to learn from the experiences of women of color who have risen to executive leadership positions in education, about how they overcame barriers to get there, and how they continue to navigate modern forms of racism. Knowledge about these experiences is valuable to other women of color who seek advancement and to those who recruit and hire for executive positions. I am interested in learning what works to remove barriers that are in place preventing women of color from being promoted to higher-level professional positions and to learn how women of color in central office leadership positions obtained their positions, remain there, and what type of mentorship is most impactful.

Pilot Study

In order to learn more about the barriers women of color experience that could have limited or prevented them from rising to central office leadership positions, strategies implemented to overcome those barriers, and to practice the data collection methods outlined in my draft methodology, I conducted a pilot study. I selected two central office leaders to participate in the pilot project, both are directors and women of color. I originally planned to interview each woman two times face-to-face, one week apart, focusing on barriers faced while working to achieve their current position during the first interview, then asking of strategies to

overcome those barriers during the second interview. However, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic which started in early March 2020, my plans changed dramatically.

The social distance and quarantine order prevented me from conducting the interviews in person, consequently, I completed both interviews virtually. I attempted to schedule the interviews individually using Google Meet, however due to scheduling conflicts, the interviews actually happened virtually using Google Docs and the participants responded to the questions in writing. I spoke with both participants over the phone before sharing the interview questions over email. I explained the purpose of the study with each participant individually over the phone. I told them that I wanted to learn about their thoughts on the barriers faced while rising to their level of leadership in central office. I read and reviewed the six interview questions with each participant, categorizing the first three as learning more about any barriers they experienced that could have limited or prevented them from rising to central office leadership positions and the last three as strategies implemented to overcome those barriers. I made initial contact on March 2, 2020, however I did not receive all responses back from both participants until April 16, 2020, which was beyond the timeline I anticipated. Because of the turn-around time given that I did this as part of a class, I only implemented one trustworthiness check: member checking. On April 18, 2020, I shared my analysis and themes from the interview questions with the participants to verify that I captured their correct sentiment. The process went well, and both agreed with what I gathered from their responses.

Insights and Pilot Findings

After receiving responses from both participants, I read, coded, and categorized their responses. I could have gotten more in-depth data had I prepared to ask additional questions. I initially reviewed the questions in the two categories outlined in the interview guide that I

created the previous semester; barriers encountered by women of color and possible strategies to overcome those barriers. As I coded the responses from the two participants, hiring practices and societal stereotypes emerged as the two major themes based on their experiences as women of color advancing to leadership positions in central office. My findings from the very small pilot project were that hiring practices and societal stereotypes were barriers that limited or prevent women of color from obtaining positions in senior educational leadership. Based on this pilot finding, I developed more questions to ask participants in the dissertation study about these issues.

Both participants described hiring practices as major barriers they had to overcome throughout their career. One participant gave the example of applying for positions then learning of changes to the experience and qualifications needed for the position, which eliminated her as a candidate, while watching her White counterparts obtain similar positions without having to meet the same exact qualifications. The other participant discussed how she had to appear over-qualified and have more experience than her peers in order to get considered for a job, even though her peers held the same position with the same roles and responsibilities. They both shared that the leadership positions they are encouraged to apply for tend to be at low performing schools, in federal programs, and with turn around initiatives, insinuating to them that women of color are best suited for challenging positions connected to the most struggling schools in the district.

In describing their strategies for overcoming barriers to reaching educational leadership positions as women of color, both participants mentioned the importance of advocating for other women of color throughout the hiring process. They shared personal experiences of speaking up for women of color interview candidates when they were being stereotyped and hiring committee

members made problematic and discriminatory statements about them as potential employees: that they were not a good fit, too aggressive, too quiet, lacking passion, and other qualifiers not based on merit or skill. From the perspective of my pilot participants, affirmative action is still needed because of the microaggressions that occur towards Black women during the hiring process.

The second theme of societal stereotypes was defined by the participants as Black women not being seen as leaders, more fit for less responsibility or positions that no one else wants, and not extended grace for their mistakes. Both participants explained the stereotype that Black women aren't capable of successfully leading non-people of color. They described being told they wouldn't be a good fit for leading a team of mostly White men and women and observed the generalization made towards other Black women because of their appearance. They also described how Black women are seen as lazy or overachieving therefore lacking the extension of grace when needed. They are expected to over perform duties without making mistakes. When mistakes are made by Black women, they are often more highly criticized as compared to their White counterparts.

The preliminary findings from this pilot research advanced my thinking about barriers faced by women of color when attempting to secure and succeed in educational leadership positions. Moreover, the themes from both women aligned with the feedback I received from conducting practice interviews on the same topic the previous semester, and from reviewing literature around the topic. These experiences confirmed to me that the topic is important and that women of color in varying levels of educational leadership face barriers and experience enablers that help them to be successful. The pilot project also supported my suspicion that interviewing would be the best method of data collection as it allowed for me to learn of the

experiences of women of color and easily member-check while experiencing a world-wide pandemic.

Study Design Adjustments

Based on the results of the pilot project, I adjusted the number of participants I planned to interview and the number of questions I decided to use. I chose to interview five participants. Initially I had intended to focus on just two women, but I realized that more participants would allow me to better read across experiences for similarities and differences. I interviewed the five participants each two times, for about one hour for each interview. I asked a broader range of questions in the first interview and then targeted additional questions in the second interviews based on my review of their first interview transcripts.

From my pilot study, I learned the importance of hiring practices and societal stereotypes, so I included more direct questions on those topics. Discussion in my interviews and the literature about stereotypes helped to solidify my decision to conduct the study and analyze the findings through the lens of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory. I added some questions connected to the lens of Black Feminist Thought, exploring issues related to pigeonholing and stereotyping. In line with Critical Race Theory, I asked questions about everyday forms of oppression, microaggressions, and whether my participants felt interest convergence was at play in their hiring.

I also created a timeline that allowed time for unforeseen circumstances. The pilot project did not go entirely as planned. I realized that I was asking important and busy Black women leaders in central office leadership positions to take the time assist me with my study. For the dissertation study, I included alternative dates for interview cancellations, and I also used email to probe for more feedback. The pilot project and practice interviews I conducted the previous

semester taught me how important it is to not have pre-existing personal relationships with the participants that could unduly influence the findings. Not knowing one of the pilot participants on a personal level required more probing from me to receive rich responses and added an element of excitement to learn more about her personal and professional experiences. The other pilot participant and I have worked on several projects together therefore the process went much quicker but had less depth. The familiar participant did not have many questions about the intention of the study or who would have access to the data, which I explained to both. When I conducted the pilot, I did not think of including considerable time for rapport building not knowing that some participants might require more than others.

Another reminder I gathered from the pilot study was to look more deeply at issues surrounding hiring practices as I continued to review literature connected to my topic. This pilot study was the first time I learned in detail about this a barrier for women of color. I have experienced racist and non-supportive hiring practices personally; however, it was more prevalent with these two participants than I had anticipated. They are from different departments; however, they are in roles that require them to participate in various interview teams throughout the district. It was eye-opening to learn that they both have experienced and observed very specific hiring practices that have limited women of color from obtaining leadership positions. Accordingly, I added questions about this to my interview guide.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

1. What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems?

2. How have women Black women overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?

Methodology

I used a basic qualitative research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to answer my research questions. I collected interview data from women of color who hold senior level positions in school district central offices. Basic qualitative research is general research with a disciplinary emphasis aimed at solving a problem, effecting change, or identifying relevant themes (Mihás, 2019). Qualitative researchers are interested in the lived experiences of people in their natural settings and how people make sense of their own experiences, construct their world, and give meaning to their lives. My focus was on understanding the barriers and enablers to educational leadership from a participant's perspective. The primary instrument in qualitative research is the actual person doing the research; the researcher takes notes, asks questions, notices themes, and prioritizes what to examine (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In my basic qualitative approach, I uncovered the barriers that women of color encounter on their leadership journey by analyzing their interview responses in conversation with the literature. I explored how they overcame those barriers by learning about their life growing up, career aspirations, and how they navigated obstacles to reach their positions in leadership.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Black woman, I have a personal connection to this research, which helped me to understand some of the barriers other Black women face and helped me to access and develop rapport with the participants. At the same time, I was reflexive to ensure I did not let my own experiences unduly influence how I interpreted others' experiences.

As a Black woman, I also have obvious assumptions and biases that women of color are at a disadvantage when it comes to career advancement opportunities, as opposed to their White male and female colleagues. Even though Fortune 500 companies and census and educational leadership data confirms this, I worked to remain as objective as possible throughout the research process, in part by identifying my own biases and trying to bracket them while listening to my participants experiences. I aimed to learn from the varied experiences of my participants about their paths to their current leadership position. I negotiated and thought through my biases in relation to the research participants by seeing the bigger picture and reminding myself that the findings could possibly benefit not just other women of color but other women in general. The participants seemed at ease and open throughout the interview processes and seemed to provide their most honest thoughts and explanations.

My positionality in this study is as a woman of color who has experienced and witnessed the challenges of women of color, particularly Black women, in obtaining promotions and rising to senior educational leadership positions, as compared to their White peers. My positionality matches the participants in the study in that I am also a woman of color. We share similar experiences of participating on interview panels for district leadership positions, providing references for Black women seeking promotions, and observing Black women being overlooked for leadership positions. I am an insider with the participants in regard to race, gender, and career field, however an outsider when it comes to rank of position. Indeed, my participants hold positions that I aspire to, making this study personally very relevant and revelatory. Currently, my position is Senior Administrator in central office in a K-12 school system, which is a lower level than the director and senior director position of the participants. We are all women of color in education; however, the participants hold senior level leadership positions in central office.

Sample Population

I selected the participants purposively. I chose five Black women who work in central offices of K-12 public school systems in North Carolina to learn about their experiences in advancing in their educational career and achieving their current leadership positions. My criteria for choosing the participants were that they were Black women with a range of leadership experience in years, held leadership positions of director or senior director, and represented five different departments in central office. I utilized the snowball sampling method to identify the sample of five women to participate in this study. I identified the first two participants from professional contacts, who then suggested the other three participants. I selected two of the participants because we have worked together in the past and have known each other professionally for seven years. These two participants recommended the other three participants to me. They are all Black women who have worked at various leadership levels; two are directors and three are senior directors. The participants work in the same large urban school district with over 150,000 students and 18,000 employees. I did not know any of the participants well, even though I am professionally acquainted with the first two participants who agreed to take part in my study. After I contacted them, all of the participants verbally agreed to participate in the study, and I shared with them the IRB consent form explaining the general purpose, process, and confidentiality of the study.

The participants have varied years of leadership experience and differ in the context for seeking their current leadership position. Anita has been in her current leadership positions for over ten years. She is in her forties and holds the position of director for magnet education. Her first educational leadership position was as an assistant principal, before that she was a classroom teacher. When Anita was a teacher, her principal encouraged her to pursue school

administrative positions. She was promoted from assistant principal to senior administrator within the department of magnet programs. Anita self-selected to apply for her current leadership position.

Brenda has been in her current leadership position for over ten years. She is in her sixties and her educational career includes positions as a teacher, department chair, district lead teacher, and director. She currently holds the position of director of planning and district initiatives. Brenda was encouraged to apply for her current leadership position by the creator of the position. Before her, no one held the position in her district. She was the first director hired for a newly formed department in her district.

Carla has been in her current position for at least five years. Before being promoted to the director of federal programs, Carla held the positions of teacher, lead teacher, assistant principal, and principal. She in her forties and decided to pursue educational leadership positions beyond the classroom to lead and teach in a different way. Carla was encouraged to apply for the position she currently holds by her predecessor.

Danecia is in her forties and is newly hired in her current position of senior director. She formerly held the positions of teacher, assistant principal, principal, and director. She has been an educator for over twenty years and in positions of educational leadership for over ten years. A former principal encouraged Danecia seek her first leadership position as an assistant principal. She has been promoted three times, up to her current position of senior director of curriculum and instruction. She self-selected to apply for her current position.

Eboni has held her current leadership position for at least five years. She is in her forties and has a less traditional educational leadership journey as compared to the other four participants. She majored in communications when she was an undergraduate student and

obtained a master's degree in counselor education. She began her education career as a high school admissions counselor. Her first educational leadership position was as the administrator of testing for a school district. She has since been promoted twice to the position of senior administrator of testing and accountability. Similar to Carla, Eboni was asked by her predecessor to apply for her current leadership position. After the completion of the interviews, she was promoted again to the chief accountability officer for a different K-12 school system.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection method I used in this basic qualitative study is interviews. I conducted interviews with Black women as an opportunity to learn about their experiences and gain insight on what they believe has helped them overcome barriers. I conducted individual interviews with the five participants using the Zoom platform. Interviews are one of the best ways to engage in conversation with the participants and learn of the barriers that they have experienced in the past (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I interviewed each participant two times; to focus on their background, experiences, and leadership barriers during the first interview and strategies for overcoming barriers, leadership lessons learned, and any themes that emerge from the initial interview during the second interview. I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A), asking follow-up questions as necessary to encourage in-depth responses. For example, when I asked participants to describe any barriers they've encountered or observed, I asked follow-up questions about explaining the effects the barriers had on them, if anything was said or done to challenge the barriers, and if they've advocated for other Black women, in order to fully understand what they experienced. When I asked the participants to describe what they experienced when it comes to hiring practices for Black women in their district, I probed by asking if they were commonly part of interview teams for Black women seeking leadership

positions, if Black women were considered viable candidates for the positions by the interview teams, if they were actively recruited, and if they noticed any delays in the hiring process for Black women. I used a combination of experience, opinion, knowledge, and sensory questions. During the interviews, I collected information and stories on the hinderances and enablers the participants have experienced during their leadership journeys. Each interview to lasted one to one and a half hours.

Data Analysis Strategies

I collected and analyzed the data from the interviews by transcribing the interview recordings, using Otter software, reviewing the transcripts for accuracy while listening again to the interviews, coding the transcripts for key ideas, and then looking for commonalities in the interview responses. I used components of narrative analysis by obtaining first-person accounts of the participants in the form of their interview responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I reviewed and coded the transcripts from the interviews to uncover interesting, relevant, unique, and important bits of data related to the barriers that women of color face. I coded the interview responses in two rounds using the inductive categories/coding process. The codes arose from the interview responses as I did not begin the process with a predetermined list of codes, though I did have some ideas about topics that might be important based on my review of the literature.

During the first round of coding, I organized the interview responses from all five participants by question. After organizing all the responses together by question, I then reviewed the responses and coded each response by topic, grouping like topics together. As I grouped the like topics together, I developed categories out of similar codes, focusing on patterns and insights related to my research purpose and questions. Then I moved into second stage coding where I re-

coded the categories into thematic findings, while considering the themes and theoretical context from my literature review.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, I utilized member checking and peer review. I utilized the member checking strategy first and the peer review second. Creswell (2016) recommends implementing the easier strategy first and the more difficult or time-consuming strategy next.

Member Checking

Member checking is a validity check that comes from the participants in the study. Member checking is when the researcher takes the themes and stories of the data back to the participants and asks the participants whether the themes or stories are an accurate representation of what they said (Creswell, 2016). I shared the themes as broad summary statements that I developed from the data analysis with the five participants as a way to check that my findings resonate with their experiences.

I met with the five participants individually and shared the codes, overall findings, and corresponding themes from the data analysis. I asked for their feedback on how I made sense of their experiences and if they heard their voice present in the findings. All five participants gave me feedback that the findings were spot on, and they could hear their voice embedded throughout. The member checking discussions however forced me to think more deeply about issue of Black women being reluctant to speak up for other Black women seeking educational leadership positions. Some of the participants mentioned that they thought that finding was disappointing but not surprising. That caused me to revisit the interview transcripts to determine how I could expound on their viewpoints and provide clearer examples in the findings.

As I reviewed the findings with the participants, they also commented that it was reassuring that they were not alone in their thinking about what they perceived as barriers to advancement. A few of them shared that the interview process was therapeutic and allowed them to talk about issues freely in ways they hadn't before. They shared that they rarely, if ever, asked if they have experienced obstacles when seeking promotions or to talk about the challenges they faced as black women in senior leadership positions.

Peer Review

I also utilized the peer review method to help ensure that my findings are trustworthy. The peer review process involves having individuals familiar with the subject area review the project to provide support, play devil's advocate, play challenger, and help refine the study (Creswell, 2016). I asked two individuals who were Black women in educational leadership positions to act as peer reviewers. A classmate with a similar dissertation topic served as one of my peer reviewers. A participant from my pilot research study served as my second peer reviewer. This person is in a position of educational leadership as an elementary school principal and is a Black woman.

The peer reviewers read my coding notes and I talked through the analyses with them. I asked them to assess if the methods made sense and if the conclusions seem valid. I also had them to check for what might be missing, such as relevant connections in the data that were overlooked. I sent them the first draft of chapter four and asked that they read it through the lens of identifying any information that sounded biased or incomplete. I met with each peer reviewer individually to discuss their reactions and recommendations to the findings.

My classmate peer reviewer, whose research study is centered around a similar topic related to Black teachers and mentorship, provided feedback that the findings did not seem

biased or incomplete. She shared, “It is affirming to hear that many of your experiences match what I expect to find.” The second peer reviewer, who serves as an elementary school principal, also offered that the methods and findings did not appear biased or incoherent. She thought that the findings themselves were interesting. She told me that the findings were “confirming, relatable, and spot on” in relation to some of the things she herself has experienced while leading as an elementary principal in a large urban school district.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this study was the small sample size. Interviewing a wider range of participants would have yielded richer data and perhaps more nuanced findings. It is also a limitation that I relied on only one form of data collection – interviews – and that because of the global pandemic, I was required to conduct these virtually (via Zoom). Another concern was the unstable climate due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The participants all agreed to participate in the interviews virtually, however the stress and anxiety of leading education during the time of a pandemic may have influenced their responses. For example, the struggles of shifting to virtual schooling when it was unsafe for kids to be face-to-face were unprecedented and overwhelming. These could have had an impact on how my participants reflected on their leadership journey, causing them to minimize some of their challenges because the pandemic challenges were and still are so significant and ongoing.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to learn about the barriers experienced by Black women that limit them from reaching higher levels of leadership in K-12 school systems and what has helped them overcome the barriers to reach those positions. Exploring the experiences of Black women educational leaders revealed systems of power that are disadvantageous to them. The study focused specifically on Black women in central office Director and Senior Director positions. I selected these positions because they provide the unique perspective of holding a position that is usually in between the Principalship and Superintendency. I believe that gaining a deeper understanding of the barriers experienced by Black women in Director and Senior Director positions can provide insights into social inequities that Black women in educational leadership come up against, the impact these have on them, and ways that these women navigate challenges to obtain positions with more power and leadership responsibilities. I was especially interested in learning more about how Black women perceive and experience disparities in hiring and promoting women of color in K-12 school systems. The study provides insight in the supports that are in place in their school district to keep them in leadership positions. I interviewed the five participants twice virtually, for one to one and a half hours each. The empirical findings from the study and the perception of the participants are that barriers still exist for Black women in educational leadership positions. Specifically, lack of access is the most pervasive barrier and building relationships is influential in navigating barriers. In working to understand the experiences of these women, I identified three major findings:

1. Prominent barriers that emerged from the participants' shared experiences are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as their White

- counterparts, Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing.
2. Participants regard the lack of access to information, opportunities, and networks of support as the most pervasive barrier for Black women leading in educational leadership positions.
 3. What has been most helpful to the participants in maneuvering the barriers was becoming good at relationship building, developing good communication skills, mentally preparing to be judged more critically than peers, personally seeking out supportive networks, and striving for positions where they can advocate for equitable hiring practices.

Findings from this study address the research problem of learning about the barriers that could hinder Black women from advancing in educational leadership positions and strategies that support them in navigating those barriers. This study focused on two overarching research questions: What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems? and How have Black women leaders overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?

In this chapter, I revisit my research questions in relation to some of the codes and categories I identified while analyzing my data (which I organize in a chart), present the three key findings from my analysis of the interviews, and review major themes that deepen our understanding of the barriers experienced by Black women educational leaders while trying to rise to higher level leadership positions. I describe these findings using comments and examples from the interview participants and ground the findings in the context of Black feminist thought

and Critical Race Theory (CRT). For anonymity when sharing quotes and events, I have assigned the five participants the pseudonyms of Anita, Brenda, Carla, Danecia, and Eboni.

In the table that follows, I outline the research questions and corresponding categories that I identified in the data.

Table 1. Research Questions and Corresponding Categories

Research Questions	Corresponding Categories
1. What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must work twice as hard as White counterparts Fear of messing up opportunities for other Black women; can't afford to make a mistake Perceived as unintelligent Critically judged by stereotypes, superwoman, too aggressive, too emotional Racial microaggressions Hired for glass cliff positions Hired to be forceful instead of visionary Represent all Black women Unwritten expectations for advancement Limited access to connections and networks
2. How have Black women overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build relationships Good communicator Diversity or equity hiring policy Seek mentors Create a supportive network Disrupt inequities Prepare mentally; faith, be honest with yourself Behave in ways that do not foster negative perceptions of Black Women

Barriers to Advancement

The goal of this section is to delve into the barriers that still exist for Black women that have made their path to promotion in educational leadership challenging. I share the experiences of five Black women in the roles of Director and Senior Director in the same public school system. The primary finding of this study is that Black women in educational leadership

positions experience daunting barriers when trying to excel to higher positions. The five participants had various previous positions and leadership paths on the way to their current position of Director and Senior Director: two were principals, one was an administrator for magnet programs, one was an administrator for testing and accountability, and one was an administrator for curriculum development, all within the same school district. Although they had different leadership paths, all five participants experienced similar barriers no matter if they self-selected to advance or were encouraged to do so by their supervisor. Three out of the five participants felt as though barriers decreased or became easier to navigate because of the networks formed along the way. The other two participants acknowledged that barriers are still present however, at this stage in their careers, these barriers are different in nature. Brenda stated:

I would say that they have not decreased. I would say the barriers are just different.

Miniscule compared to the barriers I face now. I've learned a lesson or two. A big lesson has been how to navigate the system and how to play the game.

Prominent barriers that emerged from the participants' shared experiences are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as White counterparts, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing.

Not Seen as Intelligent

All five participants experienced events and situations that led them to believe that Black women are not seen as intelligent by their colleagues and peers. They spoke about situations where Black women in their school system were hired as principals, directors, and senior directors to clean up messes left behind by other administrators or to be forceful in making a change desired by the district that previous administrators were reluctant to make. To them, the

perceptions that Black women could be authoritative change agents lead to more options for promotion than being visionary, experienced, highly skilled, or overqualified for the position. When asked about breaking the metaphorical glass ceiling as women advancing in leadership positions, they instead described experiencing more glass cliff positions of being hired for responsibilities that no one else wants to do and provided minimal support for doing the job. For example, Carla described her first elementary school principalship as a glass cliff position because it was at a low performing and high needs school, and she was offered the position with the expectation to raise test scores. However, she was not provided adequate support from the district. Danecia discussed being assigned a glass cliff responsibility in her current position of Senior Director. She was assigned the responsibility to oversee summer school programming for the entire district, which was part of a requirement from the state's legislation, without a clear budget or plan. The bill states that school districts had already been provided money to support summer learning. She was not invited to be included in the discussions or decision making but was given the responsibility that she described as something no one else in her department wanted to do. She described feeling like her supervisors were not interested in her thoughts or ideas but assigned her the responsibility to undertake the challenging work.

Eboni described watching another Black woman in the district get promoted to become the principal of a large comprehensive high school with over 2500 students. From her position of Senior Director in central office, she experienced seeing the principal struggle because she was not properly trained by the district to lead the new initiatives that the school offered. Eboni also gave an example of a different high school that the district leadership at the time specifically wanted to be led by a Black principal because the population was mostly black students. She shared that this particular school was led by two different Black women consecutively, however

neither woman was properly trained or supported, and both were eventually demoted to lower-leveled principal and assistant principal positions in the district. Eboni explained “Apparently, there were some things that were not going right for them. But how could we not recognize that? How did they get to the point that they ended up having to be moved to another school?” She believed all three principals to be intelligent, however they were not presented or provided leadership opportunities to maximize their strengths. Moreover, they were not given the support and mentoring they needed to be successful. Instead, they were offered difficult positions to fix their schools without adequate support, which almost seemed like a set up for failure. It appears the higher the promotion for Black women, the steeper the glass cliff.

As another example of being treated as less intelligent, the participants described feeling ignored in meetings held with both school and central office staff. Danecia described providing ideas during a brainstorming session and the person who was taking notes, who happened to be a White woman, avoided adding her ideas to the compiled list until asked specifically by her to do so. Eboni shared a story on being recently promoted, and then during the promotion celebration a White woman colleague commented that she might apply for her position because it seemed to require minimal effort. Eboni was told, “I might apply for your position because you don’t complain so it might be easier.” All five participants shared similar stories of feeling cognitively ignored by their supervisor and peers and that the treatment was worst from White men.

Must Work Twice as Hard

During the individual interviews, I asked participants how race and gender shaped their development and experience as a leader. All five participants responded that they learned early in their career that because they are Black women they must go over and beyond to be noticed and must work twice as hard as their White counterparts. They knew that people in the workplace

would be unlikely to ignore common stereotypes of being lazy or superwoman that often come with being Black women. Black feminist researcher Linda Tillman (2012) warns that Black women must consciously strive to affirm the intersection of racial and gendered identities while reflecting the symbolic imagery of the “Black superwoman” and often times trying to maintain sanity. One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is that women of color experience interlocking forms of oppressions, or the challenges of intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The Black women in the study knew they were treated differently because of their race, gender, or both. They described witnessing a double standard of expectations compared to their White counterparts. The participants did not feel as though they were given as much grace as White women or non-Black women throughout their leadership journey, specifically in instances of arriving late to work or leaving early to attend to issues with their own children. The participants felt as though their absence was more noticeable than that of their White counterparts and that they were expected to be extremely responsive to the people in their departments all the time.

The participants gave examples of having to do more work than their peers and working for supervisors who expected them to perform like a superwoman. For example, Danecia shared that when she was hired for her current position as Senior Director, she was told that no one would be hired for her former Director position. Alternatively, she needed to perform the duties associated with both her new and former position. She self-selected to apply for the promotion and interviewed for the Senior Director position twice. After the first round of interviews, she was provided feedback that the department needed a change. She interviewed again during the second round and was hired. She recalled, “I did the work of both positions for five months before I was promoted.” This experience made her feel as though the hiring committee did not

acknowledge her capacity to do the job until after she performed it for five months. She had to work significantly harder to move up into the higher leadership position than some of her peers and is still performing her current and past duties in the new position. Additionally, she had to negotiate her salary to be equitable to the pay of her counterparts, one White and one Black man who were offered approximately \$17,000 more than her to perform the same work while they are overseeing less staff. Black women in today's society are constantly having to do battle to prove their worth (Brock, 2011).

Fear of Messing Up Opportunities for Other Black Women

An additional barrier is that Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women. The Black women in the study felt as though their decisions impact the perception of all Black women therefore, they could not afford to make a mistake. People of color are seen as representatives of their race in ways that White people are not. Critical race theorists explain this practice as differential racialization, where the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times and shift the stereotypes of minority groups over time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Unlike White women who are rarely seen as representatives of a White group and instead get to be seen as individuals, all participants shared that they felt that they bore the burden of representing all Black women all the time. They shared the fear that if one of them doesn't perform well, their White counterparts will think that none of them are smart enough and will reflect badly on Black women who come after them.

Carrying the weight of all black women leaves them with the psychological effects of second-guessing decisions and wondering if they are good enough. Anita shared her thoughts on this topic. She is worth quoting at length since she was so thoughtful about these challenges:

If there's a Black female that does not do well, I do feel a sense of “Oh, my God, now they're going to think none of us are smart enough or good enough.” Or say we gave her a chance and it didn't work. They as a group are not good enough. But I don't know if that's just my perception. But I tend to think it's true. When you have a principal who is removed from a school, White principals get removed and I don't think White people feel responsible for that principal. But if a Black principal gets removed, I do. In one instance, I thought a principal was really good, and they removed her. Then I thought, I don't get it. I did feel a sense of what does that say about all of us? I haven't worked with her that much, but the limited amount of time that I have worked with her, I thought she was really good, very competent, you know, I was excited about her promotion. Then in no time she was gone. I thought, well, that doesn't make any sense. I did feel a sense of responsibility and the sense of ‘Oh, my God, you know, they're going to think we're all incompetent.’

Anita's reactions to a Black woman losing her job are complex, especially since she perceived her as competent and couldn't understand why she was dismissed so quickly. At the same time, she worried about how the perceptions others had of this woman could all-too-easily be generalized to all Black women.

Too Much of One Thing or Not Enough of Another

Another barrier the participants shared was the perception that Black women are sometimes too much of one thing or not enough of another, for example, too loud on the one hand, and not as vocal enough on the other. They experienced challenges and judgement, from being assessed based on their appearance or because they had a difference of opinion than their White colleagues. They told stories of being perceived as difficult and too assertive by their

White peers when sharing a difference of opinion, their knowledge on a topic, or taking on new leadership roles. They felt as Black women, they are pegged as difficult for having a difference of opinion or too assertive when sharing their expertise on a matter. When I asked if they noticed stereotypes applied to themselves or others, Carla shared that she'd been told by one of her peers, a White woman, that she was difficult to communicate with because her philosophies did not align with hers. Carla also described her feelings about the barrier of being perceived as negative when she is trying to get others to understand why she is advocating for a perspective that might be different from theirs:

I feel like they see me as negative; she's going to be negative; she's going to have something negative to say. And most of the time, what I have to say might be negative to them but it's not negative to me. It is positive, it's you're missing something. I need you to have this lens about this student population, this parent base. I need you to remember this lens because the lens gets lost, and nobody wants to talk about it.

Anita spoke about experiencing the barrier of unwritten expectations for advancement while applying for a promotion to Senior Director. She met all the qualifications that were publicly posted for the position; however, she was told that the hiring committee was looking for someone with high school principalship experience. This was the one thing that she did not have even though she worked as a director in the same department as the vacant position and was performing the duties of Senior Director up until the new person was hired. She mentioned, "I felt like there were expectations that I had to have and had it been someone else they would have been like, Oh, yeah, okay, come on, we'll just teach you. But I had to bring those with me. At least that's how I felt." In Anita's opinion, she was the most qualified candidate since she was

executing the roles and responsibilities of the position for a short time without the title or pay. Yet when it came to hiring for the position, they added arbitrary additional requirements.

Eboni told the story about how a Black woman in her department took the initiative to write grants for various programs and was the only one doing so at that time. She observed others in the department refer to this Black woman as too emotional, demanding, and drama queen because she was always introducing another grant application and asking for data to submit with it. Eboni considered her to be passionate about supporting the programs in her department, which she noted ultimately benefits the students in the district. She did not perceive her Black colleague as overly emotional or as someone who was “always asking for something.” Their perception of this Black woman is similar to what Collins (2009) describes as objectification of Black women as the “other.” From the premise of Black feminist thought, Eboni’s colleague was working within reason to obtain grants for her programs, however her White counterparts categorized her as the opposite of reasonable: emotional or being a drama queen. This is an example of maintaining controlling images of Black women as the other that help to justify racial and gender oppression. Eboni gave details on how the Black woman was stereotyped as a drama queen and how she saw that as a barrier to her doing her job well:

One black woman in particular was viewed as a drama queen and I think that created a challenge for her. She was very passionate about her work, passionate about food insecurities, making sure homeless students had what they needed, social emotional types of things. I think a lot of times her emotions made people think, oh she's a drama queen. From that standpoint it was bad for her. What people would see or would hear would be the passion and devotion that she had towards kids who were not doing well. I think she probably wore her emotions on her sleeve, whether they were good or bad emotions. It

was just the kind of fabric she was made out of. She's very passionate about education and making sure that students were treated fairly and equitably but because she wore her emotions on her sleeve people often criticized her. There was a conversation about why she applied for all these grants; there's another grant coming from student support services, here's another grant. Our department would have to supply a lot of the data as the evaluation piece of that grant. One time, I recall an Assistant Superintendent saying, we should be grateful that she is bringing that money into the district, because one thing about her is that she can write a grant and she can get a grant approved. To me, that was a way to not necessarily justify the criticisms that people were having about her, but at least to say that her work is speaking for itself. Which is the fact that she is applying for these grants that we had not gotten before. She was demanding and wanted a lot of stuff but when you gave her what she needed and she submitted that grant, guess what, we got the money. In the end, it was all about the kids because the grants that she received was for a program that was going to ultimately benefit students. Basically, the way I took it, none of that other stuff matters, because she's essentially getting the job done.

Even though her colleague was successful in getting money for her department, Eboni described how others were suspicious and easily judgmental of her, alluding to the fact that her race most likely had something to do with their perspectives.

Another topic discussed in the interviews was how Black women are burdened with the responsibility of controlling how others feel. There were instances when they had to talk to their subordinates about accountability and the conversation was perceived as aggressive and belittling. The participants used the same language and tone that they commonly used to talk to those who worked under them, addressing matters that could not go unnoticed, however their

messages were perceived harshly. The women share in the displeasure of feeling like they are walking on eggshells when communicating with White peers, subordinates, and supervisors.

Danecia reflected,

Another barrier that I thought about, for women of color in leadership positions is how do you balance being assertive with being perceived as being aggressive and what's the difference because what I've come to realize is that I can't manage, control, or be responsible for how somebody else feels. Because you can say the same sentence to various people, they're going to feel differently about that. And a lot of times, they want us to own how they feel.

Danecia continued by providing an example of an interaction with a subordinate, White woman, in her department who accused her degrading her when she was providing her feedback on a project, she asked her to complete:

She was telling me her plan for the extended learning project. I told her that, I really felt that if we cast a net that was deep and narrow, we can help the students more than her trying to cover three strands of curriculum on a six-week period. I just don't think that's going to be effective. However, I will defer to her expertise. And I said, as you're thinking about extended learning, let's make sure that we provide a lot of hands-on experiences for the kids. And knowing that she's sensitive, I guess that's what you would call it. I told her "By the way, I am in no way implying that your current units don't have hands on experiences." Why did she send me, if I were to print it, a two-page email saying that she felt degraded by my comment?

Viewing the subordinate's response through the lens of Black feminist thought allows one to see that she did not see past Danecia's Blackness to receive the feedback as feedback and instead

questioned her right and ability to suggest that she needs to do more. Danecia's feedback was provided in fairness, however it was taken as degradation, which is an example of the various levels of the all-consuming nature of negativity that often surrounds Black women (Brock, 2011).

The experiences of the participants that I describe in this section offer examples of differential racialization where they were racialized by the dominant society at different times in response to the shifting needs of their supervisor or colleagues (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I found that Black women are associated with being superwoman who gets the job done without feeling the stress of being over worked while also being too emotional or having it easier than their counterparts. It appears that the stereotype given to Black women shifted as the needs of their dominant work group, mostly White men and women, also changed.

Lack of Access to Information, Opportunities, and Support

In this section I share results from my second finding, which is that the participants regard the lack of access to information, opportunities, and networks of support as the most pervasive barrier for Black women leading in educational leadership positions. I divide this section into four categories: Don't Have Access to the Right Connections or Networks, Not Promoted at Same Rate as White Counterparts, Inequitable Opportunities, Black Women Reluctant to Speak Up for Other Black Women.

Don't Have Access to the Right Connections or Networks

The interview responses support the phenomenon that Black women often do not have access to the right connections or networks to obtain educational leadership positions at the same rate as their peers. The participants believe this is the most troublesome barrier to crack. Eboni commented, "Black women are one of the most educated populations, probably the most

educated population in the world. And the fact remains that we work hard, because we know we have got to be better than everybody else” yet the higher you go in educational leadership positions, the less Black women you see. The women felt left out of the good old boys’ club or the group who seemed to know of the leadership vacancies before they were posted on their district’s vacancy website.

All five Black women in the study were seeking connections and networks on their own to increase their opportunities for exposure to those “in the know.” To overcome this barrier, most participants were making connections with other leaders in their district; some were also connecting with leaders from other districts. They felt the need to build connections for support in their current role and to build social collateral since they are not always invited to have a seat at the table in their district. The participants seemed frustrated that they had to take the initiative to seek support from former supervisors or those with similar positions in other districts to receive pertinent information. Carla explained the connections she’s made in her district that help her to illustrate her competence:

I'm grateful to have people within the school district that I can reach out to and know that it's in confidence. I trust these women to the degree that I feel like I can ask them something in confidence. I can trust that they're going to sincerely tell me, look Carla a meeting is getting ready happen and I just want to give you a heads up, they are probably going to ask you to pop in. I literally have been texted in the middle of a meeting from someone at district level leadership saying, Carla, they're talking about federal programs in this meeting. There are some questions, I think they're going to try to reach out to you and see if you can pop in. I'm grateful of that because otherwise, I don't have any heads up.

Danecia also shared how a former supervisor helped introduce her to a nationwide network:

My former boss submitted my name to be part of this curriculum matters group. I had to fill out an application like a recruitment process. It was a strange process. I had to have an interview with him because he recommended me and now, I'm part of his curriculum madness group that connects me with curriculum leaders across the country. There are people from Tennessee, and I had to present at a conference with them. Again, something else I didn't know about. And he's White.

As evident in Danecia's experience, support for networking and opportunities can come from many places. However, my participants were plagued by the sense that White peers had an easier time networking and always seemed to know about opportunities before they did.

Not Promoted at Same Rate as White Counterparts

All five participants mentioned that there are not many Black women promoted to top level central office leadership positions in their district, specifically senior director and superintendent positions. During the period when I conducted the interviews, three out of fifteen superintendent, chief, and assistant superintendents in the district were Black women. The participants commented that there are a few women in leadership, but not a whole lot of Black women in comparison to the number of people hired in their district. The participants recognized that what seemed to be the preferred hiring progression to be considered for higher leveled positions was White men first, then Black men, White women, and lastly Black women. When asked to describe what their department does to intentionally recruit women of color, none of the participants could identify any proactive strategies used in their district. Their shared response was the district does nothing to seek out Black women for open positions. Danecia commented

that she believes having more Black women as hiring administrators in school systems will increase recruitment efforts for them. She tries to recruit diverse candidates, including Black women, in ways that she has control to do so in her department.

I asked the leaders in my study if they felt that systemic delays were present in their school district for Black women to be promoted to leadership positions in central office. I was curious whether they perceived that their White colleagues got promoted at faster rates than they did. All participants agreed that systemic delays are present but for varying reasons. Brenda has held central office positions for over fifteen years, in three departments, and has been in her current position for ten years. During this time, she has only seen three Black women, including herself, hired as an administrator in her department. She thinks that when she leaves the position, there will be even more Black women who struggle to obtain central office leadership positions. Carla also observed the slow process for the advancement of Black women across different central office departments. She recalls observing Black women being purposefully excluded from the interview process or hiring managers interviewing them knowing they had the intention to hire a different candidate, which hinders the ability to give them a fair opportunity. Carla has plans to disrupt the broken system of Black women having limited access to leadership development opportunities and says:

If I can't fix the system internally, then I'm going to find another method to make sure that we have access as well. And every chance I get a forum to talk about that, I do because I want other people to know, and be aware, that there's not a clear path.

Eboni has experienced Black women performing two different positions at once and interviewing for two years before receiving a promotion. At the same time, she observed Black women hired for positions they were not qualified for and received inadequate support to be

successful in the new position. She believes the systemic delays in promoting Black women leaders were better or worse depending on who is in charge.

Inequitable Opportunities

My participants had a general sense that they were often not afforded similar opportunities as compared to some of their peers. Danecia explained that inequitable opportunities for Black women was a barrier to why they are not promoted at the same rate as their White counterparts and why they have limited access to leadership development and promotion. She thought that Black women were qualified for leadership positions but were often overlooked, saying:

We don't have the same opportunities; it may appear that we do. Usually, your name gives away indication that you're a person of color and a woman. When you go in for an interview, cultural differences can keep you from getting a fair opportunity at a position and along the way, we don't have access to all the other positions that's available to beef up our resume, like, you know, access. So no, we don't have the same opportunities.

Danecia also thought that Black women needed to showcase their talents and abilities by seeking out leadership opportunities. She encourages Black women in principalships and central office leadership to find projects to make their own and execute well because not many opportunities will be brought to them. She offered:

When I first came to central office, I didn't have a project that was my own, or something that I can show what I can do. So, when you get an opportunity to show what you can do, take it. And make sure people know that you're leading that work, so that you can get the credit and attention you deserve.

Black Women Reluctant to Speak Up for Other Black Women

An interesting finding from the study is that some Black women believe that another reason access becomes a barrier to reaching leadership positions is because they are reluctant to speak up for each other. Carla discussed how Black men in her school district have informal strategies to support each other for moving up in leadership positions, such as meeting regularly at a local bar to connect and build networks of support. She thought Black men do better at pulling each other up for advancement opportunities. In her experience, Black women do not support each other as much as they should and it stems from a place of, "...we're afraid somebody is going to take something from us because we aren't used to having anything."

In reviewing the comments from other participants, I found that the Black women fell short in terms of proactively supporting each other. The participants shared that a huge barrier is Black women could know of other Black women who would be right for a position but are reluctant to speak up in support of them. They don't speak up out of the fear of how and what they say would influence decisions and opinions that people already have about Black women. Carla shared why this reluctance constitutes as a barrier:

But unfortunately, many times our own people are the barrier. I think it stems from we're so afraid that somebody's going to take something from us because we ever had anything or any real authority, that when we get it, we don't reach back. We say we do. We say we should, we might even encourage somebody, but what do you really do? We don't, all of us don't do the work. And that's the barrier. Because where you would expect that [is] from White folks. We should not have to deal with that with people that look like us, and a woman's a woman. I've just learned to see it for what it is, it is a barrier. Unfortunately, it's a barrier coming from our own folks and our own Black women. But I just chalked it

up to the fact that it's been so hard for us to get where we are and forget that we got there by somebody [who] helped us. And unfortunately, not all of us are of the opinion that we need to reach back. Knowing the right people is only half the battle. And that's where we fall short as Black women. We know you're the right person, we know, I should say something, but we are reluctant because we are afraid of how we speak will influence those decisions and opinions about us now. We're not sure what that White woman or that White man is going to think about me advocating for you so much, so shut up and stay in my lane. So, huge barrier. That's what I've seen, heard, and that's what I feel. How has that impacted me? Negatively in terms of the mental support side of things.

Specifically, some Black women are not sure what White men or women would think about them advocating so much for other Black women. They think that Black women play it safe by thinking they need to shut up and stay in their lane so that they don't mess up opportunities for themselves, even if this means that sometimes they make a rockier path for Black women who follow them.

Navigating Barriers

A key finding from the study is that relationship building, developing good communication skills, and mental preparation are most helpful in navigating the barriers that the participants experienced throughout their leadership journey. The final theme I found in my interviews is that building relationships, being a good communicator, and preparing mentally are most helpful in navigating the barriers that the Black women in my study experienced throughout their educational leadership journey. The Black women Directors and Senior Directors featured in the study insist that barriers do not decrease or go away with more years of experience, they remain but are different in nature. Therefore, as Black women advance to higher leadership

positions in school districts, they still need support from others who have been in similar positions. In this section I describe the participants experiences and lessons learned for overcoming challenges for promotion opportunities. I discuss the most helpful strategies for overcoming barriers, the importance of mentor relationships, how to mentally prepare for the adversity of trying to lead as a Black woman, and the need for policy targeting equitable hiring practices.

Build Relationships and Good Communication Skills

An important finding from the study is that Black women who build relationships and become good communicators are more successful in maneuvering barriers that could limit their promotion to higher levels of leadership in school districts. In analyzing the participants responses to what has been most helpful on their leadership journeys, and lessons learned for overcoming barriers, they all believe that there are many benefits to Black women building relationships with others in and outside of their school system. For example, Anita believes that it is helpful to build relationships so that people will create a vision of Black women as school leaders. She shared that traditionally White men are seen as the leaders of her district and Black women need to disrupt the traditional vision of what a school leader looks like. She expressed her thoughts on this topic passionately:

I really think it's building those relationships so that people create a vision of a woman of color as a school leader. That's grassroots because people aren't going to assume that. With district leadership, or in any place you work, it's building those relationships so that people can see us as leaders. Especially since we are out here working twice as hard. People can see and can begin to have a vision that school and district leaders can be a

woman of color, an African American woman. It's disrupting what their vision is of a school leader.

Brenda also thought that relationship building was critical to navigating barriers. She adds that the inability to build relationships could become a barrier for Black women leaders:

First of all, you have to be yourself, and you have to know how to build relationships.

And that's across the board, it doesn't matter, you still need to know how to do that. If you haven't learned how to build strong relationships with people, it's hard to move up. But it has to be the right people. If you don't know how to do that, no matter where you want to go, that can become a barrier for you.

Taking the time to build relationships and communicate openly will increase opportunities for others to see Black women as capable leaders.

The women in my study also discussed how Black women need to be in tune with who they are as people while building relationships with others. Black women should listen to their inner voice and believe they are enough instead of second guessing themselves. Carla believes it is powerful for Black women to know what they will stand for and what to ignore because they can't fight every battle. She explained her thinking during her interview:

Because there is no clear blueprint, you have to stay authentic to who you are. Yes, you have to play the game, but you have to know who you are, and what you're willing to stand for and what you're willing to ignore because you can't fight every battle. You have to have a demeanor where you come across as what they term as approachable, right? You have to be willing to listen to things fast, as [a colleague of hers] says, camouflage bullshit.

Black women should work to disrupt inequities but do it in a way that keeps them in their organization where they can continue to make a difference. Through building relationships and communicating effectively, Black women can have a stronger voice for speaking up for themselves and other marginalized groups.

Similar to Brenda and Carla, Eboni thought that relationship building is the central piece to increasing leadership opportunities. She described how she believes Black women can build relationships and why it is important:

It's important to build relationships with people. I think it is important to be an open and good communicator. You have to treat people like they are people. I truly believe that you cannot be successful and have that success be sustained if you don't treat people like human beings, and you have to have compassion. You have to be able to connect with people and you do that by building relationships with people in a variety of ways. Some people remember birthdays, and do all of those kinds of things, which I am terrible at all of those soft skill kinds of things from that standpoint, but I like to talk to people. I ask, "how are you doing," because I really want to know how you're doing. And I wait to get a response back. I think if people can build their communication skills, and make those strong, and then figure out a way to build relationships, or create or develop relationships with people, that will help, in the long run, get the work done and help people to accomplish their goals. I think people will follow you because, from a leadership standpoint, people follow people that they like. It's not about, you know, having everybody to like you, but it is about having that relationship with people, because we're human and that's just a part of who we are.

The participants also advise Black women to not be complacent and to seek out the positions and opportunities that they truly want. It is worthwhile for Black women to confidently apply for leadership positions and build relationships with others in their school district to increase connections.

Mental Preparation

Another major finding from the study is that Black women need to develop the mental capacity to handle the challenges faced when pursuing leadership positions, especially as they are bound to experience racism along the way. During their leadership journeys, the women in my study learned to mentally prepare for the microaggressions that they would encounter almost daily. The participants suggest that Black women who are seeking and currently in leadership positions should keep their eyes and ears open because things will come at them worse than it comes at any White person or Black male. Eboni shared, “I was not ready from a mental standpoint, ready to face some of the challenges, I was taken aback when I got this job. Someone admitted to me that they were mad at me for two years because they didn't get the position that I have. So, you know, that does something to your psyche a little bit.” She wasn't prepared for her White women counterparts to have that perception about her. She advised Black women in leadership positions to practice trusting their intuition and take their time when building trust with others.

Based on the participants experiences, they found it helpful to surround themselves with people who gave them honest advice. It was valuable for them to receive authentic feedback about ideas and decisions they were making from supportive people who were not afraid to help them identify when they made mistakes or situations they could have handled better. In order for Black women to benefit from authentic feedback, they need have an awareness of what they need

and what support to ask for. They should mentally prepare to receive genuine feedback by knowing themselves enough to understand that they are not perfect and utilize the feedback to create opportunities to improve. When asked what advice would help Black women mentally prepare, Eboni responded:

I think surrounding yourself with people who have your best interests at heart, people who can tell who can be honest with you and say things that you don't necessarily want to hear, because nobody is perfect. You need to be told that you're not perfect. Sometimes I need to be told that, you know, that some things that I do that aren't quite right. It does help me even though I disagree with what is said, I do appreciate the feedback. Even if it does make me sad, I appreciate knowing that someone, even if it's one or two people have not felt comfortable around me. I think that's important feedback to have. I think it's important to surround yourself, even before getting into a leadership role, that you are around people who are going to be honest with you about your skill set and about your abilities. There are some people that I wish I had a closer relationship with that I feel comfortable enough to go and say to them, you know what, you're probably not ready just yet. But do XYZ to make yourself ready. Doesn't mean that you can't do the job. You're just not quite there yet. I think that's really important if you can find those people or have those people as a part of your circle, to help you become successful.

The findings from the interview responses support the premise that Black women should mentally prepare to respond to any situation in a way that does not send off or trigger negative perceptions of Black women that people might already have. As I stated in the discussion for the first finding, at times Black women are stereotyped as being too aggressive or hard to get along with when their opinions are different than their counterparts. In essence, Black women must

work to navigate the pressures to be submissive or be stigmatized as being too strong (Collins, 2009). Black women in leadership positions must maintain composure even in challenging situations. They also carry the burden of always representing their race. Carla reflected thoughtfully about navigating the “angry Black woman” syndrome:

Barriers for me now, I would say are more difficult than they were in the early days, because the stakes are higher. My decisions today impact not just me, but so many more. That's what I have to remember that I might want to fly halfcocked and say something, but I realized that I'm only going to perpetuate the stereotype of the angry Black woman. So, you can't do that. I have to learn to temper most of what I say or at the very least table it until such time as I can figure out how to say it so that someone can hear it. What I'm finding by watching some of my peers who look like me, is no matter how high the level of leadership, when you say stuff folks don't like, they don't hear you. They turn you off. No matter what your leadership role is. I've heard senior leadership from folks that look like me, say stuff and folks not hear them. Because they have perceived that to be angry Black woman syndrome or just sheer aggression. So, for me the barriers are greater now, because the stakes are higher. The difference between now and then is that, then I didn't have a skill set by which to navigate it. I feel like I've got a skill set now that helps me navigate those barriers, until I work through them. Ultimately, at the end of the day I know that I don't have the option now to not address it. Whereas before, what I perceived as a barrier, I didn't have the skill set, so I may have just not addressed it, which then just kept a cycle going and the barrier from one year became the barrier to the next year before you know it, it's been five years and you are still facing the same barrier. What I try to do now is to find ways to navigate the system to address that barrier. So, I don't

carry that barrier from year to year because I don't want to look back in five years and I'm still facing that same barrier.

Eboni explained that Black women should stay or remain ready and equipped for promotion opportunities. She wants Black women to be prepared for leadership positions that become vacant and those in which they might be pursued for. She believes Black women are more subject to critical judgement than their peers and therefore need to be well read and informed. They should build connections within their district and stay on top of what's going on with major decisions and initiatives. Basically, they need to mentally prepare to have current knowledge of what's happening in their district because they might be held to stricter standards during the interview process. Black women should also make certain that they have the skill set for the leadership positions they apply for, just in case they are hired but not provided formal support to help them be successful in the position.

Lastly, all participants mentioned the mental preparation of having faith. It benefited the Black women in the study to have faith in themselves and the work they are doing. Brenda explained that believing in something bigger than herself helped to build the mental capacity to face day-to-day challenges of leading as a Black woman. While Carla offered:

What's been most helpful for me, I will say is first and foremost, my faith. Without me believing in something bigger than me, I don't know how from a mental capacity, I would have ever been able to wipe away the stains and move on. I think that for me, my faith has gotten me there because every time I have faced an issue, prayer has gotten me through seeking God's guidance and being faithful. I would say because sometimes what we think we need to do or where we think we need to move isn't where we need to go. I've now learned to wait on God. Every opportunity is not for you. So just because there's

an opening, even if you think you qualify, does not mean that's what you need to do. So sometimes, we have to remember if we believe we are a believer to seek God first. I believe that when something didn't happen for you, it is his way of saying that is not where I want you to be and when I'm ready, I'm going to elevate you despite all these other folks. I think sometimes we have to be mindful enough to look at opportunities as just that. It might be an opportunity, but it might be for somebody else and it may not be for me. So first and foremost, my faith has gotten me through these barriers and kept me moving.

Create Supportive Networks

Another important finding from the study is that creating supportive networks is helpful in navigating barriers that could limit Black women from reaching higher central office leadership positions. Each participant spoke of the importance of seeking mentor relationships and developing support networks. None of the five participants were formally introduced to or provided mentors when accepting their central office leadership positions. The two who are former principals were offered a “principal buddy” during their principalship, but not a formal mentor in any of their leadership positions beyond the classroom teacher position.

Because the district did not provide mentor or networking support, in general or specifically for Black women, the participants found it helpful to connect with other people of color within and outside of the district to be informed of, and exposed to, leadership opportunities. Danecia shared that she originally had the mindset that she wanted to achieve leadership positions on her own. As she progressed in leadership positions and began to encounter barriers to accessing positions, she realized “the system is not designed for Black people to get educational leadership positions on their own, so it is alright to seek help for

promotion.” It was helpful for her to connect and form relationships with other Black leaders, former supervisors, and those in professional networks.

Some of the participants found it beneficial to seek mentors of diverse backgrounds, commenting that it is not always necessary that their mentors were other Black women. Some had mentoring relationships with White men and women who were former supervisors or colleagues who gave solid advice. Danecia provided examples of her former supervisor, a Black man, who informed her of a principal’s network in her district that she joined and made connections with other principals throughout the district. She was also recommended for a national curriculum network by a different former boss, a White man. She also spoke highly of her informal mentor buddy during her principalship, another White man. She explained that she has made connections throughout her leadership journey with informal mentors from diverse backgrounds, who have all contributed to her success as a Black woman leader. Anita shared similar experiences:

The mentoring that I've had has not been specific to being an African American woman in central office leadership. It's just been being in central office leadership. For example, Ann and Jane, both White women, were great at helping me and others in my department think through the challenges of being in central office, such as how you support principals and get things done, even though we have no power to make them do anything. They've been great mentors in my career. But it wasn't specific to being a Black woman necessarily. It was specific to working in central office and how different it is from being in a school.

Equitable Hiring Practices

Finally, another key finding from the study is that Black women should put themselves in positions to advocate for equitable hiring practices in their school district. The participants do not believe there are equal opportunities for advancement for Black women even though it might appear that there are on a surface level.

I asked the participants to describe their experience with the hiring process in their district and if they thought affirmative action or diversity programs are necessary. Brenda thought that affirmative action provided Black women with a way in the door to show what they are capable of. She shared:

I believe some people think you say affirmative action and it's about giving someone the position. It's about providing the opportunity in my mind. I know people feel that we shouldn't have affirmative action, that it is unfair, and it takes away from other people who are qualified, [but] who's to say that the Black people weren't qualified? That's the part that really bothers me, the assumption is that affirmative action means I'm just going to put an African American person in that role. I don't think we would have made as much progress as we have made without affirmative action. We have a long way to go but I don't think we would be where we are now without some of those opportunities for Black women. Being there in those positions so that people could finally see, yes, Black women can do the job.

Policy and practices similar to affirmative action give Black women exposure to opportunities they could have otherwise been overlooked for because cultural differences could keep Black women from getting a fair opportunity at a position that they could do well in. Anita explained that she has observed equal opportunity stop in the hiring process after applications are

submitted because candidates are judged by their name or college attended, as in some ethnically-identifiable first names and Historically Black Colleges/Universities listed on applications are associated with Black women and men. Eboni also offered:

Those affirmative action type of programs are necessary because even though people may have or women of color may have the same opportunities, oftentimes they are overqualified, and those opportunities are not given to them. Until people change their mindset of how they view African American women, you're going to still need programs that are going to allow qualified people of color to be given the opportunity to even interview. Sometimes we have not gotten past if your name is Shaniqua, balling up your application and throwing it in the trash, we have not gotten past that stage. Until we can do that without everybody changing their names to something that you can't tell what race the person is. We know that that stuff still happens. Until people change their mindset, and the hiring managers change, and until you start seeing workforces, or workplaces that are very diverse, then you're going to need something that is causing the hiring manager to stop and say that is not okay.

Overall, the participants thought some type of affirmative action policy was needed to give Black women a fair chance until society changes their view of them and district leadership can see the value in diverse leaders.

Summary

The overall findings of the study demonstrate a need for Black women to be proactive in anticipating and navigating barriers that could limit advancement in central office leadership positions. Black women in educational settings encounter stereotypes such as superwoman, aggressive, emotional, and lacking vision. Imagining Black women as visionary change agents is

difficult because of the limiting societal frames placed on them (Patton & Haynes, 2018). An important lesson learned from the study is that Black women seeking educational leadership positions significantly benefit from pursuing mentor relationships and support networks to help them process and maneuver racial and gender biases they could encounter. It is imperative that Black women support each other in their leadership journey to higher levels and position themselves to impact systematic changes in hiring policy and practices that will consequently make opportunities more equitable for everyone in the organization.

Even though Black women are often judged by their race and gender, they are instrumental in balancing the leadership positions in organizations and school systems. The impact Black women have in leadership roles is far and great. Black women bring lived experiences of two minority groups to leadership positions that all people could benefit and learn from. Black women have a history that is relatable to other Black women, Black children and families, marginalized groups, and those who seek to build their capacity in understanding underrepresented groups. The higher Black women advance, the wider the impact they can have on improving policy and practices for themselves, women in general, and other minority groups. Lastly, Black women can bring a positive influence and diversity in thinking to organizations, especially because representation matters. Black women have the ability to empower students, other people of color, women, and families. Also, school districts that hire Black women in higher leadership positions exhibit to society that their organization values and promotes diversity in leadership.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers that could hinder Black women from advancing in educational leadership positions and learn about the strategies that Black women have implemented to overcome barriers that could have hindered their ascension to central office leadership positions. A problem that convinced and motivated me to conduct this study was the lack of women of color, people who look like me, in senior or executive leadership roles in my school district. Upon researching this issue, I learned my district was not an anomaly. Black women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions nationwide. In the first chapter, I mentioned that I want to learn more about how Black women perceive and experience disparities in hiring and promoting women of color in K-12 school systems to have a better understanding of how Black women navigate such barriers and what supports are in place to keep them in high level positions within school districts' central offices. It was not my intention to minimize what could be learned from examining the gender gap between all women and men in educational leadership positions but rather explore why Black women specifically seem to be held to different promotional standards than their White counterparts. There were three major findings that emerged from the study:

1. Prominent barriers that emerged from the participants' shared experiences are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as their White counterparts, Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing.
2. Participants regard the lack of access to information, opportunities, and networks of support as the most pervasive barrier for Black women leading in educational leadership positions.

3. What has been most helpful to the participants in maneuvering the barriers was becoming good at relationship building, developing good communication skills, mentally preparing to be judged more critically than peers, personally seeking out supportive networks, and striving for positions where they can advocate for equitable hiring practices.

My study revealed that Black women are still experiencing barriers that could interfere with them rising to higher educational leadership positions at the same rate as their peers. For example, the women in the study described experiencing barriers of being offered leadership positions that are viewed as unfavorable by their peers, having to work twice as hard as their White counterparts to be considered for promotions, and being stereotyped as too much of one thing or not enough of another. The Black women in the study knew they were treated differently because of their race, gender, or both. Critical race theorists would support the women's thoughts as them experiencing interlocking forms of oppressions, or the challenges of intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In conducting interviews with the Black women featured in the study, I found that limited access was the most persistent barrier they experienced during their leadership journey. They told stories of not having access to the same connections or networks as their peers. They also offered that inequitable opportunities, being overlooked for positions they are qualified for, and Black women not speaking up for each other as contributing factors to access being an unrelenting barrier.

A significant finding from the study is that relationship building and mental preparation were successful strategies for the participants in dealing with the barriers they encountered, no matter their varying path to higher level positions. The Black women leaders shared that barriers do not go away the higher they are promoted; however, they appear different in nature. What was

most helpful to them in maneuvering the barriers was becoming good at building relationships with others who shared their experiences, mentally preparing to be judged more critically than peers, personally seeking out supportive networks, and striving for positions where they can advocate for equitable hiring practices.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from the study in relation to my primary research questions and implications of how they contribute to larger literature. In the first section, I answer my research questions and discuss how my findings connect to other research studies on this topic. In the sections that follow, I explore implications, limitations, and recommendations for practice and future research. To close the chapter, I offer my final thoughts on what I personally learned most from the study, what surprised me, and what I am left still thinking about.

Research Questions Answered

I designed the research study to collect data from interviews with five Black women working in central office leadership positions in an urban district in the southern United States. The women work in the same school district across five different departments. My virtual interviews with Anita, Brenda, Carla, Danecia, and Eboni lasted for over twelve hours in total. I designed my semi-structured interview guide in order to answer two broad questions. What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems? And, how have Black women overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?

Existing Barriers

I asked the participants to tell me about any barriers or obstacles they encountered in seeking leadership positions, how where they manifested, and what was their emotional or

psychological effects. I asked these questions to find out the specific barriers that they have experience or perceive as limiting to Black women seeking central office leadership positions. After analyzing the interview responses, I conclude that prominent barriers that the participants experienced are that Black women are not seen as intelligent, must work twice as hard as their White counterparts, Black women fear messing up opportunities for other Black women, and are perceived as too much of one thing or not enough of another thing. I found that the Black women featured in the study experienced barriers of being overlooked for promotions, offered unfavorable glass cliff leadership positions and roles, stereotyped as too aggressive, and provided only limited access to networks of support. The barriers were mostly related to the hiring practices within the district and societal stereotypes held about Black women.

I asked the participants to expound on the barriers they experienced by describing the barriers as they happened, when the barriers were most prominent in their career, and what was the most pervasive barrier. I learned that the Black women leaders often experience the barrier of having to interview for the same leadership position more than once, going through two rounds of the interview process before finally securing the position that they were originally qualified for, and even already working in, only without recognition or equitable compensation. For example, two of the Black women performed the tasks of the higher leadership job they were applying for months before a decision was made on whether they received the promotion. Of the two, one was offered the position however the other was not. Anita, the one who did not receive the promotion, was told that the district recommended high school principalship experience which was not part of the original requirements posted for the position, nor was it mentioned during both rounds of the interview process. The events left Anita second guessing herself about being good enough for the position and wondering if the higher ups think she does not do good

work. Because of those lingering thoughts, Anita did not apply for the position when it became available again a few years later.

During the interviews, the women discussed slippery, unstable, or glass cliff positions where women or people of color are promoted to leadership positions when times are tough or to clean up a crisis. The participants experienced the barrier of being offered leadership promotions and responsibilities to glass cliff positions where they were expected turn around crisis or lead an initiative with inadequate district support. Carla's first principalship was at a low performing, high needs school which did not align with her previous experiences as an assistant principal. She accepted the position because it was her opportunity to move up to a higher position even though it required taking on challenging responsibilities as a brand-new principal. Carla shared that she worried constantly about failing and if another Black woman would ever be hired at the school again if she did. She did not want to lessen the chances for other Black women to be offered leadership positions in the district, as she felt the burden of representing her entire race in her district. As she was putting in the work to help meet the needs of the students and raise student achievement, it never left her mind that "big brother" was watching but not providing substantial support. Danecia also discussed feeling the effects of the glass cliff barrier when assigned the responsibility of overseeing the state required project in response to the state's COVID-19 legislation without clear budget or program expectations from her supervisor. She was left out of the initial budget planning but was given the task to lead and complete the project with minimal support. She felt as though she was assigned the responsibility that no one else in her department wanted to do and was not properly informed about how to carry it out successfully.

In addition to the question of sharing barriers, I also asked the Black women to give examples of how their race and gender shaped their development and experiences as a leader. The major themes from the responses are that they were often accused of being angry or aggressive. For example, Eboni talked about how she believes society views strong Black women as aggressive and equate aggressiveness with anger. Danecia spoke about the conscious effort to balance being Black and a woman. She realized that she has to be very careful when sharing emotions because her White counterparts might interpret it as aggressiveness or anger. Her thoughts are similar to the double-consciousness that Black women experienced nearly thirty years ago in Bell's 1990 study, as mentioned in chapter two, where the women felt they lived in two distinct cultural contexts: one Black and one White. The participants provided more examples, such as being judged critically by White peers and other people of color, having to be stronger as a Black woman by nature or feeling like they would drown, always having to work harder than their White counterparts, being overworked, or being seen as superwoman in ways that led to unrealistic expectations and emotional and physical burnout. The superwoman comparison aligns with what Patton and Haynes (2018) found in their study of societal frames that are often imposed onto Black women; superwoman maintains a consistent grind to get the job done, without succumbing to any psychological, physical, and emotional pain.

Lastly, I uncovered limited access as another barrier for the Black women leaders featured in the study by specifically asking, what is in your opinion the most pervasive barrier women of color face when trying to achieve leadership positions in their district? The responses clustered around the theme of limited access to leadership information, opportunities, and supportive networks. Brenda thought that the district played a good game of talking about equity but not actually implementing practices that provide access to, or adequate support for,

leadership positions for Black women. The responses also included that Black women are held to more critical, and sometimes different, standards for interviewing than their White counterparts, not having access to mentors or people in the know to inform them of opportunities coming available, and not having a clear path to leadership. They assumed that they would be able to follow the path that they saw for White men: work for a certain amount of time as a teacher, then move up to a principalship, then up to a central office as a director, then finally obtaining a superintendent position.

Overcoming Barriers

Towards the end of the interviews, I asked the Black women leaders to discuss what they believe has been most helpful in navigating the barriers they experienced on their leadership journey, which was the second overall research question. I conclude, based on their responses, that relationship building, good communication skills, mental preparation, seeking supportive networks, and advocating for equitable hiring practices are the strategies that were most helpful for them when it comes to breaking through the barriers of being overlooked for promotions, offered unfavorable positions, provided only limited access to opportunities, and being considered aggressive.

I asked the participants to provide examples of struggles and details of what they did to cope with encountering the barriers to leadership positions. Their responses were centered around building authentic relationships and thoughtfully seeking supportive networks. Brenda, who has been in the district the longest and has the most years of experience of the five Black women leaders, said that the connections and relationships she's built throughout her time there have been the most powerful strategy in helping her advance to higher positions. She described being asked by her supervisor to apply for her first leadership position outside of the classroom.

She strategically began building relationships with others when she got to central office. She was approached by someone she was introduced to years prior to apply for her current leadership position, instead of self-seeking the position. She has been in the same position for over ten years and does not believe she would be in the position if it had not been for the relationships that she built years prior to her promotion. A common theme of the other participants was that building relationships with those who will speak up for you as a Black woman makes a big difference. They also noted that being open and a good communicator helps with this relationship building work.

I also learned that seeking informal mentors or supportive networks has been another major factor in the success of the Black women throughout their leadership journey. Danecia explained that as much as she wanted her work to speak for itself and for her promotions to come on merit alone, she realized that it was alright to accept help from those who wanted to support her in moving up to higher level positions. She justified her thoughts by saying that the system (hiring practices in the district) is not designed for Black women to have a clear path to higher positions on their own, so it is acceptable to be vulnerable and appreciate other people for helping with exposure to leadership positions in central office. The participants also shared the success they've found in connecting with other people of color who share similar experiences to exchange ideas and offer support. This was especially important because none of them had a formal mentor relationship established with another person in their district. Their district does not provide access to formal mentor support, so the women had to seek those relationships on their own. They also spoke of former supervisors or informal mentors, who were White men or women, who have assisted them on their leadership journey by forging professional connections on their behalf. For example, Eboni was groomed for her latest leadership position by her former

boss, who was a White man. Based on the experiences of the Black women leaders in the study, taking the initiative to build relationships and seek out supportive professional relationships was most helpful in them maneuvering barriers to reach their current leadership positions in central office. The impact of mentorship with the participants in my study aligns with the impact that Tran (2014) discussed when studying women of color leaders in higher education, finding that mentoring is an important factor contributing to the career advancement and personal development of minority female leaders.

Lastly, the participants shared that Black women should prepare mentally to navigate the barriers that could interfere with them reaching higher level leadership positions in central office. I asked the Black women leaders to think about their leadership background and experiences and then tell me what advice they would give future Black women aspiring to central office or general educational leadership positions. In addition to seeking out good mentors, the key advice was for Black women to believe in themselves and take the time to improve their mental capacity to be able to handle the trials and tribulations that will come their way, including racial microaggressions. The participants offered that the barriers will not go away, but become subtler, as Black women move up to higher positions. Therefore, they advise Black women to keep their ears and eyes open for challenges that will come their way, typically in a more challenging fashion than for their White counterparts or Black men. They suggest that Black women prepare mentally by staying ready and in the know of current initiatives and those coming down the pike, continuing to learn and perfect their craft, having faith in themselves, and sustaining the courage to pursue the leadership positions that they truly want to accomplish. Eboni gave the example of being qualified for her position as a Senior Director, but not mentally prepared for her colleague to tell her that she was mad at her for two years because she applied for her position and did not

get it. The participants also assert that Black women should be careful with who they extend trust and surround themselves with people who have their best interest at heart. As I analyzed the responses, it was clear that the experienced Black women leaders would like for the Black women who come behind them to have confidence in themselves as a leader and continuously work hard at being on guard to handle situations that surface as barriers, so that they will have the mental capacity to keep going when things seem too difficult to bear.

Discussions and Implications

My dissertation study began with a heartfelt aspiration to learn more about the experiences of other Black women in educational leadership positions in K-12 school systems. As I discussed in chapter two, there is a limited number of research studies focused on Black women specifically in educational leadership positions beyond principalship, and there is even less research about Black women leaders in central office leadership positions. For that reason, there are gaps in our understanding of the barriers Black women leaders encounter and have to maneuver related to their race and gender. I was excited to hear about the leadership journeys of other Black women leaders in positions that are usually in between the principalship and superintendency. Through this research, I tried to create an avenue for Black women to tell their own stories and give voice to the experiences of Black women leaders that others in the education field seldom hear, drawing from the perspectives of Black feminist thought and the counter-narratives of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Personally, I have hoped for a community with other Black women leaders and this research provided me with the opportunity to build a sisterhood with other central office leaders.

The focus of my research study was the barriers Black women leaders have experienced when seeking promotion opportunities and how they have overcome these barriers. For decades,

society has placed unfavorable controlling images on Black women making it difficult for us to have a clear path to leadership, in comparison to our peers, and to feel safe and secure when we are able to lead. These stereotypical images that dampen the light of current Black women leaders are consistent with the literature of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009). Specifically, Collins writes about the ability of elite groups to manipulate ideas about Black womanhood by exploiting existing symbols or creating new ones, and by creating unfair stereotypes. Yet, Black women have rarely been asked if we are aware of the stereotypes or to share our experiences of leading as a member of two oppressed groups, being Black and a woman.

I conducted the study with five Black women in central office Director and Senior Director positions in the same school district across five different departments, to understand what they experienced as barriers to reaching higher level leadership positions. I wanted my study to intentionally uncover what issues Black women leaders are facing while leading in central office positions in hopes of all marginalized groups and hiring supervisors learning from their experiences. After conducting several rounds of data analysis, I realized that the theoretical contexts of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought were pivotal in making meaning and application of the findings. I will discuss the implications in context of the existing literature and the recommendations for practice and future research in educational leadership, in the upcoming sections.

Black Womanhood

Black women as leaders are burdened with race-based stereotypes that adversely impact their careers and relationships with colleagues at work (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Regardless of their ability to sometimes work twice as hard as their counterparts in leadership roles, educational research says very little about their actual experiences. My research adds to a

body of meager research that specifically focuses on Black women and their experiences of intersectionality while leading in central office positions. This research study provided an opportunity to recognize their experiences with barriers as a means to highlight how they persevere while leading as members of two oppressing groups.

As the Black women leaders featured in my study shared the barriers they encountered over the years, they also shared a deep consideration for other Black women leaders who faced similar obstacles. They shared that they learned early in their leadership journey that being a Black woman meant that their race and gender would have a heavy impact on what they are forced to content with as a leader. The participants wanted to share their stories to help other Black women and often said the interview discussions were therapeutic. Specifically, they knew that Black womanhood would not escape them and that other Black women are having similar experiences in their current leadership roles. For example, the Black women leaders proactively created informal mentoring and networking relationships with others and spoke about the importance of making their intelligence known. They were fully aware that society views Black women as everything but intelligent and highly capable (Brown, 2014). Controlling images of Black women have been around for so long that some make racism, sexism, and other forms of social injustice appear to be normal and part of everyday life (Collins, 2009).

Each participant described at least one situation where they felt like, or were told, they were too much of one thing or not enough of another. They all encountered more criticism than their non-Black peers. My participants each shared how deeply frustrated they were by having to work very hard to prove themselves and still not be seen as visionary or fully capable to lead. Despite the barriers they faced, they were compelled to want to find a way to impact policy to help make school district central offices more equitable for future Black women leaders.

Experiences of Black womanhood have been explored through Black Feminist Thought and the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically differential racialization. In Black feminist thought, Black womanhood is described through the social injustices Black women experience as members of an oppressed group with little hope for group-based advancement. Black women experience intersectional identities and oppression. As I mentioned in chapter one, Black feminist thought would not be necessary if the oppression of Black women did not exist and gender inequalities did not need to be challenged (Brock, 2011). As a Black woman, it seems as though many of us have an unwritten language of understanding the uphill battles we experience. Findings from this study suggest that barriers do not lessen or go away the higher Black women are promoted in leadership positions. Collectively, the participants want Black women leaders to continue to form relationships and speak up for each other to bring about change in how society view Black women. It is important for me to recognize that the Black women leaders featured in the study are still navigating the barriers of being Black women leaders, that do not seem to be letting up, while encouraging other Black women to keep going to help bring about societal change. They are balancing the double-consciousness of leading in a White dominated professional community while maintaining their Blackness, which is sometimes emotionally and psychologically draining (Bell, 1990).

To continue the conversation of Black womanhood in CRT tenet of differential racialization, Black women are thought of as too much of one thing or not enough of another. As I mentioned chapters one and four, through differential racialization the dominant society racializes Black women in varying ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The Black women leaders in the study were aware of the double standard imposed on them, especially with hiring and promotion practices in their district. It is important to mention that the study revealed Black

women educational leaders are often stereotyped by their peers and supervisors. As with society and the educational leadership realm, Black women sometimes feel as if they are damned if they do and damned if they don't. For example, if they are too nice, they are viewed as incompetent, but if they are too direct, they are viewed as angry and aggressive. Black women are expected to perform over and beyond like superwoman as well as be nurturing and agreeable. They are hired to be strong Black women leaders but need to make sure their strength doesn't come across as aggressive or alienating.

Confidence and Courage

An important lesson I learned from conducting my research study is that Black women must be confident in their abilities as a leader and have the courage to believe in themselves. Reflecting on my own leadership experiences, I know that I need to encourage myself often about my leadership capabilities, but I wondered about how other Black women leaders in education remained motivated to seek higher leveled positions. I understand confidence and courage to be important aspects of the mental preparation described by the Black women in the study. I view confidence and courage as being brave enough to have faith in yourself as a leader.

From my own experiences, I know that Black women are judged more critically than their peers that are of other races and as compared to all men. However, I wanted to hear the stories of other Black women leaders in central office to learn if there were any exceptions. The participants years of experience in their current leadership position ranged from two years to over ten. Despite the difference in years of experience, they all faced barriers that they needed to build confidence in themselves as a means to overcome. This was surprising and disheartening to me because I was hopeful that the higher black women rose in leadership positions, I assumed the level of equity and respect would also increase. What I learned was that their level of

confidence and courage increased while the barriers took a different, sometimes more subtle form. I believe the participant's theme of mental preparation is in response to the toned-down but more powerful barriers they faced the higher they were promoted. A few of the Black women discussed the ability to "play the game" when seeking promotion. I understood that to mean Black women are aware of their Black womanhood and the ways in which they are often perceived and judged in society and their profession. Consequently, they have to be smart enough to stay one step ahead because their leadership path is not straightforward. They do not expect to be promoted based on experience alone as leaders in education, as it might be the case for White counterparts.

Implications of My Research

When I began reviewing literature during the early phases of writing this dissertation, I knew that I wanted my study to impact the field of educational research. I wanted educational scholars to view my study as adding to the conversation of educational leadership from the perspective of promoting the voice of Black women and bringing to light the barriers Black women encounter in educational leadership positions. I knew that many of these barriers are also deeply engrained in American society. I believe my research adds to the collection of leadership literature that helps educational leaders and hiring supervisors to think more about equitable leadership practices, stereotypical biases toward Black women, and support for Black women leaders. My research extends current research by providing a lens of understanding the experiences of Black women in central office leadership positions as well as presenting strategies to reshape the way that new and experienced Black women leaders are supported with seeking promotions to higher level positions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Much educational research that is centered on Black women leaders is focused on Black women in the roles of principal and superintendent. I intentionally focused my attention on Black women in central office leadership positions because they commonly fall in between principal and superintendence positions. Therefore, they bring the unique perspective of Black women leaders who have been promoted beyond the school level leadership position of principal, but have not yet ascended to the highest level of superintendent. A gap remains in educational leadership that examines the hindrances of Black women educational leaders who are seeking higher leadership positions and the ways in which they encounter and navigate deeply ingrained racial stereotypes in society. Research has shown that there remains a gap between Black and White educational leaders in terms of obtaining high-level administrative jobs, with an even wider gap between Black women and White leaders (Education Drive, 2020). The societal stereotypes and intersectionality that limit Black women's climb to higher level educational leadership positions are issues of social injustice.

As I finished this study, I am left with questions about why Black women aren't asked more commonly to share their leadership experiences and what the stance of Black men is in supporting Black women in educational leadership positions? I still do not know how well Black women can effectively challenge the racial stereotypes that are imposed on them in an educational setting, especially considering my participants all noted that they still exist. Linda Tillman (2011) discusses the "little colored girl" mentality that others have of Black women and how we often have to manage working in academic spaces that were not made for us. Black women have been encountering similar barriers in leadership positions for decades and I am left wondering how we can increase the rate in which we impact change to break down those

barriers. More research focused on Black women in the highest leadership positions could be valuable.

I recommend exploring the tension that Black women feel in supporting other Black women. Again, it was surprising to find that the participants felt as though Black women are reluctant to speak up for each other. It would be valuable to find out what Black women do to survive or subvert, to navigate the fear of speaking up while also supporting other Black women. Therefore, I would suggest more studies on the issues of fear, backlash, and what Black women do to survive.

It also would be helpful to collect more data comparing the leadership experiences of Black women principals, central office directors, and superintendents in a more large-scale study. Comparing experiences of Black woman at these three positions and levels could provide a wider lens from which to understand challenges, enablers, and strategies for success. A wide-scale study might also help to uncover information that could allow us to narrow specific delays in the promotion process that slow down the ascension of Black women leaders.

Lastly, I recommend an in-depth analysis of microaggressions experienced by Black women in educational leadership. The Black women in my study shared that the barriers and microaggressions they faced did not go away as they were promoted to higher positions, however they become more subtle. I am interested in how microaggressions evolve over time and how they play out at different levels. Uncovering nuanced microaggressions might bring to light current ways Black women are discriminated against in ways that were not previously obvious. Gaining an understanding and keeping a pulse on the biases that those who work with Black women hold will help researchers and activists know where to focus improvement efforts.

Moreover, it will be easier to disrupt microaggressions at all levels when they are identified and named.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Based on my study and the studies I mentioned throughout my dissertation, I believe Black women educational leaders have demonstrated the endurance necessary to strive against double systems of oppression and still have the will and capacity to lead in powerful ways. I believe when conditions improve for Black women, other marginalized groups also benefit. Through building relationships, creating supportive networks, preparing mentally, and advocating for equitable hiring practices, they were able to achieve and maintain high-level leadership positions. These strategies, that come straight from the voice of Black women educational leaders, can be replicated by K-12 school systems and institutions of higher learning to amplify and sustain the promotion of Black women leaders. I encourage superintendents, hiring supervisors, principals, or anybody working alongside Black women leaders to evaluate their perception of Black women and their unconscious (or conscious) biases towards them.

Some questions to consider are:

- How are we operationalizing the belief that we value diversity in the hiring practices for our school, department, or district? Do the Black women in our school, department, or district believe there are systemic delays present that limit their promotion to higher level positions? Who benefits the most from establishing equitable hiring practices?
- What do we currently implement to sustain the success of Black women leaders when they are hired for a position? Is there a formal process for providing them support?

- How are we preparing all members of our organization, school, or department to engage in issues of race and gender equality? Have we asked marginalized groups for their feedback on these issues?

The responses to these questions could be the first steps to improving the success of not only Black women leaders but of all marginalized groups in school districts. Black women are arguably among the most disrespected and underappreciated people in society. Therefore, if conditions improve for them, all other persons should also reap the benefits.

Another crucial step for setting Black women up for success in educational leadership positions is to help build support networks for them. Building networks for Black women provides them with access to promotion and leadership development opportunities and increases their recruitment and retainment (Brown, 2014). The participants provided examples of how informal networking exposed them to broader opportunities to showcase their abilities and connect with other Black women leaders. I advise Black women to remain open to building networks of people from all races, not solely other Black women. Black women networks bring a lens of shared lived experiences, however connecting with leaders from all backgrounds widens the scope of exposure for them.

Seeking mentoring relationships is important for Black women as part of building their supportive networks. Black women should work to develop various types of mentoring relationships, whether non-hierarchical, collaborative, or cross-cultural, which are all different from the traditional hierarchical relationships. Modern forms of mentor relationships are just as effective with helping Black women develop as leaders. As mentioned in chapter two, positive mentoring relationships can yield desirable outcomes in helping women of color cope with

microaggressions, increase positive self-identity and efficacy, and contest oppression and negative stereotypes (Tran, 2014).

Final Thoughts

Ida B. Wells expressed in her 1892 speech that a way people can right their wrongs is by turning the light of truth upon them (Wells-Barnett et al., 2014). This research study has taught me that Black women who lead in educational settings are not treated with the same typical nonjudgmental regard as their White counterparts, though this was not surprising to me. Sadly, it was reassuring that there is a tribe of Black women leaders in school districts who are aware of the barriers in place that could limit a clear path to higher leadership positions and instead of accepting those barriers as limiting, they are adjusting their mindset to identify and overcome those barriers. This dissertation has changed me significantly, especially in the realization that I am at the point in my career that I am no longer the “next generation” of Black women leaders. I am in the current generation of Black women leaders and it is time that I begin sharing my experiences and voice with future Black women leaders. I cannot change all of the societal views of Black women, but I can impact change in my department and personal networks.

This study has given me insight into why Black feminist thought is necessary to helping Black women understand their own experiences and work to create the work and life options that they envision. I have a deeper understanding of the importance of Black women telling their own stories. I am aware that the oppression of Black women in educational leadership positions is a social injustice as it is engrained in American society and has been for centuries. It is not a coincidence that Black women in educational leadership positions are experiencing the same forms of racist controlling images that Black women in society faced during slavery and Jim Crow. As long as racism exists in society, it will also exist in educational settings. It is important

that Black women and activists continue to work against structures of power that oppress Black women and impact their ability to live and lead with the freeness of their White counterparts.

In completing this study, I am also reminded of the value in the tenets of CRT. The origin of CRT derived from the phenomenon that Black people are not reaping the full benefits of the civil rights movement. There are deep racist structures in society that have an impact on Black women leading in K-12 school systems. Critical race theorists make it clear that the racial stereotypes, intersectionality, and racial differentializing that are experienced by Black women are connected to the systems of oppression imposed on them by society. Just like Black feminist thought, CRT is needed to represent how systemic racism is impacting the livelihood of Black women by limiting their opportunities move about in society and excel in their careers.

What I was most surprised about in conducting the study is that Black women are reluctant to speak up for each other or stick their neck out for each other. I understood the reason they shared both implicitly and directly, mostly because they don't want to jeopardize their current positions by putting in a word for someone else. This has opened my eyes to how Black women need to build trust in each other and align efforts break down systems of oppression. We are all battling the same issues in a system designed to keep us in a suppressed state. We need to learn from, empower, and pay it forward with each other to have an impact on breaking down barriers that have held us down for decades. One way to do this is to continue to build better networks of support and share information with each other. In retrospect, one of the unintended outcomes of this study is that I got to know my five participants over the course of our interviews and they now are part of my own larger network of Black women leaders.

I was challenged throughout the study to keep my bias as a Black woman in check. I am a Black woman through and through, and what I mean by this is that I reflect often on my own

racial identity. I also share many of the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, I had to work to maintain reflexivity during this study so that my own biases and experiences didn't overly influence the meaning I was able to make of my participants challenges. If I had a chance to do the study over, I would have included more Black women leaders as participants to expand to the positions of principals and superintendents to compare the leadership experiences. I may have also asked at least one Black man, White man, and White woman for their thoughts about my findings and their experiences in working with Black women leaders. In hindsight, I would be interested in their reaction to the study findings because I believe it is necessary for them to speak up about the impact of systemic racism on Black women that they work alongside.

Controlling images from thirty years ago still exist for Black women. My hope is that educational leaders and researchers will continue to turn the light of truth upon the social injustices of Black women that influence hiring practices and leadership opportunities in K-12 school systems. I am left thinking that I need to do more to engage with other Black women leaders so that we might encourage each other to have more confidence and courage to keep leading and share our voices.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Themes for Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>Background experiences and path to leadership in the context of a life story.</p> <p>Impact of race and gender in leadership journey.</p>	<p>Interview I Questions (Background, Build Rapport, Details of Lived Experience)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you tell me about your background and educational experience (including family, school, and work)? 2. How did you get on the path to educational leadership? 3. Tell me about your educational career up until you became a Director/Senior Director. 4. How long have you pursued your current position? How long did it take you to reach the level of Director or Senior Director? In what context did your promotion occur, did you self-select to pursue the position? What exactly is your role in the district? 5. What past experiences are most impactful in you achieving your current position? 6. Have you reached your optimal leadership level? Do you aspire to higher leadership positions? 7. How have your race and gender shaped your development and experiences as a leader? 8. Could you describe what your department does to intentionally recruit women of color? 9. Do you believe there are systemic delays present in your school district for Black women to be promoted to leadership positions in central office? If so, please share your thinking. 10. What have you experienced when it comes to the hiring practices for Black women in your district? Are Black women typically considered viable candidates for all leadership positions? Are they actively recruited? What challenges have you seen them face in the hiring process. 11. Researchers discuss a number of ways black women are stereotyped, including as leaders. Have you noticed any stereotypes applied to yourself or other Black women leaders?

	<p>12. Tell me about a time that you addressed someone in your department about the barriers experienced by women of color; how have you advocated for other women of color?</p>
<p>What barriers exist that limit or prevent Black women from rising to central office leadership positions in K-12 school systems?</p> <p>How have Black women overcome barriers and obtained central office leadership positions?</p> <p>What lessons learned and advice do Black women in educational leadership positions have for other Black women?</p>	<p>Interview II Questions (Reflection, Lessons Learned, Advice for other Black women)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who do you believe benefits the most from hiring Black women as educational leaders? 2. Controlling images (mammy, welfare queen, hot momma, super woman) of Black women in America date back to slavery, do you see these images implied or inferred in your work setting (leadership experience)? How is it challenged? 3. Glass-cliff positions are described as positions where women and/or people of color are promoted to leadership positions when times are tough or to clean up a crisis. It builds on the “glass ceiling” where women break barriers while ascending to positions of power. Conversely, glass-cliff positions are treacherous and can leave to failure. Can you share any personal experiences you have had with glass cliff positions? In your district/leadership journey, do you notice more glass-cliffs or glass ceilings for Black women? Explain. 4. Have you ever felt like you are representing all Black women? Do you believe Black women are objectified and held to a different standard in comparison to their White counterparts? 5. Tell me about any barriers or obstacles you have encountered in seeking leadership positions? Describe how the barriers are manifested; what have you seen, heard, or felt? What was your emotional reaction to this event? Have you experienced any psychological effects? 6. Are more barriers experienced early on, later, or throughout your entire career? 7. What is your opinion as to the most pervasive barrier that women of color face when trying to achieve leadership positions? 8. Tell me in detail, what you believe has been most helpful in navigating barriers you experienced? 9. Describe the access you have to supportive networks that help in personal and professional development?

	<p>10. What impact do mentor relationships have in your leadership development? Describe any formal or informal mentorships that you are a part of.</p> <p>11. Some people would say that Black women have the same opportunities as others for promotions and that affirmative action and diversity programs are not necessary. What would you tell them?</p> <p>12. Thinking back to what you shared about your background and experiences, what advice do you have for future Black women central office/educational leaders?</p>
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