

The School Leader Representation Gap: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color

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The School Leader Representation Gap: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color

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Abstract

A school leader representation gap exists in the nation's public schools. There is an under-representation of public-school leaders of color, which results in inequity of cultural values and diverse leadership perspectives that impact recruitment, retention, and student success. Only 22% of school leaders identify as people of color, while 53% of students are non-White. This basic qualitative study focused on exploring the professional experiences of five African American school leaders, located in the Midwest, with a focus on the experiences prior to becoming a school leader and the current experiences as a school leader. Additionally, this research also explored how school leaders of color perceive their impact on Black students in their schools. Critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory were both used as theoretical frameworks to deepen understanding around the school leader representation gap. Critical race theory helped frame the reasons for and the importance of closing this gap, considering the historical inequalities in the U. S. Representative bureaucracy theory framed the potential impact of representational leadership on students of color. The study was conducted utilizing one on one virtual interviews in a semi-structured format. An emergent open coding process, alongside three levels of analysis was conducted. Five themes emerged: sense of identity, pathways to becoming a school leader, keys to longevity, persistence in the face of obstacles, and the why. This research resulted in recommendations for principal preparation programs, school districts and policy makers looking for ways to develop more diversity in the school leader role.

Keywords: School leaders of color, recruitment, retention, school leader representation gap

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. I am thankful for their support, encouragement, sacrifice, and patience during this journey. To my two boys CJ and Xander...may you understand the strength you have within you to accomplish all the things you dream.

Acknowledgements

In my journey, I have never walked alone, and I am grateful for the support of so many. Let me start by thanking my husband for his support throughout this process. It takes a great partner to trust and support me in yet another project and knowing that you are there for me made this possible. To my parents, thank you for showing me what hard work and dedication can achieve. I am grateful to you for showing me that obstacles are not roadblocks, and where there is a will, there is a way. Thank you to my sisters for being strong, amazing women, who I strive to be like every day. Thank you to all the teachers who have impacted me throughout my educational career, for pushing me and believing in me.

Professionally, I need to thank my staff and students at Lander Elementary who were on this journey with me when I started several years ago. Although I am no longer serving there, I carry a piece of them for the impact they had on me. Thanks to the Shaker Heights City School District, I have seen what it means to be committed to equity and social justice at a system level. On a final note, I would like to acknowledge my committee, Dr. Hiebel, Dr. Snowden, and especially Dr. Hornberger, for all their feedback and support. The result of this research was in and of itself an act of social justice. This research was an attempt to provide information that can impact the disproportionate outcomes that so many people of color face as American citizens.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, firsts for people of color are still occurring. In the last few years, we have seen the first Black female Vice President, the first Indigenous presidential cabinet member and most recently the first Black woman to be nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court. These firsts not only apply to leadership positions at the highest level of our nation, but they also apply to schools. In 2013 when I took on my first school principal role, I was the first and only school principal of color in my suburban school district. Ten years later, I remain the only person of color to have ever held a school principal role in that school district. Unfortunately, my experience being the first or only school leader of color in a district is not unique. Currently a school leader representation gap exists in our public schools (Gilbert et al., 2022). Our nation's public schools are experiencing a shift in the racial makeup of the student population that does not mirror the racial demographics of the school leaders. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020b) reports that in 2018, approximately 53% of public-school students were not White. During the 2017-2018 school year there were 90,850 public school principals: only 22%, or less than one out of four principals identified as people of color (NCES, 2022).

Having been the first and only school leader of color in my midwestern school district, I understand the unique challenges that school leaders of color face in their roles. A lack of diversity in the school leadership role is concerning, as students of color and communities of color need representation in the education system (Grissom et al., 2021). Now rebounding from a global pandemic, and the need to reconcile the age-old racial injustices in our country, more than ever, we need school leaders that better reflect the demographic make-up of our schools (Gilbert et al., 2022).

Background of the Study

This study sought to explore the experiences of school leaders of color in Midwest public schools. The leader of a school plays an essential role in the success of the organization. Setting a vision, nurturing a positive culture, the safe operation of the building, and guiding teaching and learning are all important functions of the school principal (Marzano et al., 2005). A review of the literature and national demographic data indicates that this leadership representation gap persists, and that the demographics of public school leaders are not keeping pace with the demographics of the students (Gilbert et al., 2022; NCES, 2022). Research also indicates that students of color, especially African American and Latino students, consistently under perform on measures of academic achievement in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Research about the role of the school principal on impacting outcomes exists (Branch et al., 2013; Marzano et al., 2005), however there is less research that investigates the role of school leaders of color and their impact on students of color. Lastly, there is a growing but limited body of research looking at recruiting and retention of school leaders of color (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014; Neely, 2018; Richardson, 2013).

Overall, there is still much to be learned about why this leadership representation gap exists, as well as strategies for addressing the gap. Unfortunately some studies even point to the fact that the global pandemic may have exacerbated this gap due to the levels of stress experienced by school leaders (Gilbert et al., 2022). In their research Gilbert et al. (2022) pointed out that:

Historical data before the pandemic indicates that turnover rates for Black and Hispanic principals were higher than for White principals. In addition, attrition rates for principals leading schools that serve large populations of students of Color and students from low-

income families were also higher than for principals serving Whiter, more affluent schools (p. 17).

This research focused on investigating the experiences that led to school leaders of color assuming their roles, as well as investigating practices that provide support to current school leaders of color so they can thrive in their roles. Additionally, this research explored how school leaders of color perceive that their leadership influences students of color in their schools. While the impacts of this leadership gap is seen across our nation's public schools (NCES, 2022) the setting for this research was public schools in the Midwest, specifically learning from practicing school leaders of color. While much remains to be understood about this issue, learning from practicing school leaders of color will help us better identify patterns in how they obtained their roles and the supports that they feel necessary to help them continue and be successful in their roles.

Through the literature review there is a limited but growing body of knowledge that points to strategies supporting the recruiting and retention of school leaders of color (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014; Richardson, 2013). This research presents strategies such as intentional recruitment, building a pipeline, mentoring, promotions, and networking as ways in which the diversity of school leadership can be increased. These strategies overlap in multiple and varied research studies. Intentional recruitment was the most frequent recruiting strategy identified. Mentoring was the strategy most frequently identified as a promising practice for the retention of school leaders of color.

Another topic explored in this research was how school leaders of color perceive their leadership influences students of color. This was of particular interest because of the long-standing achievement gaps between students of color and their White peers (Darling-Hammond,

2018). Furthermore, there is research that shows that school leaders of color can positively impact students of color (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). The research reviewed indicates that principals of color can have an impact on the diversity of the teaching staff, the reduction of discrimination in disciplinary action for students of color and increased academic outcomes. Given the outcome gaps for Black students, it was critical to add to this body of research. To elevate this urgency, the issue of a school leader representation gap is compounded if students of color are not experiencing success in school. If Black students are experiencing disproportionate outcomes in kindergarten through twelfth grade, this will only further work, to deepen the gap of available students to proceed on to higher levels of education and eventually take on school leadership roles.

This research focused on the experiences of leaders of color in school leadership positions. Rooted in the theoretical framework, the research examined recruiting and retention practices, and the way leaders describe the impact of their leadership on students of color. Findings from this research will help educators and policy makers to better understand the school leader representation gap and identify ways to begin to close this gap.

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

A school leader representation gap exists in our nation's public schools. There is an under-representation of public-school leaders of color in our public-school systems, which results in an unequal representation of cultural values and diverse leadership perspectives that impact recruitment, retention, and student success (Chin, 2013; Green & Finney, 2018; Grissom & Keiser, 2011). Only 22% of school leaders identify as people of color (NCES, 2019), while 53% of students are non-White (NCES, 2020). The students in our nation's schools are becoming

increasingly diverse with more students of color being educated in our public schools (NCES, 2020b). There are also long-standing outcome gaps in both academics and discipline between White and non-White students that persist in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018). In fact, between 1988 and 2018, Black 13-year-olds gained on average only four points in reading, while White students gained nine points; making the gap almost 30% larger between those 30 years. This same trend is also seen in mathematics scores (Darling-Hammond, 2018). These gaps remain similar when reviewing graduation rates, which show significant gaps between students of color and their White peers. In the 2019-2020 school year, the high school graduation rate for White students was 90%; 81% for Black students; and 75% for American Indian/Alaskan Native students (NCES, 2020a).

Disproportionate outcomes persist in school discipline as well (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). Among public school students, Black students in grades 6th-12th are more than two times more likely to have been suspended than their White peers (NCES, 2021). In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), during the 2019 school year, among students in grades 6th-12th, 29.6% of Black students were suspended at least once in their educational career, while only 12.3% of White students faced the same consequences. In their research on principal's bias and school discipline, Jarvis and Okonofua (2020) found that race is a better predictor of school discipline when subjective behaviors such as disrespect and insubordination occur.

The school leader representation gap and the disproportionate outcomes for students of color are intertwined. Research has demonstrated that Black school leaders can have positive impacts on students of color in a variety of ways (Grissom et al., 2017). Moreover, students of color will have difficulty ascending to a principal's role if they are not successful in school.

Room for additional research on ways in which we can disrupt the school leader representation gap has been proven necessary.

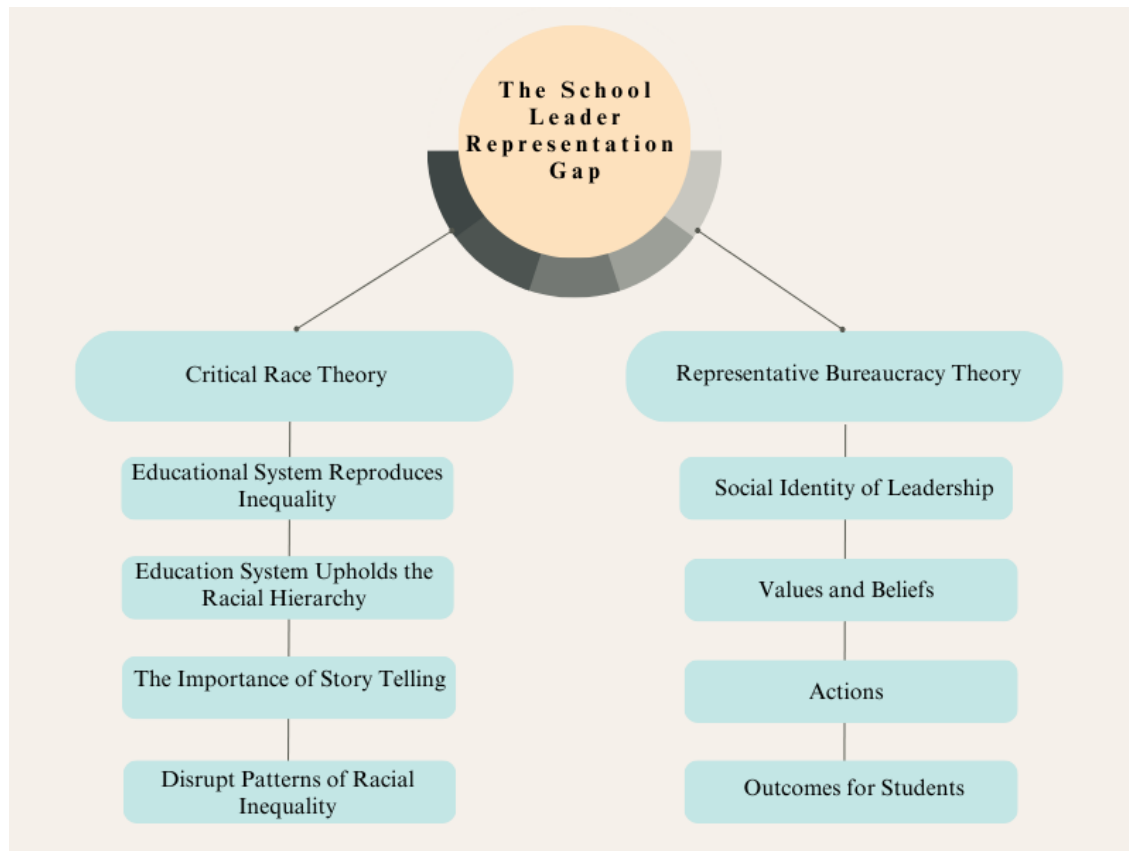
A basic qualitative study into how school leaders of color in public schools in the Midwest interpret their school leadership experiences, yielded important information about ways to recruit more diverse leaders, and support current school leaders of color. Additionally, this research yielded important information about how school leaders of color perceive their impact on students of color. This study is significant as it helps close gaps in the research around school leaders of color. Ultimately, the results of this study can be used to provide recommendations to inform policy and practice around closing the school leader representation gap. School districts with interests in equity, anti-racism and diversifying their school leadership were a target audience for this research. For this study, the terms *African American*, *of color* and *Black* are used interchangeably.

Theoretical Framework

According to Adom et al. (2018) theoretical frameworks provide a basis for inquiry for researchers, helping them to build upon an already existing theory. Critical race theory helps us frame the reasons for the gap and encourages an understanding of why it is important to close it, in light of the historical inequalities in the U.S. Representative bureaucracy theory helps us understand the potential impact of representational leadership on students of color. In this study, critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory helped to deepen understanding around the school leader representation gap. The representation of the theoretical frameworks for analyzing the school leader representation gap is found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework: The School Leader Representation Gap



Critical race theory recognizes the historical and ongoing impacts of racism and how it continues to shape policies, practices, and outcomes in education (Ladson-Billings, 2021). This theoretical framework highlights the following four basic tenets that informed the literature review and research:

- The educational system reproduces inequality.
- The educational system upholds the racial hierarchy.
- The importance of storytelling.
- Disrupting patterns of racial inequality.

Critical race theory, when applied to education, proposes that the current educational system both reproduces the inequality and upholds the racial hierarchy that we see in our nation (Lynn & Dixon, 2021). Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of elevating the stories of people of color as powerful tool toward disrupting and addressing patterns racial inequality (Capper, 2015). Using critical race theory as a framework led to a better understanding of the reasons for the representation gap and relying on the stories of school leaders of color as a basis for exploring the gap.

The theory of representative bureaucracy was applied to the leadership practices of Black school leaders, to help frame the need to increase representation of people of color in our increasingly diverse school system. Depicted in Figure 1 are four concepts that allowed for the exploration of the school leader representation gap through a lens of representative bureaucracy (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2021; Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

Those four concepts are:

- Social identity of leadership
- Values and beliefs
- Actions
- Outcomes for students

Race is a socially constructed concept (Crenshaw, 1991). Viewed through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, school leaders whose social identity more closely represent the demographics of the school, also have values and beliefs that align to the majority of the students and families in the school (Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Furthermore, these values and beliefs of the leader can lead to them taking actions that can lead to positive outcomes for those students (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Representative

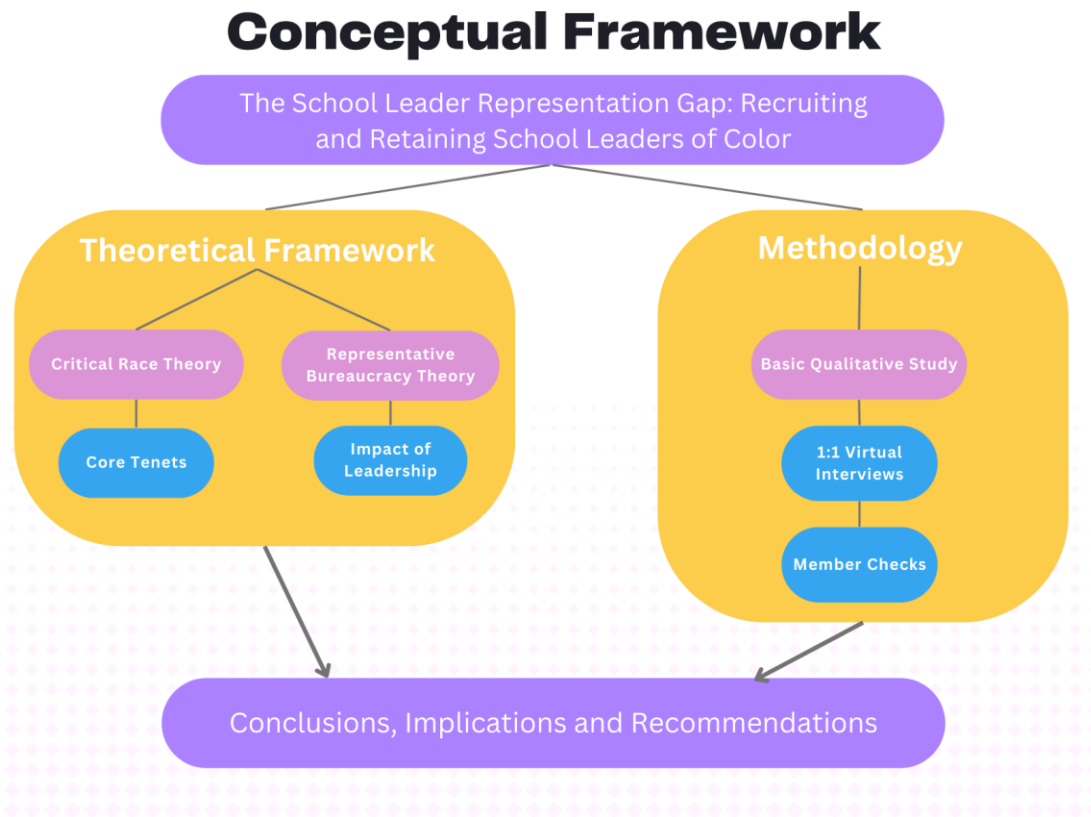
bureaucracy theory was used as a tool to explore the important concept that the leadership of Black school leaders can influence the outcomes of students of color.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework presents a guide for the research process. According to Adom et al. (2018), “It is the researcher’s explanation of how the research problem would be explored” (p. 7). Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework for the study. This visual representation highlights the theoretical framework and the methodology used to explore the topic of the school leader representation gap. The conceptual framework shows how critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory were used to support this basic qualitative study into the experiences of school leaders of color. This includes the research methods that were used, and the selection of basic qualitative design for this research. Critical race theory identified storytelling as an important part of understanding people of color and their experiences. In this basic qualitative study, a semi-structured interview tool was used to allow participants to share their stories. The theories used alongside the research design ultimately informed the conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the study.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework: The School Leader Representation Gap



Researcher's Positionality

As an African American leader myself, in the education space, I have often found myself being in places with other school leaders where I was the only, or one of only a few Black leaders in the room. My experiences with education have shaped me as a school leader, and I am deeply interested in learning about the experiences of other racially minoritized school leaders. As a researcher, I realize that my own experience as a school leader of color has had an impact on my work.

In reflecting on my own experiences with education I have surmised that there are four main premises that have guided my path, that continue to fuel my work as a leader of color. First, my experience with bias and racism is deepened by a sense of purpose and resolve to continue

engaging in this work on behalf of students. The reality in U.S. public schools is that a racial achievement gap persists. Students of color routinely score lower on measures of academic achievement as compared to their White counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2018). My own experiences with racism and bias in the public school system have motivated me to work to disrupt these patterns. I have seen the direct impact of the struggles of students of color on the ability to have a diverse and robust pipeline of school leaders.

Second, being a person of color has helped me to connect with and be an advocate and role model for other racially minoritized leaders. In my experience, I have had the opportunity to connect with and mentor several aspiring Black school leaders. I have spent 15 years as school-site leader. This past year, I have taken on the role of director of school leadership in which I supervise all the school leaders in grades preschool - 12th in my school district. The ability to be a mentor and role model to support other leaders of color is something that I am passionate about, that continues to motivate me in my work.

Third, athletics has helped build the patience, persistence and grit needed to continue to push despite the barriers I have faced. Athletics has played an important role in nurturing the work ethic and persistence needed to continue to engage in the difficult job of being a school leader. As a division one basketball player, the countless hours of training, the thrill of winning and the agony of defeat, have all built skills that helped to teach me the importance of persistence and hard work. These skills have served me well as a school leader and inform the perspectives that I have about the job and the commitment that it requires. These skills have also served me well throughout my doctoral journey. I learned in college how to manage schoolwork with athletic commitments and have found myself using those same skills to balance the demands of a high stress job, and doctoral level coursework.

Lastly, advocating for equity and justice through education helps to affirm my work and strengthen my community. For example, I currently serve as the president elect for the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators. In this role, I co-lead our state advocacy committee. Serving in this manner has allowed me to advocate for the important role that school leaders play in advancing equity work in education. I feel that this work is critical to helping support all students, as well as strengthen our communities and ultimately our nation.

I realize that my position during my research was influenced by my own experiences. Through doctoral coursework, I have been encouraged to find what I'm passionate about and find my scholarly voice. It was important to ensure that I remained as neutral, ethical, and as bias free as possible, since I brought such a strong voice and perspective into this research. The research design included strategies such as member checking and reflexivity, that ensured the integrity of the research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how school leaders of color in Midwestern public schools interpret their experiences as school leaders. The focus of the study was on the experiences that led them to their current positions (recruitment), the things that they need to support them in their roles (retainment), and how they described the impact of their leadership on students of color.

It is important to note that this study provided significant research in an area of school leadership that is lacking. There is currently limited research around school leaders of color and how to best recruit and retain more diverse talent for this important role. This research could be used to inform policy for lawmakers that are looking for ways to develop more diversity in the school leader role. Additionally, this research has implications for school districts and human

resource departments that are actively seeking to find school leaders who represent the demographics of their school communities. Lastly, this research has social justice implications, due to its emphasis on disrupting historical inequities for populations of color in the U.S. Outcome gaps persist in public education, which mirror similar gaps seen in representational leadership in U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018; NCES, 2021, 2022). From an equity and social justice perspective, the findings from this research may advance the inclusion of more diverse school leaders as a priority for public schools across the U.S.

Research Questions

It is important that research questions support the topic of the study. These questions should be fairly narrow in scope, but allow for the topic to be fully explored (Bailey, 2018).

According to Bailey,

For me, research questions are the anchors of the research process, to which all parts are attached. Every aspect of the research should be tightly linked so that one can easily follow the chain that connects the first page of the final document to the last. The research question is the strongest link in the chain and handles most of the load (p. 43)

The research questions for this study were developed with this information in mind. This basic qualitative research was focused on exploring the professional experiences of school leaders of color in the Midwest with a focus on the experiences prior to becoming a school leader, and the current experiences as a school leader. Additionally, this research explored how Black school leaders perceive their impact on the students of color in their schools. The following research questions guided this basic qualitative study:

Central Question: What are the professional experiences of school leaders of color in Midwest public schools?

R1: How do public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?

R2: How do school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?

R3: How do school leaders of color describe how their leadership influences students of color in their schools?

Rationale for Methodology

This research was conducted using a basic qualitative study design. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that basic qualitative research is concerned about how people make sense of their lives. The researchers stated that "...Thus qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). Critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 2021) informed the selection of this methodology.

Qualitative research allows for the exploration of participants' beliefs and experiences. Labuschagne (2003) contended that "Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases. Qualitative data provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions and observed behaviours" (p. 100). Due to the need for detailed data, this study limited the number of participants to five. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) there is not a correct answer or formula for the correct number of participants in a qualitative study. Instead, the authors suggested "It always depends on the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources you have to support the study" (p. 101). Limiting the number of

participants allowed for the depth necessary to truly analyze the experiences of busy school professionals, while balancing the amount of time and resources available to myself and the participants. The purpose of qualitative research is not necessarily to generalize the research to larger populations, but to ensure that while a researcher obtains a thick description, they are not overwhelmed with too much information (Cohen et al., 2017). The data collected from this research shed light on an area that is a current gap in our understanding. The information gained gave insight into the experiences of school leaders of color, which could be used to help shape experiences for future school leaders.

Basic qualitative study design is a helpful approach when exploring the professional experiences of school leaders of color because of their unique and multifaceted experiences (Bailey, 2018). The opportunity to go deep into the experiences of practicing school leaders of color shed important light on similarities and differences among their journeys to the school leader role; the support they need to remain in the role; and the meaning that they make about their impact on Black students. This comprehensive qualitative analysis allowed for patterns to be uncovered and conclusions to be made about how to interrupt the school leader representation gap (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A basic qualitative approach was utilized because of the alignment of critical race theory with my philosophical beliefs in the critical paradigm. I am interested in learning about the experiences of oppressed groups and intend to use the knowledge gained as a basis for providing equitable opportunities and experiences for others, beyond this study. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) asserted several characteristics of critical paradigm research, which also aligns well with this research. Namely, "...the concern with power relationships set up within social structures...An examination of conditions and individuals in a situation, based on social positioning...and the

deliberate efforts of the researcher to address issues of power, oppression and trust among research participants” (p. 35). The use of qualitative research methodology is supported using critical race theory as a framework and reinforced by my epistemological beliefs. In total, the use of a basic qualitative study design aligns with the theoretical framework, which supports my epistemological beliefs.

The terms and sample population were five public school leaders of color in the Midwest. I used snowball sampling, a type of purposeful sampling. Emails were sent to multiple sources in public school districts across the Midwest to identify potential research participants. Emails were then sent to those candidates to see if they would be willing to participate. The criteria for participation were school principals, who identified as non-White, with at least two years of experience in their current role. Multiple races and genders were represented. The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview, one hour in length, conducted virtually and recorded. Semi-structured interviews allowed for predetermined questions, however it also allowed for prompts be utilized to explore relevant issues in greater depth (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were reviewed and transcribed to have an accurate record of the participant’s interview. Anonymity of participants was maintained using pseudonyms to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants.

As the data was collected, the coding process began. Elliott (2018) called the data analysis of qualitative data coding. To begin the coding process, transcripts were read multiple times with notes taken on the readings. There were several levels to the coding process. Level 1 coding is about labeling different chunks of data, while level 2 involves turning these codes into categories (Elliott, 2018). Grounded codes, which emerged from the data, were utilized (Elliott,

2018). Finally, level 3 coding was utilized by looking across the categories and determining what broader themes emerge (Elliott, 2018).

Lastly, issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the data needed to be considered. The concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research are likened to the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All these concepts together build towards rigorous, ethical, and trustworthy research. Audit trails were used to increase the trustworthiness of research and consisted of detailed records that were carefully kept through the whole research process from idea formulation to the conclusion (Bailey, 2018). Journals and memos with reflections were also kept along the way, which included keeping careful records on how codes were created, as well as patterns and themes.

This careful process of data collection and data analysis allowed for reflections on the central and primary research questions. The reported findings were structured around the themes that emerged in the study. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) encouraged the use of dialogue to support the identified themes, as well as including personal reflections, due to a researcher's strong positionality around the central phenomenon. Furthermore, findings were also compared to the literature. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) underscored this process, stating that "Similar to quantitative research, the qualitative inquirer interprets the data in view of this past research, showing how the findings may support or contradict prior studies or both" (p. 260).

Definition of the Terms

School leader: A *school leader* is the individual that is responsible for the operations, teaching and learning at the school, also referred to as the school principal (Marzano et al., 2005).

Person of color: A *person of color* is someone who self identifies as being from a non-White, socially constructed racial group. People of color in the United States are predominately Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, and Multi-racial. These racial groups are also referred to as “minorities” or “marginalized” people (Crenshaw, 1991; Mcleod, 2021).

White person: A *White person*, is from a socially constructed racial group, made up of individuals who self-identify as White and non-Hispanic (Mcleod, 2021).

School leader representation gap: The *school leader representation gap* defines the gap between the race of the school leader and the racial composition of the students in the school. In this context, it refers specifically to the larger percentage of Black students in public schools, as compared the smaller percentage of school leaders of color in public schools (Gilbert et al., 2022).

Critical race theory: *Critical race theory* asserts that racism is embedded in our institutions, and this is the reason why people of color experience disproportionately poor outcomes across our legal, economic, and social institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Representative bureaucracy theory: *Representative bureaucracy theory* asserts that organizations perform better when the leadership matches the population of the clients (Grissom et al., 2015).

Recruitment: *Recruitment* is the action or process of attracting, selecting and hiring employees (Smith, 2009).

Retention: *Retention* is the action or process of supporting current employees (Seyfarth, 2008).

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The gap between the diversity of students in our nation's public schools and the diversity of the leadership of those schools continues to persist. Additionally, outcome gaps also persist between students of color and their White peers. Through a lens of critical race theory, we come to understand that these two issues are intertwined. Students who do not perform well in school will have a much more difficult time becoming teachers, and subsequently school leaders. It is important that students see themselves represented in both the classroom and the principal's office. Through a basic qualitative study into the leadership experiences of school leaders of color, this study explored patterns around the recruiting and retention of school leaders of color. Furthermore, I sought to develop an understanding of how these Black school leaders describe how their leadership influences the students of color they serve. There is currently a small, but growing base of knowledge around the experiences of school leaders of color. This research helped to deepen that field and gain a better understanding of why the school leader representation gap persists. Moreover, the study provided solutions to impact this gap.

Chapter two introduces the literature on the school leader representation gap and provides a more in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework. The conceptual framework outlining the research is detailed. Additionally, a review of current research relevant to the school leader representation gap is presented. The demographics of current school leaders is highlighted, as well as the interconnectedness between the outcome gaps suffered by students of color and the outcome gaps seen in school leadership. Further, concepts around recruiting, and retention of school leaders is presented, as is research into the impact of school leaders of color. Gaps in the research and implications are offered.

In chapter three, the methodology, research design, and procedures are described. The primary focus for that chapter is the statement of the problem, research questions, and how this study was executed. The outline of the basic qualitative study is shared, along with sampling procedures, interview methods, and instruments used. Data collection and data analysis procedures are explained. Furthermore, strategies such as journals, memos and audit trails are explained, alongside member checking to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. Finally, the chapter includes the ethical considerations, limitations, and a summary of the methodology.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study. It begins by restating the research problem, methodology and research questions. It provides an overview of data collection methods, and is followed by the findings, presented in detail. The categories and themes that emerged during the coding process are shared, alongside direct quotes from participants. The data from participants helps to deepen the presentation of the findings and provide a rich description of the results. The chapter also restates the problem, research methodology, and research questions. It gives in-depth information about collecting data and how the analysis of the data provided the findings.

The concluding chapter, chapter five, provides a summary, interpretation, and discussion of the results, as it relates to the existing body of research related to the school leader representation gap. Connections are made to the theoretical framework. I offer a critical analysis of the results, alongside the limitations of the study. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research are presented. Lastly, I share how the research has contributed to the body of knowledge and make a case for the importance of the work.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction and Background of The Problem

The school leader plays a critical role in the school. Establishing a positive school culture, ensuring the safe operations of the building and supporting high quality teaching and learning are all essential roles of the school leader (Marzano et al., 2005). Furthermore, research shows that when a school principal clearly articulates shared values and embeds these into the culture of the school, the school can improve (Day et al., 2016). Ensuring that students are learning at the highest levels possible is also a key role of the school principal. Branch et al. (2013) asserted that "...highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year" (p. 62). The potential to have an impact this large is a factor that cannot be ignored. The school principal also plays a large role in determining the disciplinary outcomes for students and has the ultimate decision over policies and practices that lead to students being suspended and excluded from school (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020).

Recent, large scale research from the Wallace Foundation (Grissom et al., 2021) found that the impact of school principals is larger than earlier research suggested. These researchers found that the difference between a principal in the 25th percentile of effectiveness and the 75th percentile in effectiveness can increase learning on average in math and reading by almost three months. Furthermore, they found that an important focus of the principalship should be on educational equity. Lastly, they concluded that there should be an increased focus on increasing the number of school leaders of color as a strategy to support educational equity in schools.

National demographic data indicates that a leadership representation gap persists, and that the demographics of public school leaders are not keeping pace with the demographics of the

students (Gilbert et al., 2022; NCES, 2022). Research also indicates that students of color, especially African American and Latino students, consistently under perform on measures of academic achievement in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018). With the current research pointing towards the school principal as being a significant player in the improvement of schools, alongside the need to increase the diversity of our nation's principals, this literature review examined the existing literature on school leaders of color and the school leader representation gap. Specifically, it focused on current demographics patterns in our nation's public schools, outcome gaps seen in our schools, critical race theory, representative bureaucracy theory, the impact of school leaders of color, and practices around recruiting and retaining school leaders. The review begins with a synthesis of common themes, which includes a summary of various research studies and theories in the field. Next, patterns, gaps and inconsistencies in the literature are identified, followed by a synthesis and analysis of ideas. Lastly contributions to the body of knowledge are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks are lenses by which researchers orient their study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hiebert et al. (2023) described theoretical frameworks in the following way:

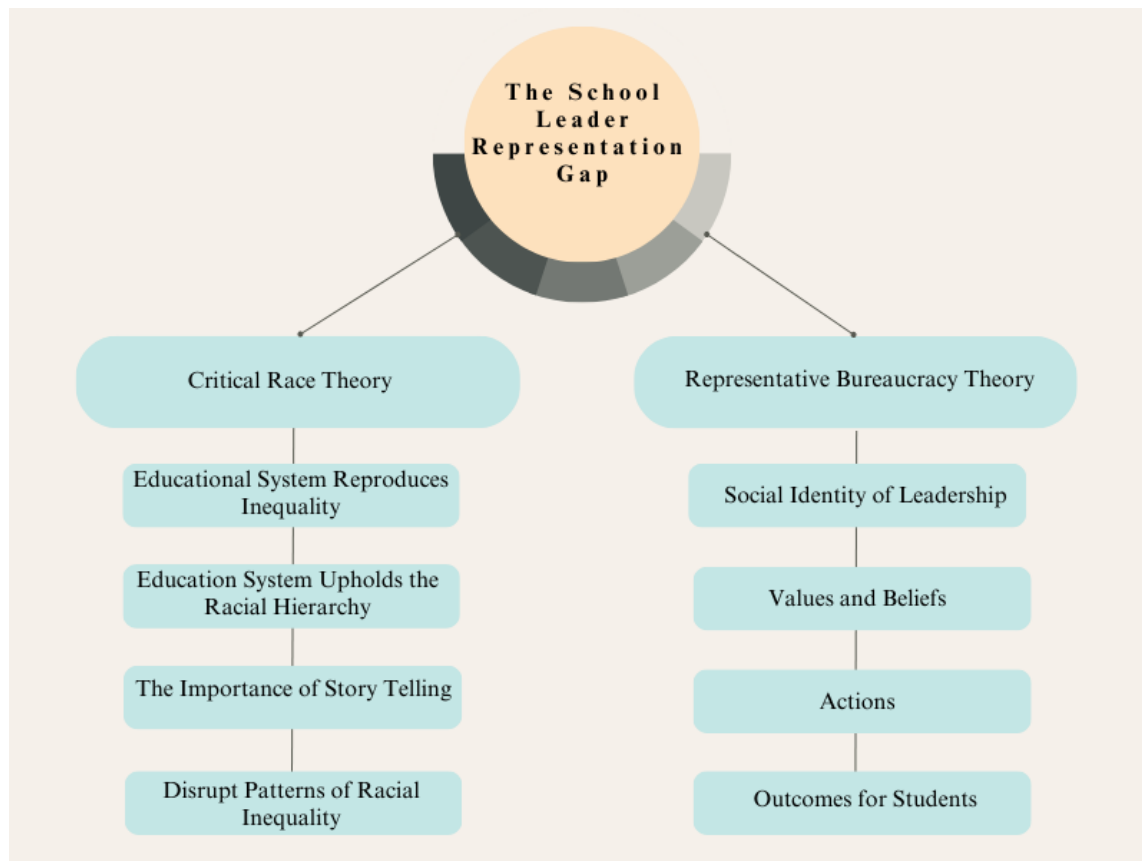
Theoretical frameworks do lots of work for you. They have four primary purposes. They ensure (1) you have sound reasons to expect your predictions will be accurate, (2) you will craft appropriate methods to test your predictions, (3) you can interpret appropriately what you find, and (4) your interpretations will contribute to the accumulation of a knowledge base that can improve education (p. 55)

For the purposes of this literature review, critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory were used as theoretical frameworks. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the

integration of these theories. This figure will be more fully explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Figure 3

Theoretical Framework: The School Leader Representation Gap



Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory was selected as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the school leader representation gap. Critical race theory dates back to the 1970s, and has been used to describe and explain the differing experience of racial groups in the U.S.'s legal, educational, and political systems (Ladson-Billings, 1999). While critical race theory is a framework that originated in the legal field, it also has implications in the field of education (Ladson-Billings,

2021). In the context of education, critical race theory focuses on the ways in which race and racism intersect with educational policies, practices, and outcomes. When applied to education this theory challenges the traditional approaches that view educational issues as purely technical or administrative problems; instead highlighting the role of race and racism in shaping the challenges experienced in education today (Harnish, 2022). Critical race theory recognizes the historical and ongoing impacts of racism and how it continues to shape policies, practices, and outcomes in education (Ladson-Billings, 2021). It is important also to understand that critical race theory looks beyond the Black-White binary that is commonplace in the U.S. Critical race theory applies to the global majority, people of color from various groups, who have been minoritized in this country (Harnish, 2022).

Across the research, there are several major tenets of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Hartlep, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Owens & Valesky, 2021; Parker et al., 2018). While different scholars have different versions of the tenets, summarized below are those most prevalent and relevant to this study from across the research:

- Race is socially constructed.
- The belief that racism is common in the U.S., is embedded in our systems and structures, and occurs regularly.
- The concept of intersectionality and multiple identities.
- The importance of counter stories and storytelling.
- We must work towards justice for racially minoritized groups.

The concept that race is socially constructed is a core tenet of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1991). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that there are no biological differences between people of different races. However, what has caused division is that humans

created the concept of race to create a hierarchy and to reinforce White supremacy (Capper, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

The belief that racism is omnipresent, that there exists a racial hierarchy and that it is embedded within our systems and structures, is another tenet of critical race theory and is often referred to as systemic racism (Hartlep, 2009). Liu et al. (2023) defined systemic racism in the following manner:

Systemic racism comprises networks of institutions and structures that are rooted in white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism with the goal of creating, protecting, and sustaining White spaces and property. These structures and institutions help reproduce White epistemologies, Whiteness, and the belief of White superiority; the result of systemic racism is continued asymmetrical power dynamics that legitimize and rationalize varied forms of racism against Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian and other non-Black people of color (p. 248)

From this definition it becomes clear that the school leader representation gap is a manifestation of systemic racism within our education system. The fact that school leaders of color are vastly underrepresented in our education system can be explained through this tenet of critical race theory. The persistent achievement gap among students of color and their non-White peers, as well as the lack of diverse school leaders aligns to the racial hierarchy present in the U.S. (Capper, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2018; NCES, 2022). While the gaps in representation are seen across many sectors in the U.S., the persistence of the educational achievement gaps, also leads to the persistent school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022). If students are not experiencing successful outcomes in K-12 education, they are less likely to enter college, less likely to become teachers, and less likely to then become school leaders (Capper, 2015). The

racial hierarchy in the U.S. is a persistent issue; therefore, determining strategies to impact this hierarchy is critical.

Another main tenet of critical race theory explored in the literature is the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is the convergence of our identities, which are made up of many different layers, including gender, class, sexuality, politics, etc. (Parker et al., 2018). It is also important to recognize ways which race and racism intersect with other social identities to produce educational inequalities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). While the focus of this research was on the racial representation gap, a socio-economic gap also persists in school leadership; and this often overlaps with race. According to Taie and Lewis (2022), during the 2020-2021 school year, at schools where 75% of the students qualified for free/reduced meals, African Americans were 18.4% of all principals. Compared to schools where less than 35% of students qualified for free/reduced meals, African Americans made up only 3.6% of the principals (Taie & Lewis, 2022). The nuance in these figures shows the complexity of intersectionality and how both economics and race can factor into disproportionate outcomes.

Another tenet of critical race theory, called *counter storytelling*, centers the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Counter storytelling is about gathering and learning from the stories of minoritized groups in our society (Parker et al., 2018). Much of the current research into school leaders of color and the school leader representation gap centers on researching the experiences of current school leaders of color and elevating the voices of racially minoritized leaders. This research has shown that perspectives can be gained into ways in which the current school leadership gap can be disrupted.

The last and vital tenet of critical race theory is the importance of examining how policies and practices perpetuate systemic racism, and how they can be reformed to promote equity and justice (Hartlep, 2009). Scholars who utilize critical race theory, do so with the premise that action must also be taken (Parker et al., 2018). The research on the school leader representation gap shines a light on the larger racial hierarchy in the U.S. Research points to school leaders of color as having a positive impact on Black students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Additionally, research has shown strategies that may be beneficial to recruiting and retaining school leaders of color (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014; Richardson, 2013). Throughout the research, various studies deepen the knowledge base around experiences of practicing school leaders of color, to create recommendations to disrupt the disproportionate racial hierarchy, and work towards liberated systems of education, where all participants experience inclusion and excellence.

The exploration of critical race theory is done across multiple fields, including the legal, health and education systems (Delgado et al., 2012; Harnish, 2022). Across the research, there are five core tenets of critical race theory (Hartlep, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Owens & Valesky, 2021; Parker et al., 2018). In applying these five core tenets to the school leader representation gap, the following four concepts, highlighted in Figure 3, help provide an understanding of the school leader representation gap and the ways in which a basic qualitative study can provide recommendations towards addressing the gap:

- The educational system reproduces inequality.
- The educational system upholds the racial hierarchy.
- The importance of storytelling.

- Disrupting patterns of racial inequality.

The Educational System Reproduces Inequality

The outcome gaps between White students and students of color in both academics and discipline are examples of how the educational system repeatedly reproduces inequality. With increasing gaps in reading, math, and graduation rates (Darling-Hammond, 2018; NCES, 2020a). Coupled with steeper disciplinary action (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020), students of color continue to experience marginalization.

The Educational System Upholds the Racial Hierarchy

The school principal represents the apex of the school hierarchy. The school principal's authority is considerable in scope and magnitude. When compared to teachers, the decisions of the school leader impacts all of the students in the school (Grissom et al., 2021). Across the U.S., racial hierarchies can be seen in all sectors of public life. An example can be found in the fact that there has only been one U.S. president of color. The same representation gap in the president's office is seen in the principal's office, where less than one out of four principals identified as people of color (NCES, 2022). The racial hierarchy is on full display in the educational system.

The Importance of Storytelling

Elevating the experiences of minoritized groups is a core tenet of critical race theory (Parker et al., 2018). The basic qualitative approach in studying the school leader representation gap was selected because of the alignment of critical race theory and the critical paradigm (Bailey, 2018). Gathering the experiences of school leaders of color regarding how they obtained (recruitment) and maintained their roles (retention), as well as how they perceive that their

leadership influences students of color, yielded rich information. Analyzing patterns, trends, and themes from this research provides valuable insight into the stories of Black school leaders.

Disrupting Patterns of Racial Inequality

Ultimately, the goal of this research was to provide findings and recommendations to help disrupt and dismantle the school leader representation gap. Reforming current policies and finding justice for communities of color is a core tenet of critical race theory (Hartlep, 2009). The result of this research is in and of itself an act of social justice. This research was an attempt to provide information that can impact the disproportionate outcomes that so many people of color face.

Representative Bureaucracy Theory

Representative bureaucracy theory is a theoretical framework for looking at the school leader representation gap. Rocha and Hawes (2009) asserted that,

The essential hypothesis within the representative bureaucracy literature is that greater passive representation for a group, or the extent to which a group is employed by a public organization, leads to outputs that are in the expressed or understood interest of that group (p. 331).

Through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, school leaders that more closely represent the demographics of the school, can lead to better outcomes for those students. The theory of representative bureaucracy is applied to the school leader representation gap to show the importance of school leaders of color. Figure 3 illustrates four principles that allow for the exploration of this concept. Those four principles are:

- Social identity of leadership
- Values and beliefs

- Actions
- Outcomes for students

Through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, school leaders whose social identity more closely represent the demographics of the school, also have values and beliefs that align to the majority of the students and families in the school (Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Furthermore, these values and beliefs of the leader can lead to them taking actions that result in positive outcomes for those students (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2015, 2021; Meier, 2023). Representative bureaucracy theory can be used as a tool to explore the important concept that school leaders of color can influence the outcomes of students of color. In their research, Grissom et al. (2015) asserted that representative bureaucracy theory can and should be applied to public education. They contended,

A diverse bureaucratic workforce is then essential for ensuring that diverse groups' interests are addressed in policy implementation. Applied to public schooling, this perspective suggests that meeting the needs of a diverse student population requires a diverse teacher and principal workforce (p. 186).

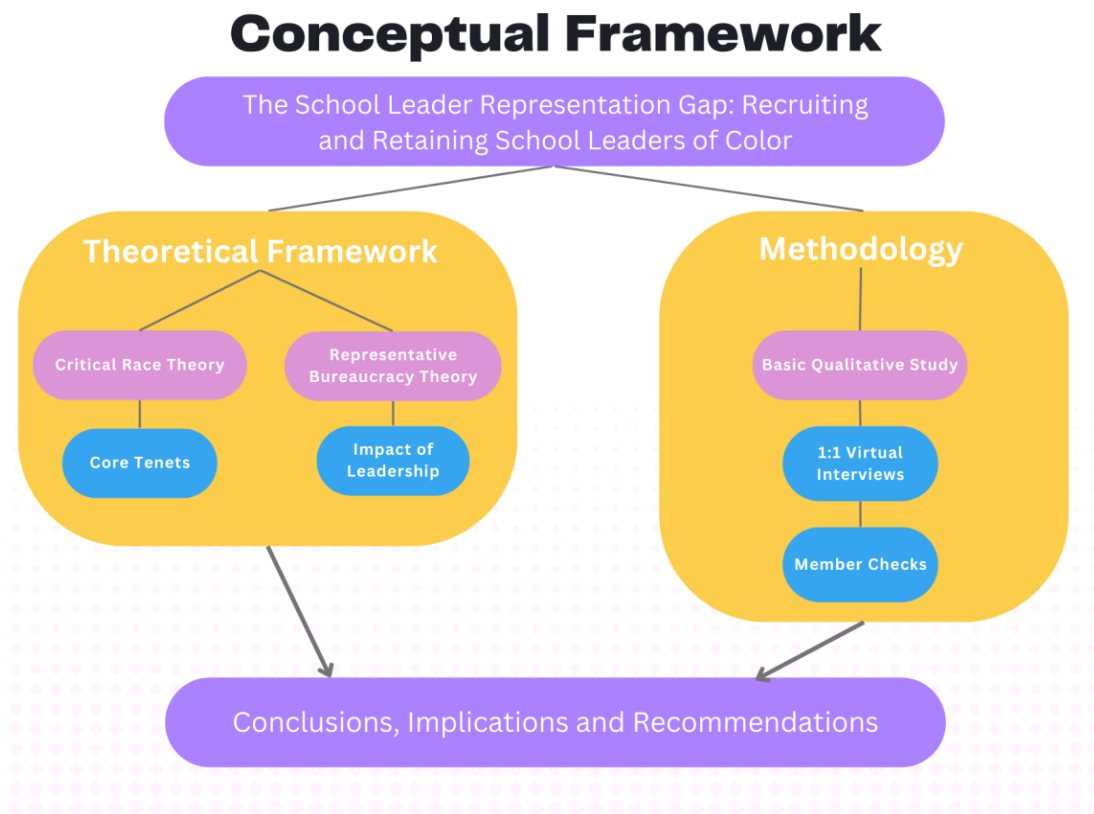
The theory of representative bureaucracy applied to the school leader representation gap helps to frame the need to increase representation of people of color in the increasingly diverse school system. Furthermore, research by Meier (2023) reveals that representative bureaucracy "...is a policy lever that in many cases can contribute to greater social equity" (p. 34). The impact of school leaders of color is further explored in this literature review, to examine the concept of representative bureaucracy theory in practice.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks provide an overall summary of the study, by highlighting the overall structure of the study and how it integrates the theory and relationships between the concepts (Hennink et al., 2010). The conceptual framework in Figure 4 visually depicts the research study on the school leader representation gap. It displays how critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory are used alongside a basic qualitative study to make conclusions, discuss implications, and identify recommendations regarding the school leader representation gap. The conceptual framework shows the major concepts that are emphasized through the theories researched in the literature review process. The basic tenets of critical race theory and the importance of the impacts of leadership in representative bureaucracy theory are included. The conceptual framework shows the flow of the research design and how this impacted the results of the study, emphasizing the importance of tying the topic to the results through a high quality basic qualitative study design.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework: The School Leader Representation Gap



Review of the Literature

Demographics of Public School Principals and Students

From academic achievement to disciplinary outcomes, the school leader is an important function in U.S. public schools. However, when it comes to the demographics of who is sitting in the principal's chair, there is a lack of diversity, compared to the student make up of these schools. U.S. public schools are experiencing a shift in the racial makeup of the student population. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020b) reports that in 2018, approximately 53% of public school students were non-White, compared to 1995 when only 34% of public school students were non-White. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were

90,850 public school principals. Only 22%, or less than one out of four principals, identified as people of color (NCES, 2022). People of color are a socially constructed racial group, made up of individuals who self-identify as non-White (Mcleod, 2021). This gap is referred to as the school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022). U.S. public school students are becoming more diverse, while the leadership of its schools is not keeping pace. Interestingly, the data about the current demographics of principals, as well as the potential pool of principals is difficult to summarize. One reason for this is because the U.S. Department of Education does not report any demographic data on principal preparation programs (Fuller & Young, 2022). So, while we can identify the gap in current practicing principals, it is difficult to identify if there is a pool of potential principals that might fill the gap.

Student Outcome Gaps Persist

The students in U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse, with more students of color being educated in public schools (NCES, 2020b). However, outcomes for students of color remains disproportionate. Statistics show a persistent gap between the performance of students of color and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Darling-Hammond (2018) pointed to glaring disparities in achievement, stating that,

For example, Black 13-year-olds have gained only 4 points in reading since 1988, while White students have gained 9 points, leaving a gap that is nearly 30% larger today than it was 30 years ago. In mathematics, Black 13-year-olds score a point lower than they did when the gap was smallest in 1990, while White same-age students now score 5 points higher, increasing the gap in that subject by 30% as well (pp. 5-6).

Darling-Hammond also pointed to gaps in high school performance. She asserted,

While high school completion rates have steadily risen for all groups, significant gaps in high school graduation remain for non-Asian students of Color and White students (see Figure 7). While 9 out of 10 White and Asian students graduate within 4 years, 1 in 4 Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students fail to do so (p. 6).

Given this data, it is important to look to strategies that impact students of color in U.S. schools.

Disproportionate outcomes persist in school discipline as well (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). Jarvis and Okonofua (2020) contended that “Principals serve as important gatekeepers, providing or limiting access to school, and have a great influence over policies and procedures for large groups of students” (p. 497). Among public school students, Black students in 6th-12th grades are more than two times more likely to have been suspended than their White peers. In fact, according to the (NCES, 2021), in the 2019 school year, among students in grades 6th-12th, 29.6% of Black students had been suspended at least once in their educational career; while only 12.3% of White students had faced the same consequences. In their research on principal’s bias and school discipline, Jarvis and Okonofua (2020) found that race is a better predictor of school discipline, with subjective behaviors such as disrespect and insubordination. This research underscores the important role that principals play in the discipline of students, and how race may have a role in the disciplinary process.

Impact of School Leaders of Color

There is a growing but limited body of research that shows that school leaders of color can positively impact students of color (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Given the outcomes gaps for Black students presented previously, it is important to review this body of research. The research indicates that principals of color can have impacts on the diversity of the teaching staff, the

reduction of discrimination in disciplinary action for Black students, and increased academic outcomes (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009) .

Diversity of Teaching Staff

In most schools, the hiring of teachers is ultimately conducted by the school leader. Reviews of the research show that Black principals are more likely to hire teachers of color (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; D'amico et al., 2017; Meier et al., 2004; Myung et al., 2011). In their research on the race of school principals and the hiring of racially diverse teaching staff, Bartanen and Grissom (2019) found that Black school leaders are more likely to hire teachers of color who, in turn, positively impact Black students. The researchers found that the increase in teachers of color came with no loss in the quality of teaching. Other research studies have found similar results. In a study that looked at how principals selected teachers for future leadership and administrative positions, Myung et al. (2011) found that principals were more likely to select (a process they call “tapping”) teachers who are male, and who match their same ethnicity. When analyzing this in context of the school leader representation gap; it can be concluded that perhaps a part of the reason why the gap persists may be that White school principals continue to *tap* White male teachers for leadership roles. This research also has important implications as the research revealed that school leaders of color tend to tap Black to take on leadership roles.

The leader of the school also has an impact on the culture of the school (Marzano et al., 2005). School leaders of color have been shown to create and encourage school cultures that enable Black to feel more supported (Grissom & Keiser, 2011). With these details in mind, it is important to understand how Black leaders impact the hiring and retention of teachers of color which can, in turn, impact the pipeline of leadership.

Reduction of Discrimination

Other impacts of diverse school leaders are also seen through the reduction of discrimination in schools. In their research, Rocha and Hawes (2009) found that factors such as suspensions, identification for special education, and gifted identification were more equitable when staff diversity more closely aligned to the student diversity. Interestingly, in their research, they found that, essentially co-ethnic staff can impact all students of color; meaning that Hispanic staff has a positive impact on Black students, and vice versa.

As presented earlier, Black students face disproportionate disciplinary outcomes (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). In their research in the state of Tennessee, Bartanen and Grissom (2019) reported finding that for Black students, having a Black principal reduced the probability of in-school suspension by 1.8% ($p < 0.05$) and that the longer the principal stayed at the school, the greater the decrease observed: growing to 3.8% by the sixth year.

Increased Academic Outcomes

Patterns in the research have shown that when a principal of color is leading the school, there are positive outcomes for Black students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017). In their research Grissom et al. (2017) found that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be identified and placed into gifted programming if their principal was Black or Hispanic. In this research, they looked at the race of principals and the number of Black students placed into gifted programming. By controlling for the characteristics of the teacher, they were able to conclude a correlational relationship between the number of Black students placed into gifted programming and the race of the principal. In this same research Grissom et al. (2017) also

found that students of Hispanic descent were more likely to take advanced courses, and even more likely to have good attendance at school, if their school was led by a Hispanic principal.

Additional research has shown that Black principals are more likely to hire Black teachers, which in turn has a positive impact on Black student achievement in mathematics (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019). They found,

As in prior work, Black students have higher achievement under Black teachers, at least in math, though importantly we find positive effects of Black principals on Black student math achievement after the principal's first year that appear to operate through channels other than the indirect effect on the presence of Black teachers. Identifying these channels with more detailed data on principal behaviors and school processes would be a useful endeavor for future research (p. 42 - 43).

This research carries important implications, because it asserts that influences such as race, which are outside of a student's control, can impact their educational outcomes. The research on the impacts of school leaders of color remains emergent. Additional research is warranted to determine the extent to which Black school leaders can positively guide students of color in U.S. public schools.

Recruitment and Retention

Given the existence of a representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022; NCES, 2022), and given the benefits of school leaders of color (Grissom et al., 2017; Rocha & Hawes, 2009); the logical next step is to look at ways in which the school leader representation gap can be disrupted. There is research that points to effective strategies for recruiting and retaining school leaders in general (Benedetti, 2022; Buckman & Sloan, 2022). There is also research that points to strategies supporting the recruiting and retention of school leaders of color (Bailes & Guthery, 2020;

Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014; Richardson, 2013). This research points towards strategies such as intentional recruitment, building a pipeline, mentoring, promotions, and networking as ways in which the diversity of school leadership can be increased. Many of these same strategies suggested for school leaders of color are also found in the general research on recruiting and retaining school leaders.

Recruitment

In analyzing the school leader representation gap, a place to start is the path that current principals take in assuming their roles. Filling the role of the school leader is an important function of school districts. Buckman and Sloan (2022) contended that, “The process of selecting and hiring capable principal candidates could be one of the most critical tasks district administrators and school boards face during their tenure” (pp. 2-3). School districts can either look internally to fill vacancies or externally.

Across the research, there are many benefits seen when utilizing an internal school leader succession process (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Buckman & Sloan, 2022). In their research on the recruiting mechanisms for principals, Buckman and Sloan (2022) found that the following benefits were seen across the research:

- Internal candidates are a better choice than external candidates because of the perception of an internal candidate’s ability to minimize organizational transition disruptions and maintain leadership continuity.
- Internal candidates are seemingly more entrenched in the community and school culture, enabling them to better manage status changes within social group boundaries while maintaining legitimacy.

- Many factors provide a hiring advantage to internal candidates, including the knowledge and experience specific to district protocols, culture, vision, and goals.

A common internal lever for filling principal vacancies is through the assistant principal role. Another important factor in retaining diverse leaders is promotion through this important role. Bailes and Guthery (2020) used statistical procedures to assess promotions for 4,689 assistant principals in Texas from 2001 to 2017. While accounting for education, experience, school level and settings, they found that Black principals were 18% less likely to be promoted and waited longer for promotions, compared to White assistant principals. In reflecting on their research, Bailes and Guthery (2020) highlighted,

In absence of equitable pathways to leadership, many educators experience careers that are curtailed or truncated. School improvement is an urgent mandate and increasing the diversity of school leadership is likely to result in addressing the academic needs of an increasingly diverse student body (p. 13).

Intentional actions by school districts to ensure that they are promoting assistant principals of color is a necessary step to closing the school leader representation gap.

Another internal lever for filling school leadership roles is through a strong network of teacher leaders. The programs are called “grow your own,” and can prove to be an effective strategy, due to the fact that internal expertise is often aligned with school district goals (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). If a school district has equity goals aligned to hire a diverse talent pool, the use of grow your own programs could serve a district well towards increasing their recruitment of school leaders of color.

There is recent research that suggests that principal vacancies are growing, and that universities are the primary external source responsible for ensuring that an adequate pipeline

towards leadership exists (Benedetti, 2022). The pipeline, however, is where another barrier seems to occur. According to Benedetti (2022), an almost 50 percentage point gap exists between White students and students of color in enrolling in postbaccalaureate programs. Benedetti (2022) went on to suggest ways to support diversity in school leadership, asserting that “Leaders can examine how collaboration between principal preparation programs, districts, and organizations can present a united front that identifies the value of diversity in school leadership” (p. 8). This focus on principal preparation programs gives us important information about how school leaders ascend to their positions. In their research on increasing the diversity of school leaders by looking at strategies for leadership preparation programs, Yamashiro et al. (2022) found that improving data collection methods in order to analyze the demographics of the leadership preparation programs was an important first step to understanding the challenges faced. The program then focused on targeted underrepresented groups with fellowship programs. The researchers found that reflecting on current programs and refining these by offering more anti-racist, social justice and culturally responsive approaches was a critical component to supporting emerging leaders of color. Additionally, the researchers looked at the barriers that aspiring Black leaders face regarding systemic and financial barriers. To remove and begin to eradicate these barriers, the leaders of the program looked intentionally at the credentialing process and established support to help make this more accessible.

Richardson (2013) also examined the pipeline issue by conducting a qualitative study in which he looked at ways to increase the number of African American male principals. His research used qualitative methodology to analyze the experiences of aspiring and practicing principals. Richardson (2013) contended that part of the reason for a lack of school leaders of color is a pipeline issue. His research points to specific recruitment strategies to address this

problem, such as the recruitment of Black male high school and college students into the field of education, to increase the diversity of potential school leaders.

School leader preparation programs also play a critical role in increasing the pipeline of emerging school leaders (Benedetti, 2022; Yamashiro et al., 2022). There is research that suggests that these programs should be held accountable for the disparate outcomes that they are producing. In their research on exploring intersectionality and the employment of school leaders, Fuller et al. (2019) found that both female and male leaders of color have lower odds of becoming a principal, compared with White males. The researchers suggested that school districts need to examine their hiring practices, and that careful consideration be given to principal preparation programs that are incentivized to meet diversity goals.

Values and beliefs are other factors that are important in recruiting: especially principals of color into the role. Moultry (2014) conducted a qualitative study on four African American male principals and their experiences. In his research, he found that the desire to make an impact on students of color was a common theme. Specifically, Moultry (2014) asserted that, “As I see it, these successful African American male principals have journeyed to the profession that allows them to use their talents and create experiences and opportunities for the students of color they currently serve” (p. 113). This research could be beneficial in highlighting ways to increase the recruitment of more leaders of color into the principalship.

Overall, the recruitment of school leaders from either internal or external sources emphasizes the need for school districts to review their practices around the recruitment of diverse school leadership (Benedetti, 2022; Richardson, 2013; Yamashiro et al., 2022). Hiring school leaders is a critical task that school districts need to invest time and resources into (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). Internal recruitment strategies provide many benefits to districts,

including the ability to minimize disruptions, having candidates that are already entrenched in the community and school culture, and with candidates that already have knowledge of the district vision and goals (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). External recruitment strategies tend to be less successful because there are fewer African American students who are enrolled in post baccalaureate studies, thereby creating a smaller pool of qualified applicants (Benedetti, 2022). Strategies that prove to be helpful in addressing the pipeline issue include intentional recruitment of high school students of color into preparation programs, understanding the challenges faced by these students, embedding anti-racist and social justice approaches into preparation programs, and finding ways to remove financial systemic barriers (Richardson, 2013; Yamashiro et al., 2022).

Retention

Various research studies have looked at different factors effecting the retention of school leaders (Cieminski, 2018; Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Levin & Bradley, 2019). While the research on retention for principals of color specifically is rather slim, there is a body of research that investigates principal retention more broadly without a focus on race or ethnicity. In their review of the research, Levin and Bradley (2019) found that there are several key ways to improve principal retention. These include:

- Improve principals' working conditions.
- Increase their decision-making autonomy.
- Ensure sufficient compensation.
- Decrease counterproductive accountability practices.
- Provide meaningful and high-quality professional learning.

Current research on principal turnover rates is startling. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated principal turnover rates at schools across the U.S. Diliberti and Schwartz (2023) found that, at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, principal turnover was 16%, which was 13% higher than pre-pandemic levels. In their report, Diliberti and Schwartz (2023) also found,

Principal turnover was also substantial in high poverty districts (23 percent), three-quarters of which are rural districts. Those districts with the highest principal turnover as of 2021–2022 (i.e., high-poverty districts and rural districts) also saw the greatest increases of principal turnover over time, widening the gap between rural and high-poverty districts and their counterparts (p. 3).

Given that Black principals are more likely to serve in higher poverty schools (Taie & Lewis, 2022), conclusions could be made that the turnover of principals represents a disproportionately higher number of Black principals, since turnover rates are so much higher in high poverty districts. The researchers also suggest that the principal turnover concern has not gained as much media attention as the teacher turnover issue. In their report, Diliberti and Schwartz (2023) asserted that there is a need to increase attention around the issue of principal turnover. The report suggests that “Researchers, philanthropies, professional associations of school principals, and the federal department of education should seek to understand how the school leader job is changing. These individuals and organizations should also develop policies to attract and retain high-quality principals” (p. 10). This suggestion provides further evidence of the need for study into the retention of school leaders of color.

In research into school districts with high principal retention rates, Cieminski (2018) found that differentiated and individualized support was a key strategy to increase retention. High quality professional learning and creating networks of professional learning communities

with other colleagues is another factor that supports the retention of school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Another critical role in schools are the individuals responsible for supporting and supervising principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors can play an important role in supporting principals, especially when that support is focused on coaching over compliance (Goldring et al., 2018, 2020). In their research on principal supervisors, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2021) found that in order to effectively support principals, supervisors should focus on four key areas:

1. Be a visible partner and model being a lead learner.
2. Develop a common vision and consistently use a shared language that describes expectations for principals around the instructional leadership aspects of their role.
3. Establish a coaching, feedback, and support system that is aligned with expectations in evaluation.
4. Create opportunities for collaboration and capacity-building.

The researchers assert that this emphasis on coaching and a collaborative relationship with the principal supervisor also supports the principal in applying these same strategies in their schools; improving the culture and professional learning in schools. Cieminski and Asmus (2023) contended that, given the complex nature of school leadership, the principal supervisor can support the retention of principals. “Principal supervisors can be a help or hindrance in retaining principals based on how well they support principals’ development, skills, and ability to navigate challenges” (p. 38). Given the research supporting the effectiveness of school principal supervisors in retaining principals, it is important that districts invest in this role.

The sharing of leadership is another key factor in the retention of school leaders (Cierninski, 2018). The idea behind distributed leadership is that school leadership is not controlled just by the actions of a single leader, but is shared throughout the school community (Harris, 2008). This means that leadership is shared among teachers, administrators, students, parents, and the community of the school. Leaders that are sharing the load realize that everyone in the school community is responsible for the success of the school (Harris, 2008). According to Bolman and Deal (2021), “Leadership helps groups develop a shared sense of direction and commitment” (p. 176). Strong leadership allows for teachers to perform at high levels. Additionally, the collaborative capacity of the staff can also lead to gains. A strategy for doing this is what Fiarman (2017) referred to as a culture of collective responsibility. She encourages leaders to make space for others and to allow them to lead. This sharing of leadership increases engagement and collaboration. In schools that are practicing distributed leadership, teacher leaders and building leadership teams take on the shared load of advancing the mission of the school. Additionally, student councils and parent organizations also play an active role in the success of the school. This type of shared leadership can lessen the load on the school leader, and make the job more feasible (Fiarman, 2017).

Issues of race and racism were factors that Jackson (2013) examined in her qualitative study of African American female school leaders in majority White school settings. In her study, Jackson found that issues of racism were the predominate barrier that these leaders reported they faced. This research points to having strong networks both inside and outside of the school setting as a way deal with issues of racism. Gilbert et al. (2022) also found that a network of support, including mentoring, is a crucial strategy for supporting school leaders of color. The researchers suggest that having mentors and affinity groups helps Black leaders solve problems,

and share stories, fears, and resources in a safe space. The researchers also suggested that many school leaders of color find these networks informally or through intentional relationship building with others who are in roles like them. Helping Black school leaders build networks has the potential to be a powerful strategy for supporting and retaining them. On mentoring programs, Gilbert et al. (2022) explained that "...providing mentors with substantial training in the same equity-centered principles that school leaders receive could help to build a common language and practice for mentoring" (p. 36). The researchers also asserted that debriefing after mentoring sessions can help build support at many different levels within the school district.

Issues of race and racism are factors that Neely (2018) examined in her qualitative study on Black female high school principals. In her research, she uncovered the concern that Black principals face considerable racism in their roles as school leaders. In this research, she suggested that in order to support school leaders of color, school districts need to take steps towards addressing racism in their institutions. Neely (2018) made several recommendations, which include the need for dialogue around issues of race and racism, the need to remove systemic barriers for leaders of color, and the need to support Black school leaders when issues of racism arise. Additional strategies suggested were professional development for staff, including diversity and awareness training. This research points to the need for school districts to take intentional steps towards supporting their school leaders of color.

Being that only 22% of the school leaders in U.S. public schools are Black (NCES, 2022), it is important for school districts to look at strategies that support the retention of school leaders. Across the research, there are strategies that point towards supporting the retention of school principals without regard to race (Cieminski, 2018; Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Goldring et al., 2018, 2020). These strategies include providing school

leaders with differentiated, individualized support, and professional learning communities with other leaders (Cieminski, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The principal supervisor also plays an important role in supporting principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors should serve as coaches, supporting the development of skills and helping with challenges (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Goldring et al., 2018). Shared and distributed leadership is also a practice which can lead towards collective responsibility and support the retention of principals (Fiarman, 2017; Goldring et al., 2020). There is also research that looks at strategies to support school leaders of color in particular (Gilbert et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013; Neely, 2018). This research stresses strategies such as mentoring, building networks and affinity spaces for Black school leaders (Gilbert et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013). The important concept of addressing racism within school systems was also raised as a strategy to support the retention of school leaders of color (Neely, 2018).

Summary and Integration

This literature review examined the existing literature on school leaders of color and the school leader representation gap. Analyzing demographic data revealed that the majority of public-school students are not White (NCES, 2020b), while less than one out of four principals, identified as a person of color (NCES, 2022). The school leader representation gap in U.S. public schools remains an area in which more robust, peer-reviewed research is necessary. In conducting this literature review, the areas with the most research were around the outcome gaps experienced by students in schools and around the retention of school leaders in general. Research on the impact of school principals and the recruiting and retaining of school principals, without regard to race is more plentiful than specific research directed at school leaders of color.

There was limited research discovered on the experiences of Black school leaders and their impact on students of color.

These gaps in the research also present limitations. In reviewing the literature on the impacts of Black school leaders, much of the research reviewed was narrowed to same race outcomes; with most of the literature focusing on Black Principals and Black students, with some research discovered on Hispanic Principals and Hispanic students. In general, the school leader representation gap generalizes race into two categories, White and non-White, which potentially overlooks the differences among racial and ethnic groups.

Lastly, while peer-reviewed journal articles were used, some of the research into the recruitment and retention of Black school leaders relies upon dissertation research conducted using qualitative methodology. While dissertation research still adds to the body of knowledge in this area, more peer reviewed sources will add more rigor to the knowledge base. Additionally, while attempts were made to balance both qualitative and quantitative research, this review relied more heavily on the use of qualitative methods, signaling that more quantitative research may be necessary.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge, due to the unique way that the research problem is framed to intentionally close existing gaps in the research. The school leader representation gap is framed intentionally around the outcome gaps experienced by students of color in public schools and the increase in the number of students from underrepresented groups in our public schools. The review revealed that there are persistent gaps between the performance of Black and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2018). As well as disproportionate outcomes in school discipline with students of color being disciplined more harshly than White students (Heilbrun et al., 2015; Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020).

Critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory were used as frameworks from which to understand the school leader representation gap. A key tenet of critical race theory is the idea that the racial hierarchy in the U.S. is persistent across multiple systems, with education being impacted (Ladson-Billings, 2021). When examined through a framework of critical race theory, the persistent gaps in achievement and outcomes by Black students also have effects on the school leader representation gap, due to a lack of available students of color who proceed on to higher levels of education (Capper, 2015).

The theory of representative bureaucracy is applied to the school leader representation gap to help frame the need to increase representation of Blacks in increasingly diverse school system. When people of color are a part of the leadership in schools that represent a greater number of Black students, they better represent the needs and interests of those populations (Grissom & Keiser, 2011). This also presents a conflicting consideration. Given that most school principals are White, there is potential to provide these principals with strategies to better support their Black students. Research into culturally responsive leadership practices could be an area of further analysis.

To underscore the need to address the school leader representation gap, given the current outcomes for students of color, a review of the research on the impact of school leaders was also conducted. The research reviewed indicates that Black principals can have impacts on the diversity of the teaching staff, the reduction of discrimination in disciplinary action for students of color and increased academic outcomes (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

Lastly, the review of the school leader representation gap included looking at ways to recruit and retain school leaders of color (Benedetti, 2022; Buckman & Sloan, 2022; Gilbert et

al., 2022; Neely, 2018; Richardson, 2013; Yamashiro et al., 2022). The research reviewed revealed that strategies such as intentional recruitment, building a pipeline, mentoring, promotions, and networking are ways to begin to disrupt the school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013; Neely, 2018). Additionally, an analysis of the school leader preparation programs was also indicated as a way to increase the number of school leaders of color in the field (Yamashiro et al., 2022).

Overall, the research into school Black school leaders and the school leader representation gap is limited because most of the literature on school leadership has been done without the lens of race. There is much that is still unknown about the ways in which barriers can be removed to allow for more diverse leadership to emerge, and this study sought to close that gap. Unfortunately, race plays a role in who becomes a school leader and who does not. Further exploration into the leadership experiences of people of color is warranted.

This literature review is unique in the approach to analyzing the body of research on school leaders of color through the problem of the school leader representation gap. The context for this literature review is important because it was situated in several important issues. First, the research on school leaders of color was framed by analyzing the current demographics of public school students, compared to public school leaders. This review of the literature highlighted an assumption that a lack of research on Black school leaders may be due in part to the lack of their representation. Furthermore, the framing of this research by looking at outcomes of students of color in public schools also shows gaps between Black and White students. The assumption that if Black students are not experiencing success in school, there will be less of a pipeline of future school leaders, is an important one, and is made through the lens of critical race theory and the research into the school leader pipeline. The research on these ideas, led to

the need to review research on the experiences of school leaders of color to underscore the importance of closing the representation gap by learning from practicing Black school leaders, which this study did. Lastly, the summary of research towards recruiting and retaining school leaders of color was conducted to round out the literature review and bring the problem statement and significance back into view, making this literature review comprehensive in its approach. The summary of this research concludes with the need to conduct further scholarly research into the experiences of school leaders of color and into the analysis of strategies that support the recruiting and retaining of school leaders, so that more equitable outcomes can be realized.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

U.S. public schools are experiencing a shift in the racial makeup of the student population that does not mirror the racial demographics of the leaders of the schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020b) reports that in 2018, approximately 53% of public-school students were not White. During the 2017-2018 school year, while there were 90,850 public school principals, only 22%, or less than one out of four principals identified as Black (NCES, 2022). This gap is referred to as the school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022).

A lack of diversity in the school leadership role impacts students and communities of color, as it is important for them to have representation in the education system (Grissom et al., 2021). U.S. schools are experiencing struggles as they seek new ways to educate students in a post pandemic world; alongside the ever-present racial injustices experienced in our country (Gilbert et al., 2022). Research also indicates that students of color consistently underperform, compared to their White counterparts, on measures of academic achievement in school (Darling-Hammond, 2018). It is essential that communities of color are represented by school leaders that share their values and beliefs (Grissom et al., 2015).

This study sought to explore the experiences of Black school leaders in Midwest public schools. The leader of a school plays an essential role in the success of the organization (Marzano et al., 2005). A review of the literature and national demographic data indicates that this leadership representation gap persists, and that the demographics of public school leaders are not keeping pace with the demographics of the students (Gilbert et al., 2022; NCES, 2022). Research about the role of the school principal on impacting outcomes exists (Branch et al., 2013; Marzano et al., 2005). However, there is less research investigating the role of Black

school leaders, and their impact on students of color. Lastly, there is a limited body of research revealing promising strategies for recruiting and retention of Black school leaders (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014; Neely, 2018; Richardson, 2013). A study exploring the leadership experiences of school leaders, including how these leaders perceive that their impact influences students of color will add to the body of knowledge on Black school leaders.

Statement of the Problem

A school leader representation gap exists in U.S. public schools. There is an under-representation of public-school leaders of color in public-school systems, which results in an unequal representation of cultural values and diverse leadership perspectives that ultimately impact recruitment, retention, and student success (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; Gilbert et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021). Only 22% of school leaders identify as Black (NCES, 2019), while 53% of students are non-White (NCES, 2020). Outcome gaps between White and non-White students persists in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018). These two issues are intertwined. Research has demonstrated that school leaders of color can have positive impacts in multiple ways on Black students (Grissom et al., 2017). Moreover, those students will have difficulty ascending to the principal's role if they are not successful in school (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). This research sought to learn from practicing Black school leaders, to discover ways in which the school leader representation gap can be disrupted.

Research Questions

In this study, I sought to explore the experiences of school leaders of color. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

Central Question: What are the professional experiences of school leaders of color in Midwest public schools?

R1: How do public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?

R2: How do school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?

R3: How do school leaders of color describe how their leadership influences students of color in their schools?

Research Methodology

This research was done using a basic qualitative study design. This design was selected due to the phenomenon being studied, the alignment to the theoretical framework and my researcher positionality. A basic qualitative study looks at participants experiences and the ways in which the participants assign meaning to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This research sought to understand the experiences of school leaders of color and the meaning they assign to those experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that basic qualitative research is concerned about how people make sense of their lives, including how they interpret experiences and the meaning they attach to these experiences. Critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 2021), informed the selection of this methodology.

Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the beliefs and experiences of study participants, allowing for a wealth of data to be obtained from a smaller sample size. (Labuschagne, 2003). This study required an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. To obtain the depth necessary, the number of participants was limited to five. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) there is no correct answer or formula for the number of participants in a

qualitative study. Instead, the authors suggested considering all factors of the research design alongside the resources available to conduct the study. The participants in this study, and I are all very busy leading and managing schools and school districts. The smaller number of study participants was selected to achieve the depth of reflection desired from each study participant. The purpose then of this basic qualitative research was not to generalize the research to larger populations, but to gather a deep description of the school leaders experiences, while not being overwhelmed with too much information (Cohen et al., 2017).

School leaders of color have unique and multifaceted experiences. A basic qualitative study design is a helpful approach when exploring their professional experiences (Bailey, 2018). Critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 2021), was used as a theoretical framework for this research. The emphasis of storytelling as a tenet of critical race theory is another reason why a basic qualitative study was a good choice for this research design.

Lastly, a basic qualitative study design was selected because of the alignment to my positionality as the researcher. My philosophical beliefs are aligned with the critical paradigm. I am interested in learning about the experiences of oppressed groups and intend to use the knowledge gained as a basis for providing equitable opportunities and experiences for others. The use of qualitative research methodology is supported using critical race theory as a framework and reinforced by my epistemological beliefs.

Research Design

This research was a basic qualitative study. The opportunity to go deep into the experiences of practicing school leaders of color shed important light on similarities and differences of their journey to the school leader role, the support they need to remain in the role,

and how they perceive their leadership influences Black students in their schools. This comprehensive qualitative analysis allowed for patterns to be uncovered and recommendations to be made from the themes that emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The study was conducted using virtual interviews that occurred one-to-one and were between 45 minutes and one hour in length. The study participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format, which allowed for additional questions to be asked as needed and permitted me to dig deeper into participants' responses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The interviews allowed for data to be collected, that answered the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data were used to identify patterns and themes in the responses of the participants. These themes emerged, once the data was collected, transcribed, checked by participants and then analyzed multiple times (Bailey, 2018). At the end of this process, findings and conclusions were made that then helped to answer the research questions.

Study Population and Sample Selection

Qualitative research allows for the exploration of participants beliefs and experiences and provides for an abundance of data about a smaller sample of the broader population (Labuschagne, 2003). Due to the need for detailed data, this study was limited in the number of participants, but contained the depth necessary to fully analyze the experiences of the school leaders. The purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the research to larger populations, but to ensure that I was able to garner thick description, without being overwhelmed with too much information (Cohen et al., 2017). The sample size for this study was five school leaders of color from the Midwest, that met the following criteria:

- Currently serving in a school leader or school principal role.

- Currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States.
- Have at least two years of experience as a school leader.
- Identifies as a person of color (Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian, or multi-racial).
- Is willing and able to participate in a one-hour interview conducted one-on-one in a virtual setting.

I endeavored to select participants that represented multiple gender identities. I also attempted to include a range of different races, a range of different experience levels, and a span of several different grade levels. Varying the demographics of the research participants permitted me to capture a broader range of experiences of Black school leaders. Principals with at least two years of in the role were selected as it allowed for them to reflect on and share experiences. This was particularly critical since this research focused on recruiting and retention practices. All participants worked in the Midwestern region of the U.S. This area was selected due to the unique diversity of the area and the fact that I reside and work in the region.

Snowball sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, was used to garner participants. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It involves deliberately choosing participants who hold specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the phenomenon being studied. Rather than aiming for representativeness or generalizability, purposeful sampling focuses on selecting participants that can provide rich and in-depth insights into the research topic (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Since I was interested in the experiences of practicing school leaders of color, purposeful sampling was used to target participants that matched the terms of the study. Cohen et al. (2017) contended that snowball sampling is common in qualitative research. The

value is found in the fact that relying on peers and others with whom a researcher has personal connections can help equalize power dynamics and allow for participants to be targeted that match the terms. I sent an email (Appendix A) to multiple colleagues from districts across the Midwest, that matched the criteria desired for the study. Also included in the email were details about the purpose of the study and information about the research.

Once participation was secured, I provided each participant with an informed consent letter (Appendix B) detailing the purpose of the research. Qualtrics was used to secure informed consent. I informed the participants of any possible risks, and that they may terminate their participation in the study at any time. I asked the participants to complete the informed consent prior to the start of their participation. Once it was received, I sent out a demographic questionnaire using Qualtrics (Appendix C). In this questionnaire, I sought information that would determine alignment with the criteria for the study. Questions included: their participants' role, the school level and size of their school, location type (urban, suburban, rural), race/ethnicity, gender, and the length of time they have worked in their current position. I also requested that the participants contact me via email to set up a one-to-one interview at a mutually convenient time. The interviews were recorded for transcription. No personal identifying information was collected, and a pseudonym was used for each interview. Recordings were transcribed verbatim for coding and data analysis. Recordings and transcripts are the property of a researcher. The master code list connecting the participants' identity to the data was kept in a separate locked cabinet in my home and was destroyed after data analysis. Contact lists, recruitment records, and other documents that contained personally identifiable data were destroyed when I determined that they were no longer required for the research. Files containing electronic data were stored on my home computer indefinitely. The files were password-

protected and encrypted using File Vault for Mac, which utilizes Data Protection Class C, with a volume key, and may be used for future research.

Sources of Data

The source of data for this basic qualitative study came from the interviews with the research participants. Interviews can be a beneficial tool when the research design does not allow for direct observation of participants in the field (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Five participants were interviewed: each interview, between 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were conducted virtually using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). Most of the questions on the semi-structured interview guide were created during my qualitative methods coursework. This allowed for most of the questions to be field tested, with feedback garnered from both professors and colleagues.

Interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform and transcribed for accuracy. Semi-structured interviews allowed for predetermined questions; however it also permitted for prompts be used to explore relevant issues in greater depth (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once the interviews were completed, the recording was reviewed and transcribed to have an accurate record of the participant's interview. Anonymity of participants was maintained using pseudonyms, to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants. Once the interviews were transcribed, member checking occurred. Member checking is also called respondent validation. It is the process by which researchers have participants review the transcripts to ensure accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Member checking also increases the internal validity and credibility of the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the data need to be considered when conducting qualitative research (Bailey, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research are likened to the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Together, these concepts establish rigorous, ethical, and trustworthy research. I used notes, which consisted of detailed records that were carefully kept through the entire research process, from idea formulation to the conclusion of the study. These can be used to increase the trustworthiness of research (Bailey, 2018). Essentially these notes allow for replication of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Memos with reflections were also kept, which included careful records on how codes were created, as well as how patterns and themes emerged. This careful process of data collection and data analysis allowed for reflections on the central research question and supporting sub questions. The reported findings were structured around the themes that emerged from the data. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) encouraged the use of dialogue and personal reflection to support the identified themes. These reflections are included in the finding sections and support the researcher's strong positionality around the central phenomenon. Findings were also compared to the literature. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) underscored this point stating that "Similar to quantitative research, the qualitative inquirer interprets the data in view of this past research, showing how the findings may support or contradict prior studies or both" (p. 260).

Due to the fact that this qualitative research involved human subjects, and the results of the research may be used to inform the practice of school districts, it is important that trustworthiness of the process be maintained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Two ways in which I

enhanced trustworthiness of the study were through member checking and reflexivity. Member checking was selected due to my critical paradigm, as well as the sensitive nature of the topic (Bailey, 2018). According to Bailey (2018), “Member checking is when you ask the participants (the members) to review your research and provide feedback. Member checking allows participants the chance to add, confirm, refute, and/or clarify what they have said” (p. 149). To accomplish member checking, I sent a draft of the transcript back to participants for review and feedback. Another strategy that employed to increase trustworthiness of the study was reflexivity. Bailey (2018) explained, “Reflexivity is, in part, critically thinking about how your status characteristics, values, and history, as well as the numerous choices you have made during the research, affect the results” (p. 136). I practiced reflexivity by keeping notes and memos as the research was being conducted and analyzed. These notes helped center me as active participant in the research (Bailey, 2018), particularly due to the critical paradigm I held (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Collection Procedures

The collection of qualitative data must be done in an organized and careful manner. Careful record keeping ensures that the integrity of the study is maintained and that it can be reproduced (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The following steps were taken to collect the data for this basic qualitative study:

1. After successfully defending the proposal of the research study, I sought and received approval from the IRB Office and the International Review Board (IRB).
2. Once approval was received, I sent an email to colleagues seeking their participation in the study (see Appendix A). Once agreement was secured, I requested the

- participants complete the informed consent document through Qualtrics (see Appendix B).
3. Once the informed consent documents were received, I sent a demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics to ensure that participants met the study criteria (see Appendix C).
 4. Once the demographic questionnaire was received, they were analyzed, and five participants were selected that matched the sample terms. I then reached back out to participants to schedule a date and time for the interviews. Interviews occurred virtually and were recorded using the Zoom platform. I created a semi-structured interview guide for our conversations (see Appendix D).
 5. After interviews were completed, I began transcribing the recording. The recording was played several times and the transcription checked multiple times to ensure accuracy.
 6. Once the transcriptions were complete, member checking was enacted. The transcripts were sent back to the participants to review for accuracy and completeness.
 7. After transcribing the interviews, I coded the data. I uploaded the transcripts into MAXQDA to organize the coding process. To begin the coding process, I read and reread the transcripts. There were multiple levels to the coding process. In level one (open) coding, different chunks of data were labeled. Level two (axial) coding involved turning these codes into categories (Elliott, 2018). Finally, level three (selective) coding was completed. I looked across these categories to see what

broader themes emerged (Elliott, 2018). The themes and patterns identified were then used to reflect on the research questions.

8. During the data collection and analysis process, memos were kept. Memos were short notes that I kept on the data collection process, as well as ideas that were learned along the way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Analysis Procedures

The interview transcripts collected from the participants of this study were the data that was analyzed for this research. The process of searching for meaning is the essence of qualitative data analysis (Bailey, 2018). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) recommended six steps in the data analysis process:

1. Start with a system or method for organizing the data. I used MAXQDA to organize the data analysis process. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) emphasized the importance of being organized, due to the large amounts of information that is collected during qualitative studies.
2. In this step the transcripts were read several times and patterns were identified and coded. Bailey (2018) called this process *line by line coding* explaining that “Codes are labels, keywords, or brief summaries of each statement or larger chunks of data” (p. 161). Elliott (2018) asserted that “Coding is an almost universal process in qualitative research; it is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and the ways in which researchers break down their data to make something new” (p. 2850). The code list was kept separately from the data to ensure security of the data.
3. The next step was to create categories, which included naming the categories, determining how many categories there would be, and putting the codes into

categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). MAXQDA was used to color code and label the emerging categories. Once the categories were identified, the next step was to look for relationships among the categories, and begin to identify emergent themes (Bailey, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that “When categories and their properties are reduced and refined and then linked together, the analysis is moving toward the development of a model or theory to explain the data’s meaning” (p. 220).

4. This step included presenting the findings as a narrative report. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained “A narrative discussion is a written passage in a qualitative study in which authors summarize, in detail, the findings from their data analysis” (p. 257). Using quotes from participants to support findings is an important step that is included in the narrative report (Foss & Waters, 2015).
5. Another step is to ensure the validity and accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I used member checks to ensure the validity of the research. Member checking is also called respondent validation. It is the process by which researchers have participants review the transcripts to ensure accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
6. In this last step, I referred back to the theoretical frameworks and literature review (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and compared this to the research findings. This section included a review of the major findings, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Reflexivity was also practiced throughout the analysis.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) made an important point about qualitative data analysis. The authors insist that data analysis should begin during the data collection phase. This means that

researchers do not wait until all their data is collected to begin analyzing that data. This is because qualitative data analysis is emergent in nature. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained,

At the outset of a qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a purposeful sample to collect the data in order to address the problem. But the researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like” (p. 197).

I began analyzing data while it was still being collected, which allowed for the study to be furthered narrowed, focused, and exploratory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research, it was important to ensure that all human subject regulations were met. It is important to note that I completed two online human research protection training courses. These included the Social Behavioral-Educational Comprehensive and the Social and Behavioral Responsible Conduct of Research courses, through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program.

According to the Belmont Report (1979), when conducting research involving human subjects, it is crucial to adhere to ethical guidelines and regulations to ensure the protection of participants' rights, welfare, and privacy. Also, according to the Belmont Report (1979), meeting human subject regulations involves following established principles and obtaining appropriate approvals before initiating any research involving human participants. Approval for this study was done through the process of the participants signing an informed consent document.

The issue of confidentiality is a potential challenge that needed to be addressed. Confidentiality is an ethical concern because of the unique position that school leaders are in and the potential harm that could be caused by the sharing of information. Head (2018) summarized

this well, stating that, “The researcher, therefore, is in a position of care in choosing how, where and with whom to disseminate, including conferences, co-authors and publishers” (p. 7). When conducting and disseminating this research, I practiced care to ensure that personally identifiable information was not shared. It was also important to maintain confidentiality due to my position as the researcher. I was a colleague, friend, and peer in the field of educational leadership to the participants. I did not utilize any participants from the school district in which they were employed.

Bromley et al. (2015) cited the Belmont Report and encouraged- researchers to be mindful that participation in research should be voluntary. Due to my relationship with the participants, care was taken to be sure that they did not feel that there could be an obligation to participate in the study. Additionally, the participants were notified that they could terminate their participation in the study at any time. Head (2018) referred to an “...ethic of care in educational research” (p. 7) explaining that, “...thus, researchers are encouraged to think about their own place in a project in terms of their experience and the values and beliefs that underpin the decision to undertake the research and the questions and issues that frame it” (Gregory, 2003, p. 7). To address the challenges of my potential relationship with participants, I made clear that participation was voluntary, and acknowledged that the relationship should not impact a school leader’s decision to participate.

Another important factor to consider with participants was the idea of additional burdens on already busy school leaders. Bromley et al. (2015) described the concept of beneficence from the Belmont Report as ensuring that researchers are minimizing harm and maximizing benefits, stating that, “Benefits could include generating knowledge that will help individuals who share characteristics with the subject. Minimizing harm means ensuring that study procedures are as

safe as possible for subjects” (p. 904). The study was carefully designed to not overly burden subjects. The time needed to participate in the study was limited to one hour of interviews followed by member checking. Head (2018) discussed this challenge within his description of the ethic of care, asserting that,

Data gathering is also a matter of care: care to ensure that enough data is gathered to address the focus of the research, but sufficient care also not to interfere too long in the lives of those being researched, in an effort to ensure adequate data is collected through gathering more than is necessary (p. 7).

Since school leaders have tremendous workloads, I was careful to make sure that participation did not cause additional burdens, while balancing the need to make sure enough information was collected.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. The first was sample size. The sample size for this study was five participants, which was relatively small, compared to the number of public-school principals of color in the Midwest. Recommendations were made but did not serve to generalize the results to all public-school principals of color. Another factor considered was the geographical area of participants. The participants were practicing school leaders in the Midwest region of the U.S. School leaders from other regions of the country may have different experiences based upon their geographic location, or even individual communities. Participants that were selected for this study were school leaders of color. Due to my positionality, beliefs, values, common attributes such as race, geographic location, and professional experiences, the possibility of researcher bias was a limitation to the study. Reflexivity was practiced, improving the trustworthiness of the study, and helped mitigate the potential for bias. Interviews were

limited to an hour in length. This time frame limited the amount of information that participants were able to share, and thereby limited the amount of information I was able to collect. I created the interview instrument, which presented limitations due to my novice as a researcher. Member checking ensured the accuracy of the data that was collected. Conducting the participant interviews virtually was a limitation, as in-person interviews could have created a different relationship between me and the participants. The existing limitations presented were mitigated, due to efforts such as careful note taking, memos, member checking and reflexivity. The limitations could not be avoided and did not negatively affect the results of the study.

Summary

U.S. public schools are experiencing a shift in the racial makeup of the student population that does not mirror the racial demographics of the leaders of the schools (NCES, 2020b, 2022). The gap between the demographics of the student population and the demographic of the leaders of the school is called the school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022). A lack of diversity in the school leadership role impacts students and communities of color, as it is important for them to have representation in the education system (Grissom et al., 2021). Research also indicates that Black students consistently underperform in school, as compared to their White counterparts on measures of academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2018). It is essential that communities of color are represented by school leaders that share their values and beliefs (Grissom et al., 2015).

This study sought to explore the experiences of Black school leaders in Midwest public schools. A study exploring the leadership experiences of school leaders, including how these leaders perceive that their impact influences students of color, added to the body of knowledge

on these leaders. This research was guided by the following overarching question, which asked, what are the professional experiences of school leaders of Color in Midwest public schools?

This research was conducted using a basic qualitative study design. A basic qualitative study looks at participants experiences and the ways in which the participants assign meaning to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A basic qualitative study design was selected due to the phenomenon being studied, the alignment to the theoretical framework and the researcher's positionality. Qualitative research permits a researcher to explore the beliefs and experiences of study participants, allowing for a wealth of data to be obtained from a smaller sample size. (Labuschagne, 2003). This study required an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. To obtain the depth necessary, the number of participants was limited to five.

Purposeful sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research, was utilized to secure participants for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study was conducted using virtual one-on-one interviews, approximately one hour in length. The study participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format using an interview guide of my design. The interviews permitted for data to be collected that addressed the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Issues of validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the data were considered when conducting this qualitative research (Bailey, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Notes, member checking, journals, memos, and reflexivity were all utilized in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Bailey, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) made an important point about qualitative data analysis. The authors insist that data analysis should begin during the data collection phase. I did not wait until all the data was collected to begin analyzing that data, which allowed the qualitative data analysis to be emergent in nature.

In conducting this research, it was important to ensure that all human subject regulations were met. According to the Belmont Report (1979), when conducting research involving human subjects, it is crucial to adhere to ethical guidelines and regulations to ensure the protection of participants' rights, welfare, and privacy. When conducting and disseminating this research, I practiced care to ensure that confidential and personally identifiable information was not shared. My position as researcher was also important to maintain confidentiality. My position to participants was that of colleague, friend, and peer in the field of educational leadership. I did not utilize any participants from the school district in which they were employed.

I also accounted for limitations to the study, that included sample size, geographic location, researcher's positionality, the instrument, length of interviews, and the virtual format of the interviews were all limitations considered. The existing limitations presented were mitigated due to efforts such as member checking and reflexivity to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness (Bailey, 2018). The limitations of this study could not be avoided and did not negatively affect the results of the study.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

A school leader representation gap exists in U.S. public schools. Only 22% of school leaders identify as people of color (NCES, 2019), while 53% of students are non-White (NCES, 2020). Outcome gaps between White and non-White students persist in U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018). These two issues are intertwined. Research has demonstrated that school leaders of color can positively impact Black students in a multitude of ways (Grissom et al., 2017). Moreover, students of color will have difficulty ascending to the principal's role if they are not successful in school. There is a need for additional research into ways in which to disrupt the school leader's representation gap. This research used a basic qualitative study design to investigate the experiences of leaders of color in school leadership positions in the Midwest. The focus of this research was on recruiting practices, retention practices, and the leaders' perceived impact on students of color.

The research examined the professional experiences of these school leaders related to the following research questions:

Central Question: What are the professional experiences of school leaders of color in Midwest public schools?

R1: How do public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?

R2: How do school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?

R3: How do school leaders of color describe how their leadership influences students of color in their schools?

In this chapter is a description of the study participants, the research methods used to collect the data, and the processes used to analyze the data. Also included is a presentation and analysis, reporting of the findings, and summary of the data collected. The integration of the theoretical frameworks, as well as the research from the literature review is also presented alongside the findings.

Participants

The participants in this study included five principals from public schools in the Midwest. These five participants met the following criteria for participation: 1) currently serving in a school leader or school principal role; 2) currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States; 3) has had at least two years of experience as a school leader; 4) identifies as a person of color (Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, or multi-racial) and; 5) is willing and able to participate in a one-hour interview conducted one-on-one in a virtual setting.

Purposeful and snowball sampling was used by selecting principals in the Midwest who potentially matched the demographic criteria. Potential participants received an email soliciting their participation in the study (see Appendix A). The participants were also asked to share the study with others who might be eligible and interested in participating. Once agreement was received, the participants were sent the IRB consent letter (see Appendix B) and Qualtrics was used to confirm consent. Lastly, once consent was gained, a demographic survey (see Appendix C) was sent to participants through Qualtrics as well, to ensure participants matched the demographic profile needed for the research. Initial emails were sent to 20 potential participants. After all the steps in the process, I was successful in completing interviews with five participants.

All participants were excited to participate in the study. Several of the participants had either completed, were working on an advanced degree, or were interested in a doctoral program, which seemed to help solidify their participation. Table 1 summarizes the participants, their pseudonym, race, gender, years as a principal, the type of school, and the level of their school.

Table 1

Study Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Years as a Principal	School Type	School Level
Pam	African American	Female	18	Suburban	9-12
Anthony	African American	Male	24	Urban	K-5
Angela	African American	Female	15	Urban	K-8
Mary	African American	Female	9	Suburban	K-5
Tina	African American	Female	14	Urban	K-8

All the participants identified as African American and four of the five identified as females. All the participants were veteran principals with the most veteran having served 24 years as a principal. Both suburban and urban school settings were represented, along with a variety of school levels. The data were collected through one-on-one interviews which were held in the fall of 2023. These interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom and lasted between 45-60 minutes. I used a semi-structured interview script, consisting of 17 questions (see Appendix D) which ensured that interview questions were delivered with consistency, yet allowed me to probe deeper with participants as needed. Table 2 displays the alignment between the interview questions and the research questions for this basic qualitative study.

Table 2*Alignment of Interview Questions to Research Questions*

Research Question	Aligned Interview Questions
<i>R1: How do public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?</i>	7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17
<i>R2: How do school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?</i>	7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17
<i>R3: How do school leaders of color describe how their leadership influences students of color in their schools?</i>	7, 11, 16, 17

There was a total of 17 interview questions aligned to the three research questions. The first six questions were demographic questions designed to get the participant comfortable and learn about their current setting. Permission to record the interview was obtained and the interview was recorded via the Zoom recording feature. Once completed, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by me to ensure accuracy. After the transcripts were completed, they were then sent to the participants to review for accuracy and to confirm if the participants wanted to add any additional information. This process, called member checking, was meant to ensure that the transcription portrayed their experiences and perceptions correctly. Initially, I had proposed to do member checking after analysis was completed, but upon further reflection, I wanted to ensure that analysis was made based on accurate experiences, so this step was taken first to confirm that accuracy. This member checking increases the internal validity and credibility of the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

After the interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were verified by participants, the data analysis process began. Due to the high volume of data and the need to be meticulous in the data analysis process, a tool for data analysis was used. The tool, called MAXQDA, was

recommended by the university to store and analyze large quantities of qualitative data. I went through the transcripts, removed all personally identifiable data, and stored the master list of participants separate from the pseudonyms used in the transcripts. These deidentified transcripts were then uploaded into MAXQDA. Member checking, journals, memos, and reflexivity were all utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Bailey, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

I read and re-read through all the transcripts before completing three levels of coding. According to Grant and Tomal (2013) there are three levels of coding when conducting qualitative data analysis. The authors described that “Open coding involves labeling phenomena and developing categories from the data. Axial coding occurs when the researcher makes connections between categories. Finally, selective coding is when the researcher finds the story or overarching themes to organize the data” (p. 96). Table 3 summarizes the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts and how these each align to the research questions.

Table 3*Research Questions and Themes*

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
R1: How do public school leaders of Color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?	Theme 1: Sense of Identity	Sub-Theme 1.1: How the leader is perceived. Sub-Theme 1.2: Identity of the leader.
R2: How do school leaders of Color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?	Theme 2: Pathways to Becoming a School Leader Theme 3: Keys to Longevity Theme 4: Persistence in the Face of Obstacles	Sub-Theme 2.1: Began as a teacher. Sub-Theme 2.2: Someone saw leadership in them. Sub-Theme 2.3: Assistant principalship as an entry point into leadership. Sub-Theme 3.1: Professional growth. Sub-Theme 3.2: Role of the supervisor. Sub-Theme 3.3: Sources of Strength Sub-Theme 4.1: Challenges in the role. Sub-Theme 4.2: Racism faced.
R3: How do school leaders of Color describe how their leadership influences students of Color in their schools?	Theme 5: The Why	Sub-Theme 5.1: Role model for students. Sub-Theme 5.2: Sense of purpose.

The open coding was completed as I read and reread the transcript, labeling different chunks of data. I utilized grounded codes, which emerged from the data (Elliott, 2018). The open coding analysis produced 121 unique code segments. Next, axial coding was completed. The open codes were analyzed for connections and organized into categories which became the sub-themes of the data, there were 12 sub-themes that emerged. Finally, selective coding was completed, and I summarized broader themes across the categories, which produced five broader

themes. These themes and sub-themes were then compared back to the three research questions to analyze the extent to which the research questions were fully explored.

Researcher's Reflexivity

Within qualitative research it is important to consider the position of the researcher. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) identified three interrelated concepts that researchers should consider: 1) insider/outsider issues, 2) positionality issues, 3) researcher reflexivity. Insider/outsider issues refers to whether or not the participants see the researcher as a person who has inside experiences in the same field or not (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In reflecting my own insider/outside status, I believe that the participants saw me as an insider in the field of educational leadership. First, due to the snowball and purposeful sampling techniques that were used, I was familiar with all the participants in the study in one way or another. Additionally, having served as a public-school assistant principal and principal for 14 years, I have a wealth of professional experiences that are similar to the research participants. Lastly, as a school leader of color, I share similar experiences with the research participants.

I believe that the insider status allowed me access to many school leaders of color in the Midwest. I was able to identify 20 potential participants, however, I had trouble completing all steps in the research process with many participants and ended up limiting the study to five. I credit this primarily to the incredible amount of stress that school leaders are under, and their limited free time. Several potential participants indicated interest in participating but were unable to find the time to complete all the steps.

Also relevant to reflexivity is that my insider status allowed participants to share issues such as their experiences with racism, which may not have been fully shared with a researcher with outsider access. My insider position strengthened the amount of data that was collected

from the participants. However, care was taken to ensure that my own bias was mitigated as much as possible.

Positionality issues, are also issues that arise with qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) described positionality issues as an extension of the insider/outsider issues, but are focused more directly on demographics and identity, particularly as they relate to the purpose of the study. Being a school leader of color, alongside the intent of this study to research the recruitment and retention of school leaders of color, I brought a strong positionality into this study. Additionally, four of the five participants identify as women, which further strengthened my positionality to the research participants. Another indicator of my strong positionality is that my philosophical beliefs are aligned with the critical paradigm. I am interested in learning about the experiences of oppressed groups and intend to use the knowledge gained as a basis for providing equitable opportunities and experiences for others.

In order to respond to both the insider/outsider and positionality issues, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that researcher reflexivity should be practiced throughout the study. Bailey (2018) identified reflexivity as a practice that the researcher engages in to reflect on their own status and experiences, alongside the choices made in the research and how these might affect the results. I practiced reflexivity throughout this research by keeping notes and memos as the research was being conducted and analyzed. The notes helped center me as an active participant in the research (Bailey, 2018). This was especially helpful because of the critical paradigm and the insider status that I hold (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These notes and memos helped me to process the emotions felt during the interviews, especially when concepts of race and racism, which I have also experienced, were shared by participants. Furthermore, the use of

memos allowed me to begin analyzing data while it was still being collected which, in turn, made the study more narrowed, focused, and exploratory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In addition to memos, the practice of member checking was conducted to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the research. Member checking is also called respondent validation. It is the process by which researchers have participants review the data to ensure accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After completing the interviews, and before analyzing the results, I sent the transcripts to the participants to check for accuracy. All the participants completed this step. I elected to do member checking before beginning the analysis to ensure that the analysis was conducted on accurate transcriptions.

Finally, the last practice that I used to ensure the dependability and credibility of the results and mitigate their own bias was by using inductive thematic analysis. Bailey (2018) described this as identifying themes that emerge from the data that is collected, rather than identifying themes in advance. The analysis conducted and themes presented will be bolstered by the use of dialogue in reporting the findings. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) encouraged the use of dialogue to support the identified themes to strengthen the report of the findings. The findings section will include lengthier sections of dialogue from the participants, which support the analysis that was conducted, and to share a thick description of the participant's stories.

Findings

In the remainder of this section the findings from the study will be detailed. These findings are organized by research question, theme, and finally the corresponding sub-themes. The integration of the theoretical frameworks as well as the research from the literature review is also presented alongside the findings. Quotes from the participants are used to support findings and enhance the trustworthiness of the reported findings. While these quotes provided do not

represent the entire findings, they do give a sample of the participants perceptions, which help to provide insights into the participants experiences and support the reported findings.

A basic qualitative study design is a helpful approach when exploring their professional experiences (Bailey, 2018). Critical race theory was used as a theoretical framework for this research. Critical race theory emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a tool to elevate the voice and experiences of marginalized people (Ladson-Billings, 2021). It was important to emphasize the storytelling nature of this study. Because of this, lengthier quotes are used to support the findings. The result of this research is rooted in the stories of five African American school leaders, who shared their stories, truths, sources of strength, and the obstacles they face.

R1: Professional Experiences of School Leaders of Color

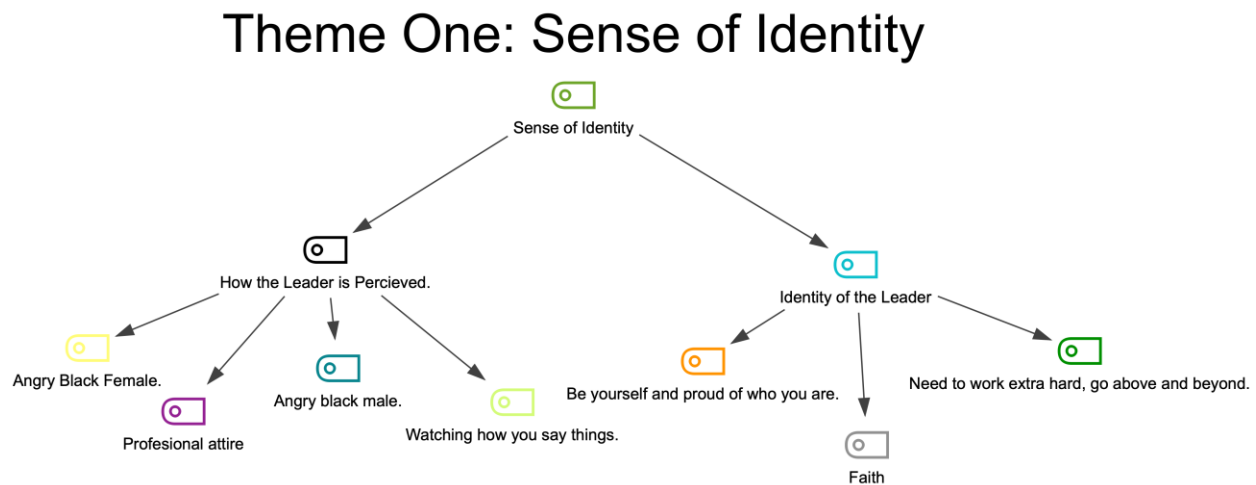
Two sub-themes and one overarching theme emerged that are connected to the first research question. Theme one is sense of identity, and the sub-themes are how the leader is perceived and the identity of the leader. There were 17 coded segments that were connected to the two sub-themes that emerged.

Theme One: Sense of Identity

Participants in this study had a strong sense of awareness of their identity as school leaders of color. Figure 5 summarizes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes upon which this theme emerged.

Figure 5

Theme One: Sense of Identity



There were questions posed, that asked the participants about their path towards becoming a school leader, and an open-ended question asking about their overall experience as a school leader. All the participants had a keen sense of how others perceive them as a leader. It is important to note that all the principals lead a staff that is predominately White. The concept that race is socially constructed, and the concept of intersectionality are core tenets of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker et al., 2018). Intersectionality is the theory that our identities are made up of many different layers including gender, class, sexuality, politics, etc. (Parker et al., 2018). All the participants expressed understanding of their own social identity regarding the social identity of their majority White staff. They also discussed the importance of perceptions to their leadership. Several of these perceptions were based upon the attire that the leaders wear, and the fact that the leaders felt that they needed to be cognizant of how they “said” things. In reflecting on her interactions with her staff, Pam shared,

I will always have to watch the way I talk with them. My body language, my head, all of that. Because, um, my voice is very soft. I, ... I always tell people I'm not a yeller, and I'm

not going to yell. So even if I raise my voice one octave, all of a sudden, I'm mad. I'm angry, but I'm not. I might be a little bit. I will say I'm passionate about whatever the situation is, so I always have to be mindful of that.

Pam is a secondary principal with an all-White teaching staff. She discussed that she felt the need to carefully select what she says and how she says it. She characterized herself as being very passionate about her work while needing to be careful that her staff does not misinterpret her passion.

Mary is also a principal of a primarily Black student body and primarily White teaching staff. When discussing how her staff and students perceive her, Mary offered,

So, I have very high expectations for them, for myself and for the staff. I want them to see excellence and I want them to understand that that is what is expected of them. Even down to something is just as simple as you know, my attire when I come to work, I'm going to look like the principal of the building.

This emphasizes the way in which Mary is intentional about the perceptions of others. She wants her staff and students to perceive excellence, she expressed that the professional way she dresses conveys a certain level of expectation.

In all cases, the trope of “angry Black female” and “angry Black male” were raised as concerns for how White teachers may perceive their Black leaders. In discussing how his primarily Black students and families perceive his leadership, Anthony explained,

Because I see what they are capable of, and I'm happy to be a part of that journey and building a foundation of it. So, seeing a black male who is not always angry, you know, and not always, you know, it's fulfilling, like I say, these stereotypes that, you know, may come across as negative in the eyes of many.

Tina discussed some advice that Black central office members shared with her to help her navigate as a leader of color. Tina shared,

Here's some information...make sure you ask these questions...make sure that when we are in this hearing that you're dressed in this demeanor...this person is going to try to push your buttons because they want you to act like the angry black woman, the stereotype of how an aggressive, dark skinned school leader would be according to them. And when that happens, and if you feel that's coming for whatever, this is what you should do. And so, you know, along the way, if I have like a teacher, I may need to correct about something, I go back and I call it I go back to my principal's toolkit. And okay, I say I remember once I told you this, this is what you should do, instead of going there with that teacher, you already know what it is.

What is interesting about this quote is that it portrays how other leaders in the district gave Tina advice on how to carry herself, to ensure that stereotypes are not reinforced. This same sentiment of other Black leaders sharing wisdom with each other came up under other topics and with other leaders as well. The experiences these leaders share is very much aligned to the presence of systemic racism and what critical race theory defines as asymmetrical power dynamics and the belief of White superiority (Liu, 2023). The fact that these leaders shared that they must be mindful of how they speak, what they wear, and how they are perceived are all challenges of working within systems where racism persists.

The second sub-theme that emerged from theme one is the identity of the leader and how they see themselves as a leader. All the participants discussed, in different forms, being proud of who they are, needing to work hard, and their strong faith as being integral to their leadership. When discussing how she sees herself as a leader, Angela explained,

And I think that's something that I really try to show them, like show your authenticity, because I was one of those people like you pick up the phone and you have to change your voice. And in the last few years, I've changed that because that's not me. Like, I'm gonna give you the real me. And I think that's the part that I hope resonates most with every stakeholder group that I have had an opportunity to encounter.

Additionally, Mary said,

But you know, also, I am just personally a firm believer of, you know, where God has placed you is where you are for that time. And until he says, to move on to something else, or somewhere else. This is where you are, but then also even though it's challenging, I believe it is growing me and preparing me for whatever is next.

The reflections of these participants show that they have an awareness of themselves as leaders and that they take intentional steps to reflect on their leadership. Participants' responses also indicate that being intentional about their identities is an important part of their success and longevity as school leaders of color.

R2: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color

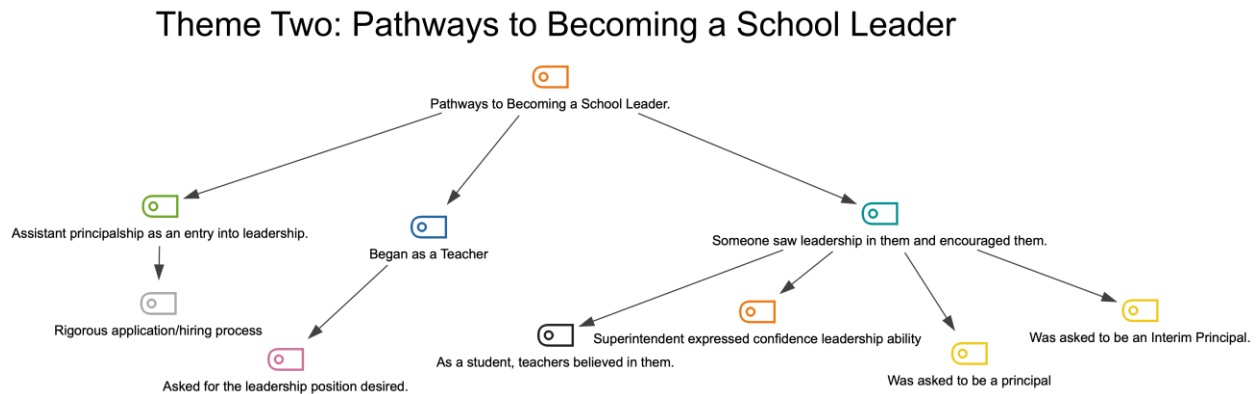
Three overarching themes emerged, and eight sub-themes emerged from the participants responses. Research question two has the most themes aligned to it. Theme two is pathways to becoming a school leader, theme three is keys to longevity, and theme four is persistence in the face of obstacles.

Theme Two: Pathways to Becoming a School Leader

The theme pathways to becoming a school leader emerged from three sub-themes and 21 coded segments. Figure 6 summarizes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes upon which this theme emerged.

Figure 6

Theme Two: Pathways to Becoming a School Leader



In the semi-structured interview, there were questions about recruitment and how the participants became a school leader. There were also questions about previous roles that they might have held and mentors along their journey. Participants shared some common experiences along their pathways towards becoming school leaders.

The first sub-theme that emerged was that all the school leaders began the leadership journey as a teacher and had positive experiences in that role, which helped shape them as leaders. Research indicates that an effective internal lever for filling school leadership roles is through a strong network of teacher leaders (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). Several of the participants shared how they started as a teacher, and then took on teacher leader roles, before moving into a building leader role. In reflecting on her pathway towards becoming a school leader, Tina clarified,

I also was a special education teacher for 11 years prior to going into becoming a school leader. And I did that in another district. And let's see, I've been a coach, I think a lot of that has a lot of influence with my coaching and working with a variety of staff members as a special education teacher, and the capacity to work with students as well as parents and people from different backgrounds.

The prerequisite of being a teacher first was the pathway into school leadership for all these principals. Several of them discussed the importance of learning as a teacher and subsequently a teacher leader before taking on leadership roles and this perhaps strengthened their school leadership skills, which is aligned to the research.

The second sub-theme that emerged was the idea that someone saw leadership in the participants and encouraged them to pursue school leadership. Gilbert et al. (2022) referred to this as the shoulder tap and described it as a moment when someone sees the leadership potential in another individual and encourages that individual to pursue a leadership role. The researchers describe it as an important strategy to increasing school leader diversity. All the participants shared experiences of shoulder tapping. In one form or another, someone saw that they had leadership capacity. For some of the participants it was a direct supervisor, for other participants it was a colleague that held a leadership role. It was evident from all the participants that they would not have pursued school leadership if it was not for someone else encouraging them. In reflecting on her pathway into leadership, Pam offered,

All right, I was an elementary teacher for seven years and under my principal at the time, she knew I had no interest really, I had no interest in going back to school to get a master's or anything like that. But she saw leadership in me and encouraged me to, you know, start to pursue the principal's license. So that was back in probably about 99. And so, I did. I went on to a local College and earned my principal certification and also my master's in administration. And then I was offered a position.

In reflecting on his path into administration Anthony shared,

So, I'll take you to my first years of teaching. The principal, my principal at that time, Italian dude, he comes to school with all this bravado, you see, the chest hair, and, and

necklaces and everything like that he's got a principal job, but you know, I had conversation with him. And he did kind of make it you know, how he engaged staff and how he interacted with the kids, he made it look easy. And you know, after having an observation, evaluation conversation or whatever, I asked him, I said, you know, how, how do you think I would fare as a principal? And he was like, you could do whatever you want to do, because I see what how you engage kids. And just like, all you have to do is just take it to the next level and engage adults, you know, in a similar manner. And, you know, you work wonders. And so, he kind of guided me, you know, to getting into the principalship.

This concept that someone else saw leadership potential in the participants and helped support their journey towards leadership is twofold. First the participants reported that having someone see potential in them as inspiring, but also, when asked about the race of the people that supported them along their journey towards leadership, several participants mentioned that it was someone of the same race that supported them. Gilbert et al. (2022) points to mentors of the same race being particularly effective in supporting school leaders of color.

An additional theme that emerged from the participants is that all but one of them started their leadership journey as assistant principals, which is sub-theme three. Across the research there are many benefits seen when utilizing an internal school leader succession process (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Buckman & Sloan, 2022). The promotion of assistant principals is a natural path for school districts to use as lever for preparing building principals for their role.

Unfortunately, the research also points to discrimination in this process. Bailes and Guthery (2020) used statistical procedures to assess promotions for 4,689 assistant principals in Texas from 2001 to 2017. While accounting for education, experience, school level and settings, they

found that Black principals are 18% less likely to be promoted and wait longer for promotions compared to White assistant principals. Of the four participants who had served as assistant principals, they all shared how the assistant principal role prepared them for the challenges of serving as a building principal. In reflecting on her time as an assistant principal, Angela shared,

And so, I didn't know what the AP journey would be like. But it was one of the best experiences. I worked under two principals, one for a year, the other one for four years. And it just taught me how to lead from behind how to work alongside somebody to help their vision come to life, but not have all of the responsibility of the job.

The one participant, Mary, who did not start out as an assistant principal, reflected on how hard it was to have a principalship as her first school leadership role, she explained,

Coming in, in the role, like, from the classroom, was a lot, it was very overwhelming. And I really do not recommend that to anyone. Because having the ability to watch and grow, learning strategies from someone is invaluable, I will fail, because it's a huge responsibility to run an entire building. And you don't think about that, at least I didn't initially, I'm thinking about the classroom and the teaching aspects. And there's so much more involved, you know, when you're working with parents, and how to communicate effectively to the parents versus the staff than the community. And yes, it was quite a bit, I had to learn a lot very fast. Had a lot of bumps along the way.

Comparing the experiences of Angela and Mary is interesting because in Angela's case, her leadership capacity was strengthened by time spent as an assistant principal, learning from veteran principal. While Mary reflected on the challenges that she had jumping straight from the classroom into a school leader role. Pam, Tina, and Anthony also all shared how their time as an assistant principal was a pathway towards becoming a school principal. The research, paired with

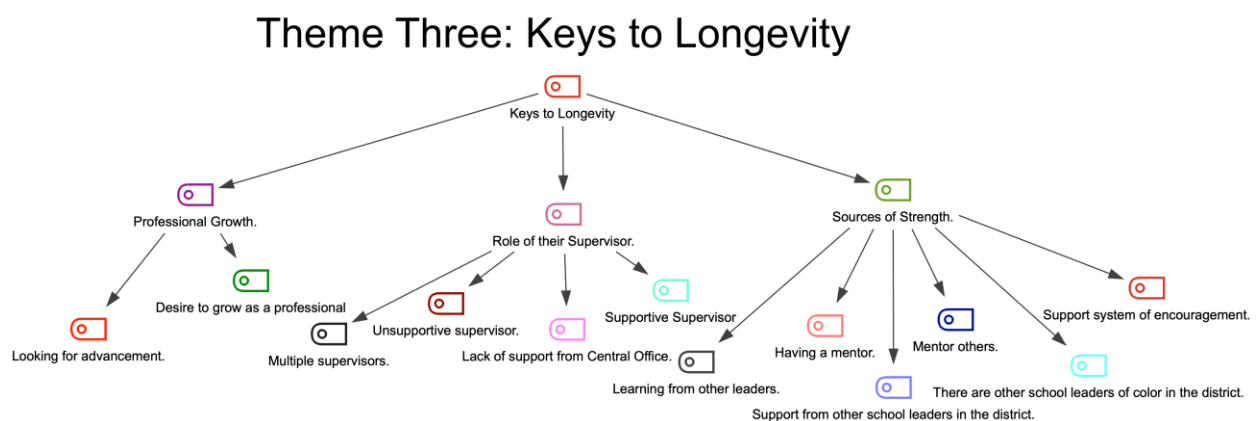
the experiences of these participants points to the assistant principalship as an important role both diversifying the school leader role and preparing leaders for success and longevity in their roles.

Theme Three: Keys to Longevity

Theme three is keys to longevity. This theme emerged from three sub-themes and 40 coded segments. With 40 coded segments, this theme is the most comprehensive of all the five themes. Figure 7 summarizes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes upon which this theme emerged.

Figure 7

Theme Three: Keys to Longevity



In the interview the participants were asked about how many years that they have served as a school leader, the supports that they have in place, and what role their supervisor plays in supporting them. I was fortunate to be able to include participants that had significant years of experience as school leaders. The years of experience as a school leader ranged from nine to 24 years, with the total number of years for all participants adding up to 80. With this type of extensive experience, the school leaders were able to reflect a great deal on the different things that have led to their longevity in the role. The first sub-theme is professional growth. In their

research Levin and Bradley (2019) found that providing principals with meaningful and high-quality professional learning is a key to improving principal retention. High quality professional learning and creating networks of professional learning communities with other colleagues are factors that Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) asserted supports the retention of school leaders.

Many of the participants declared that they had participated in professional growth opportunities, and desired to continue to grow as leaders. Mary reflected on her time spent in a small suburban district and how the support that she has gotten has been helpful, claiming,

One of the great rewards is the support that I have been able to have. And with that, you know, I've had opportunities to have training and go out and learn a lot. I've been in the leadership academies through the ESC and the first ring. I've had opportunities to do things that may not have been as readily available for principals in a larger district. So, I learned a lot, you know, in that that was one of the things as well, I've been able to learn about a lot of different areas of leadership because of it.

Tina expressed that she did not feel like her larger district was doing enough to support her growth, so she has pursued professional development opportunities on her own. She clarified,

And so that's also part of the reason why I have applied and now I'm actively in the NAESP principal mentoring program. So that, one, I can refine some of my skills that are current to make sure I stay current with what is going on and current research best practices for the principalship, as well as so I can impact other principals to be able to help not just African American students, but all students. So that is something that I did for myself.

This strand of continuous learning can be seen through the other participants as well. Some participants discussed being frustrated and wanting more support for current challenges,

while others expressed how they seek out their own professional learning to strengthen their leadership. Both the experiences of the participants and the body of research on principal retention underscore the importance of professional learning.

The second sub-theme aligned to theme three is the role of the supervisor. The principal supervisor also plays an important role in supporting principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). The research indicates that principal supervisors should serve as coaches, supporting the development of skills and helping with challenges (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Goldring et al., 2018). In their research into school districts with high principal retention rates, Cieminski (2018) found that differentiated and individualized support was a key strategy to increase retention.

All participants reflected on the role that their supervisor plays in either supporting or not supporting them as school leaders. Several of the participants discussed having multiple supervisors over the span of their career. Some of these supervisory experiences were positive and some were negative. In reflecting on the supervision provided by her superintendent, Pam shared,

I have to say he just loves our district. He loves our kids and our district, and he will not let anyone talk negative about our kids, nor our parents. Let me tell you that and he goes out of his way to help me, he goes out of his way to help our parents to help our staff. And he has set that example of being a leader that does collaboration, that will collaborate with you, and not always tell you what to do. He will, you know, set the stage to say this is what has to be done. However, you know, and you do it the way you need to get it done. But never I will say I'm a micromanager. Now, maybe some other folks in central office, but not him.

Angela expressed frustration with the experience of having multiple supervisors,

I've been in the district nine years, like, calendar years, I have had nine supervisors. And of those nine, sometimes that's because somebody has got a promotion that kind of simple, like, this supervisor I currently have, this is her third year being my supervisor. She was a principal with us here in the district. And I'm gonna say overall, like, I don't feel supported. As far as growing as a professional.

Of the participants, two of them had the superintendent as their direct supervisor, while three had some form of regional or assistant superintendent serving as their supervisor. With the participants, the supervisor came up as a topic both as a source of challenge in some cases, and source of support in others. With the research indicating that the principal supervisor plays an important role in supporting school leaders, this area is further explored in chapter five.

The third sub-theme aligned to theme three is sources of strength. Aligned to this sub-theme are things that participants expressed are either people or experiences on which they draw their strength to continue in their roles. Mentoring and supportive networks are strategies that the research point to as being effective for retaining school leaders of color (Gilbert et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013; Neely, 2018). All participants declared having a mentor and learning from others as support for them in their roles. Additionally, some participants suggested that having a strong support system outside of the school was important. Lastly, several participants claimed that having other leaders of color in the district is also a source of strength. In discussing some of his mentors, Anthony explained,

She was my executive director, but she also, you know, kind of took me under her wing, you know, she was the one that encouraged me to go into elementary, and being young and kind of, you know, naive and things, I would always kind of ask her what her thoughts were on things and how to proceed in, you know what I should do. And during

the course of one conversation, trying to pick her brain on things, she stopped me, and she said, Anthony, don't ever ask anyone for permission to run your school, you run it the way you see fit, you're the principal, you're the leader, I asked you to get into this role for a reason, and I believe that you can do it. And I was like, oh, that's all I need to know.

In reflecting on the other principals in the district, Angela shared,

I think the benefit is that the principal's in my district, you can go to them and ask them, like, if you have a question, if your person that you normally talk to doesn't know, they might know someone else that knows, and we will connect with each other. I feel like when it's things like hey, I don't understand this, or I don't know, or did you get that or what are you using? Can I have that resource? Like people will share. That I value very much. I would say that's the biggest thing sometimes, even just great. Just to know you're not the only one. Like I'm not the only one experiencing this feels like you're not on an island and I think that is very important because you only get a chance to see each other a couple of times a month.

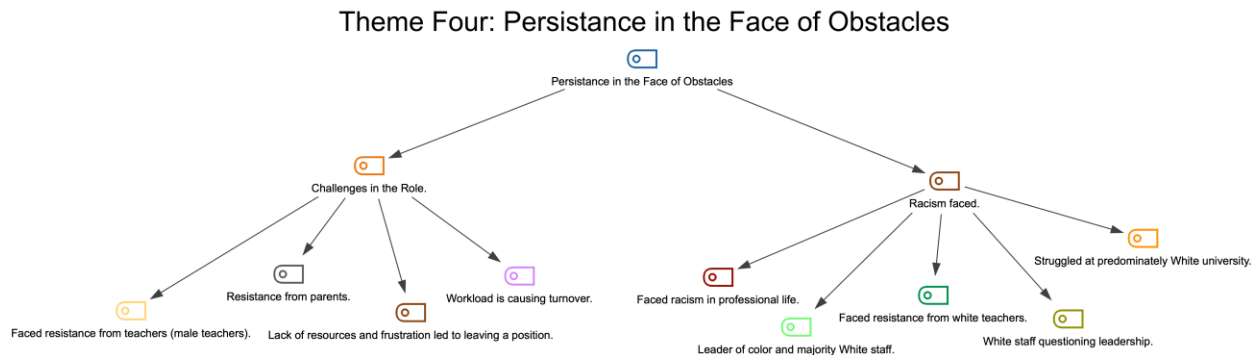
Whether it be other principals in the district, a mentor who the principal has developed a relationship with, or even the support systems that the principal has created outside of the school; it is evident that a strong support system is important to these school leaders. This is aligned to the research as a best practice strategy for retaining school leaders of color.

Theme Four: Persistence in the Face of Obstacles

Theme four is persistence in the face of obstacles. This theme emerged from two sub-themes and 15 coded segments. Figure 8 summarizes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes upon which this theme emerged.

Figure 8

Theme Four: Persistence in the Face of Obstacles



The participants were asked about the challenges that they face in the role. They were also asked if they were met with any resistance from anyone or anything. These questions generated much of the data aligned to the theme. Theme four was based on two sub-themes, which are challenges faced in the role and in facing racism. The first sub-theme of theme four is challenges faced in the role. In responses, the participants named a variety of challenges in the role. Some participants face resistance from teachers, some from parents, and others from the workload and lack of resources. In reflecting on the year before she changed schools, Pam shared,

...and I can tell you, it was the worst school year in my life, of my career, it was the worst. There was so much, um, I just started to feel like I wasn't helping anymore, that I wasn't, I knew that I had basically taken my staff to where it could go with me, and that they needed someone new to come in. The students that I had back then, they had some very severe behavior. And I always say, I fall in love with my job with my kids. And then I just want to help them all the time. And I felt like I couldn't help them. Like I didn't have the resources to help them and that became very frustrating for me.

Anthony reflected on a school where he spent four years as the principal. He shared that this was early in his career and that he faced quite a bit of resistance from teachers.

I was there for four years. And in those four years, I went through a lot. It was grieved a couple times. And I had teachers telling me that I've been teaching longer than you've been alive. That was interesting in that I was my retort to that was, you know, good teaching is good teaching. And the data will always show whether or not you're meeting the needs of children.

All the participants were able to reflect on resistance that they face in their roles. Some of the participants discussed how they continued to push through, while other participants ended up leaving roles and transitioning to new schools.

The second sub-theme of theme four is racism faced. The belief that racism is omnipresent: that there exists a racial hierarchy and that it is embedded within our systems and structures, is a tenet of critical race theory, and is often referred to as systemic racism (Hartlep, 2009). In studies of school leaders of color, issues of race and racism are commonly expressed as barriers that Black school leaders face (Jackson, 2013; Neely, 2018). All the participants in this study shared experiences of racism while serving in their roles as school leaders. Of the five principals, four expressed facing racism from White teachers as a source of challenge. One participant shared the struggles she had at a predominately White university in trying to complete her schooling. In reflecting on a school that she led; Tina shared some struggles that she had with teachers,

And so, I moved from a building that was like 230 students to a building that had almost 600 students. And that pretty much the teachers ran the building. And they were predominantly white, as well. And I used to have my afro, you know, my different attire.

And so, for a long time, I was the angry black woman, because I was not doing what they were accustomed to being allowed to do. And people were being held accountable. And to me, that was the issue for a long time that people were not held accountable at that building, they did what they wanted to do. And so that would be where I said that there was some different some growing pains for me, because I know, after doing those two years and my experience at the high school, and working with other people in various capacities, that it wasn't it wasn't me, it was them.

Anthony conveyed an experience from early on in his leadership journey. He was completing an administrative intern program at a middle school,

I had a racist principal facilitator. And you know, she told me that I would never be a good administrator, or a good principal, that I was a failure, and I wouldn't amount to much. And me being the stubborn person that I am, like I'm gonna show you. And, and so that has kind of always been my internal fire to be committed to being a leader and administrator in school. And, you know, I have this conversation with, you know, my own kids and kids in my school, about commitment and motivation. And I've shared this with my teachers as well, you know, motivation can sometimes wane. And you know, you have to find things to motivate yourself to do something, some of us may be motivated to go to the gym at the beginning of the of the year, with new year's resolution resolutions and everything, but that motivation sometimes falls, and you get tired of going to the gym. But when you're committed, you have that internal drive, nothing will stop you.

Communicating instances of racism can be intimate and emotional. Creating space for these leaders to share their stories can be looked at as a way to counteract the impact of racism on these school leaders. Ladson-Billings (2021) asserted that “Historically, storytelling has been

a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (p. 27). I was fortunate to have built rapport with the participants to allow these stories to be told. While the participants shared these stories of racism as challenges, they also, in many cases shared them as sources of inspiration and purpose.

R3: Influence of Leadership on Students of Color

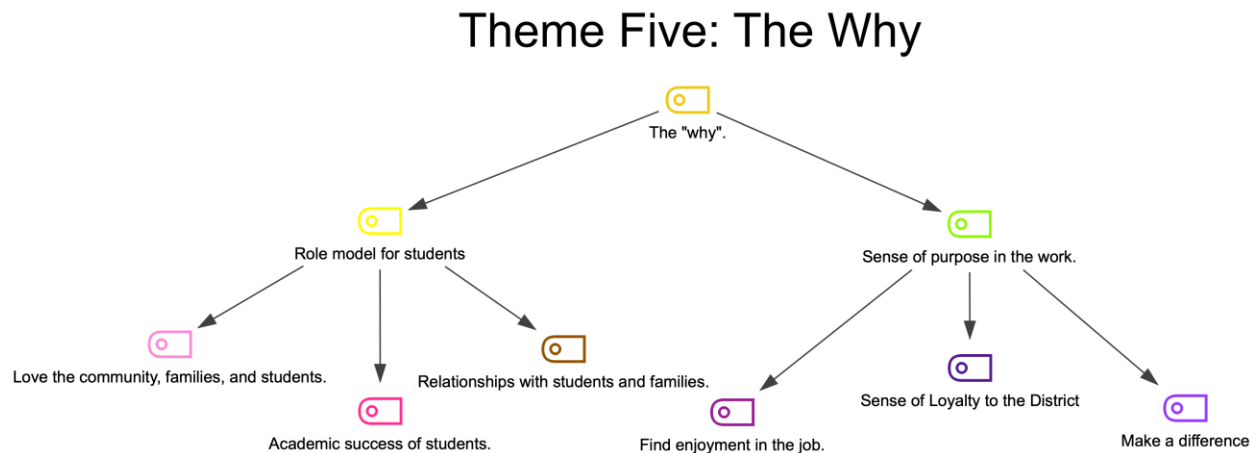
One overarching theme emerged, and two sub-themes emerged from the participant responses aligned to research question three. Overall, there were 28 coded segments aligned to this theme, making it the theme with the second largest number of coded segments.

Theme Five: The Why

Theme five is the why; and the two sub-themes are role model for students and sense of purpose in the work. Figure 9 summarizes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes upon which this theme emerged.

Figure 9

Theme Five: The Why



The theory of representative bureaucracy applied to the school leader representation gap helps to frame the need to increase representation of people of color in the U.S.'s increasingly diverse school systems. Through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, school leaders whose social identity more closely represents the demographics of the school, also have values and beliefs that align to the majority of the students and families in the school (Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Furthermore, the values and beliefs of the leader can lead to them taking actions that result in positive outcomes for those students (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2015, 2021; Meier, 2023). It is important to note that all the participants in this study were African American, and they all had school populations that were primarily African American. Every participant in the study expressed being deeply committed to their work. One question asked what participants felt were some of the most rewarding aspects of the job. They were also asked to reflect on how their leadership guides their students of color, and what they perceive to be their impact on those students. The first sub-theme that emerged was role model for students. The participants clearly see themselves as role models for not only African American students, in their schools but all students. The participants shared how they build relationships with students

and families, how they love the community in which they work, and how important the academic success of their students is to them. In reflecting on how her leadership guides her students of Color, Pam declared,

And you know, you're growing up here in this community that was totally, is totally different than, you know, what I grew up in, and you can have goals, you can, if you want to go to college, we can help you do that. If you want a career, we can help you do that. Um, so I think I am a role model for them. Also, they know the principal is the person in charge, all their teachers are White, but I'm the one in charge. And it's been like that, you know, to see me in that leadership role. And I think that's important too. That, you know, you can lead, you can make your dreams come true with hard work and determination.

In reflecting on the success that he has had a school leader, Anthony shared,

And within three years, we will we transitioned from proficiency to a different state test. We made gains, we made double digit gains within three years, I had 50% of my students, we went from, like 23% to 25% of our students passing to almost 60% of our students within three years. It was a challenging group of teachers and students, very volatile environment sometimes. But I've learned that I'm committed to the kids.

Mary, an elementary principal who works in a district where the middle school is next door, discussed some of the most rewarding aspects of the job. Mary explained,

It's the kids, it's very rewarding, to go to the other building, which is right across the parking lot. And see the students who, you know, when I, when they see me, they're excited to see me, but they weren't that excited when I was there, when they were in my building. But you know, to see the seventh and eighth graders, and at this point, now, there are students at every grade level at the upper school that have, you know, gone

through my building that I know and have relationships with, it's rewarding, just seeing the kids and seeing how much they've grown. And, you know, I check in on them, and they're doing well, and I'm very proud, you know, of course, I love that.

The reflections on how their leadership impacts students of color and the most rewarding parts of the job were very much similar answers. All the participants shared how they saw themselves as role models for students, and how they find job satisfaction in seeing their students grow. In reflecting on this through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, we can see how the social identity of these school leaders represents the students that they serve. These leaders have values and beliefs that are aligned to the students and families of the school, therefore their actions drive positive outcomes for their students (Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

The second sub-theme under theme five is sense of purpose in the work. The research points to the desire to make an impact on students as a common theme for school leaders of Color (Moultry, 2014). Within this sub-theme, participants expressed finding purpose in their work, the desire to make a difference, the sense of loyalty to the districts that they work for, and the fact that they find enjoyment in the job. In reflecting on her purpose, Tina shared,

...and to me, it's about the passion and drive that the person has to make sure that an individual person succeeds in their growth in capacity for them. And that's the same thing for us as adults, because we don't have to get out to bed every day. That's our choice to, we don't have to go to these jobs. But we choose to...So the same thing with leading a school and staying within that same district. You don't have to, but you choose to. There's something internally within, inside of you that you said that you aspire to be. And you happen to be here at this location at this time in your life because you didn't have to. And so that's why I think it's so important to build our culture, our race, because down the

road, we're going to need more people that are willing to make those sacrifices because this is a sacrifice. This is a time commitment. This is the smiles and the struggles, you know, that comes with it.

Pam, who is a high school principal shared that she has found her purpose,

And I can tell you, this position has been the most rewarding, because my students, once they get back on track, they have been given permission to stay. So, they have challenged me to find other instructional strategies that my staff can use to keep them engaged. And learning. So, they have, but also watching them, recover their credits, take their senior pictures, walk across the stage, that right there is the most rewarding experience. I mean, just the last few years, it's like, wow, this is what I've been, you know, I like now I feel like I found, you know, my purpose is to help my students get back on track, develop the belief in themselves, that they can do whatever they put their minds to. It has just been very rewarding.

The *why* for the participants is deeply rooted in their belief that they are making a difference for students, and that this is what fuels them. This is also aligned to the research (Jackson, 2013; Moultry, 2014). The participants reflected on how they serve as a role model for students, especially students of color, and how the relationships that they have built with them, and their families yields a sense of satisfaction.

Summary

The data analysis for this study was conducted by utilizing the transcripts from the interviews of five principals of color, who are currently leading in schools in the midwestern United States. An emergent open coding process was conducted and because of this data analysis, 121 code segments were identified. Axial coding was then conducted on these 121

codes, and 12 sub-themes emerged. Selective coding was conducted, and five overarching themes emerged as a result. The integration of the research with the theoretical frameworks and literature review were also integrated into the findings. The five themes that emerged are sense of identity, pathways to becoming a school leader, keys to longevity, persistence in the face of obstacles, and the why.

Research question one asked how public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools. This research question was connected to theme one (sense of identity) and had two aligned sub-themes. The participants reflected on both how they are perceived as a leader and their own sense of identity as a leader. They were cognizant of the stereotypes around being perceived as an angry Black male or female. The participants expressed being intentional about how they dressed and speak, and how this impacts the perceptions of others. Through the lens of critical race theory, the experiences that these leaders shared aligned to the concepts of systemic racism, intersectional identities, and the realities of being Black leaders of primarily White staff.

Research question two asked how school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders? This research question had three aligned themes and eight aligned sub-themes, which was the most for any of the research questions. Theme two, pathways to becoming a school leader, centered on the ways in which the participants entered school leadership. All participants started as teachers and had experience as teacher leaders. Four of the five participants were assistant principals prior to becoming principals. All the participants benefited from either a supervisor or colleague who saw leadership potential in them. These acquaintances helped support the participants through encouragement, mentorship, and identifying roles that might be a good fit for them. The findings

aligned to the research from the literature review, which supports that the pathways of teacher leadership and assistant principalship are viable ways to recruit school leaders of color. Additionally, the findings around others having seen leadership potential in the participants, called the “shoulder tap” to recruit Black school leaders, is also indicated in the research.

Theme three is keys to longevity and has three sub-themes. With a total of 80 years of school leader experience among the participants, this theme centered on ways in which school principals remain in their roles. Participants shared the importance of professional growth to their longevity, as well as the role that their supervisor plays in supporting or not supporting them. Both the importance of professional growth and the critical role of the principal supervisor are suggested in the research as ways to retain school leaders. Finally, additional ways to support the longevity of school leaders, which also is aligned to the research were shared. The participants reported different sources of strength which include having a mentor, connecting with a network of other principals, and having a strong support system in their personal lives.

Theme four is also aligned to the second research question. Theme four is persistence in the face of obstacles. This theme had two sub-themes which are challenges in the role and racism faced. The participants discussed the resistance that they face from teachers and parents, lack of resources, and a heavy workload as challenges in the role. The participants also shared some common experiences around racism. This came in the form of resistance from White staff, discrimination from a supervisor, and not feeling a sense of belonging at a primarily White institution of higher learning. The racism that participants experienced is both aligned to critical race theory and the research on school leaders of color.

The third research question asked how school leaders of color described how their leadership influences Black students in their schools. This question produced theme five: the

why. There were two sub-themes associated with this, role model for students, and sense of purpose. The participants shared how they see themselves as role models for Black students in their schools, and that they have built strong relationships with students and families. The participants also discussed the importance of the academic gains they have seen their students make because of their leadership. These findings, when looked at through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, demonstrate the importance that representative leadership can have on students of color. All the participants expressed finding the purpose in the work in different ways. Some participants expressed finding enjoyment in the job. Some feel a sense of loyalty to their district, and some discussed the importance of making a difference.

Chapter five includes the integration of the findings and a discussion of the importance of this research. Strengths and limitations of the study and the credibility given the methodology are also explored. Chapter five includes recommendations for practice as well as implications for next steps and further research.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

A school leader representation gap exists in the nation's public schools. There is an underrepresentation of public-school leaders of color in U.S. public-school systems, which results in inequity of cultural values and diverse leadership perspectives that impact recruitment, retention, and student success (Chin, 2013; Green & Finney, 2018; Grissom & Keiser, 2011). Only 22% of school leaders identify as people of color (NCES, 2019), while 53% of students are non-White (NCES, 2020). The students in U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse with more students of color being educated in public schools (NCES, 2020b). There are also long-standing outcome gaps in both academics and discipline between White and non-White students that persist in schools (Darling-Hammond, 2018).

The school leader representation gap and the disproportionate outcomes for Black students are intertwined. Research has demonstrated that school leaders of color can have positive impacts in multiple ways on Black students (Grissom et al., 2017). Moreover, students of color will have difficulty ascending to the principal's role if they are not successful in school. Additional research around ways in which the school leader representation gap can be disrupted is necessary. Critical race theory and representative bureaucracy theory were used as theoretical frameworks for this study.

This basic qualitative study yielded important information about ways to recruit more diverse leaders and ways to support current school leaders of color. Additionally, this research yielded important information about how Black school leaders perceive their impact on students of color. This study is significant, as it can help close gaps in the research around school leaders of color. Ultimately, the results of this study can be used to provide recommendations to inform

policy and practice around closing the school leader representation gap. School districts with interests in equity, anti-racism and diversifying their school leadership are a target audience for this research.

This chapter represents a discussion and interpretation of the findings of this research as they relate to the research questions. I examine the connections between the theoretical frameworks, other research that has been done in this field, and the findings. Implications for practice are aligned to the findings, the theoretical frameworks, and the literature review. An analysis of the strengths and limitations of the study is presented, which included a discussion of the credibility of the study. Recommendations and implications for further research are also shared.

Discussion and Interpretation

This research was conducted using a basic qualitative study design. A basic qualitative study design was selected due to the phenomenon being studied, the alignment to the theoretical framework and the researcher's positionality. This design allowed me to explore the beliefs and experiences of study participants and for a wealth of data to be obtained from a smaller sample size (Labuschagne, 2003). The emphasis of storytelling as a tenet of critical race theory: one of two theoretical frameworks for this study, which was another reason why a basic qualitative study was a good choice for this research design.

Interviews were conducted with five elementary school principals. Four of the five participants identified as female, and one as male. All the participants identified as African American and were located in both urban and suburban public schools, in the Midwestern region of the United States. All the participants were veteran principals with the most veteran having served 24 years as a principal.

Purposeful and snowball sampling were utilized to secure participants for the study. The data were collected through one-on-one interviews which were conducted in the fall of 2023. These interviews were conducted virtually, over Zoom, and lasted between 45-60 minutes. I used a semi-structured interview script, consisting of 17 questions. This ensured that interview questions were delivered with consistency, but also allowed me to probe deeper with participants as needed.

Issues of validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the data were considered when conducting this qualitative research (Bailey, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Member checking, memos, and reflexivity were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Bailey, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data analysis began during the data collection phase. Open coding, axial coding and selective coding was conducted on the data. I utilized grounded codes, which are codes that emerged from the data (Elliott, 2018). The open coding was analyzed for connections and organized into categories which produced 12 sub-themes. Finally, selective coding was completed, this analysis produced five broader themes. These sub-themes and themes were then compared back to the research questions and the literature review, to analyze the extent to which the research questions were fully explored.

Discussion of the Findings

The research questions and the themes that emerged from the study were guided by the central research question: What are the professional experiences of school leaders of color in Midwest public schools? The research questions and their corresponding themes were:

R1: How do public school leaders of color describe their professional experience as a school leader in Midwest public schools?

1. Theme One: Sense of Identity

R2: How do school leaders of color describe retention and recruitment factors that guide their ability to be effective school leaders?

2. Theme Two: Pathways to Becoming a School Leader
3. Theme Three: Keys to Longevity
4. Theme Four: Persistence in the Face of Obstacles

R3: How do school leaders of color describe how their leadership influences students of Color in their schools?

5. Theme Five: The Why

Sense of Identity

The first research question explored the professional experiences of school leaders of color. What emerged from the analysis was the sense of identity. As the participants discussed their different experiences as leaders, all had a keen sense of how others perceive them as a leader. Furthermore, all expressed an understanding of their social identity relative to their majority White staff and discussed the importance of the perception of their leadership. Pam shared that she will always have to watch the way she talks with her staff and feels the need to carefully select what she says. Mary is a principal of a primarily Black student body and primarily White teaching staff. She has very high expectations for her staff and students; even down to something as simple as her attire, which she chooses intentionally because of the need to be perceived as professional. In all cases, the trope of "angry Black female" and "angry Black male" was raised as concerns for how White teachers may perceive their Black leaders.

Tina discussed some advice that Black central office members shared with her to help her navigate as a leader of color. She shared that she goes back to this "principal's toolkit" when she needs to correct a teacher, particularly White teachers. The fact that race is socially constructed,

and the concept of intersectionality are core tenets of critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker et al., 2018). When viewed through a lens of critical race theory, these professional experiences can be interpreted as ways in which the leaders navigate systemic racism, alongside their identity to thrive as leaders. Tina's accounts show that these experiences are shared by other leaders in the system as well. Furthermore, it emphasizes that Blacks are reminded and taught that they must be mindful of how others perceive them as a Black, and in Tina's case, to somehow mitigate this against the discomfort of White teachers, so her leadership is better received.

Pathways to Becoming a Leader

The next three themes were aligned to the second research question. Theme two pathways to becoming a leader, explored the experiences that the school leaders had as they entered their leadership journeys. This showed successful ways to recruit school leaders of color into the role. All the participants began as teachers and had positive experiences in that role, which helped shape them as leaders. Several shared how they started as teachers, took on teacher leader roles, and then moved into building leader roles. Tina explained that she was a special education teacher coach before becoming a school leader. Research indicates that an effective internal lever for filling school leadership roles is through a strong network of teacher leaders (Buckman & Sloan, 2022).

All the participants described the shoulder tap, as a way in which they were recruited into the role. Recall, Gilbert et al. (2022) described the shoulder tap as a moment when someone sees the leadership potential in another individual and encourages that individual to pursue a leadership role. The researchers described it as an important strategy to increase school leader diversity. Pam explained that her principal saw leadership in her and encouraged her to pursue a

principal's license. She earned her certification and her master's in administration and was offered a position. Several of the participants mentioned that it was someone of the same race that saw leadership potential in them.

Another route towards the recruiting of school leaders that was indicated in the findings and across the research is through the assistant principal role. While accounting for education, experience, school level and settings, research has found that Black assistant principals are 18% less likely to be promoted, and in fact wait longer for promotions when compared to White assistant principals (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Four of the five participants were assistant principals prior to becoming principals. Angela's leadership capacity was strengthened by her time spent as an assistant principal; while Mary reflected on the challenges, she encountered going straight from the classroom into a school leader role. Across the research there are many benefits noted when utilizing an internal school leader succession process (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Buckman & Sloan, 2022). These examples highlight the importance of and need to look at assistant principals as ways to increase the diversity of the school leader role. Given that all the participants have served as school leaders for many years, it also suggests that potentially serving as an assistant principal could provide experiences that increase the longevity of school leaders of color.

Keys to Longevity

Theme three was keys to longevity, which represented the retention of African American school leaders. Current research on the retention of school principals, while not necessarily specific to Black school leaders, points to ongoing professional learning; the importance of school principal supervisor and mentoring as important strategies for retaining school principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Gilbert et al., 2022; Goldring et al.,

2018; Levin & Bradley, 2019). The findings from the participants also support this research. Tina expressed that she did not feel like her larger district was doing enough to support her growth, so she has pursued professional development opportunities on her own. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) found that high quality professional learning and creating networks of professional learning communities with other colleagues are important factors in the retention of school leaders.

All participants reflected on the role that their supervisor plays in either supporting or not supporting them as school leaders. Angela expressed frustration with the experience of having multiple supervisors and shared that she did not feel supported as a professional. This finding is aligned with the research on principal supervisors. Cieminski and Asmus (2023) found that principal supervisors are important in whether principals remain in their district. The researchers contended that the principal supervisor's ability to support the development and skills of the principal is a key factor in retention given the complex nature of school leadership.

Each of the participants also named having a mentor, and learning from others as supports for them in their roles, which is also supported by the literature. Angela shared that she values the other principals in her district because it helps her to feel like she is not on an island. She also values the mentors she has developed a relationship with, and the support systems she has created outside of work. Gilbert et al. (2022) asserted that a network of support, including mentoring, is a crucial strategy for supporting school leaders of color. The researchers suggested that mentors, as well as affinity groups help Black leaders solve problems, share stories, fears, and resources in a safe space.

Persistence in the Face of Obstacles

Theme four, persistence in the face of obstacles, explored the concept of retention of school leaders of color. The belief that racism is omnipresent, that there exists a racial hierarchy and that it is embedded within our systems and structures, is a tenet of critical race theory and is often referred to as systemic racism (Hartlep, 2009). In studies of Black school leaders, issues of race and racism are commonly expressed as barriers they face (Jackson, 2013; Neely, 2018). All the participants in this study shared experiences of racism they encountered while serving in their roles as school leaders. Of the five principals, four conveyed facing racism from White teachers as a source of challenge. Anthony shared an experience from early on in his leadership journey, when a racist principal facilitator told him he would never be a good principal. Anthony's internal fire motivated him to be committed to being a school leader, He is now in year 24 as a successful school principal.

The Why

The final theme that emerged from this research was “the why” for these school leaders of Color. This theme concerned the perceptions of how participants described ways in which their leadership influenced students of color in their schools. Through a lens of representative bureaucracy theory, we can see how the leadership of these principals impact their students (Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Participants revealed how they see themselves as role models for Black students in their schools and that they have built strong relationships with students and families. The participants also discussed the importance of the academic gains they have seen their students make because of their leadership. Pam conveyed that her leadership guides her students of color because she sees herself as a role model for them. She tells them they can have goals, and that they can make their dreams come true with hard work and determination. Anthony,

whose students are majority African American, also sees himself as a role model for his students of color. He shared that his school made double digit gains in three years and went from 23% of students passing to almost 60% of students passing state tests. These declarations by the participants connect back to both the theoretical framework and the literature and demonstrate the perceived impact that these leaders have on their students of color. In this research, all the school leaders identified as African American and had student populations that were majority African American. The theory of representative bureaucracy helps us understand that school leaders whose social identity more closely represent the demographics of the school, also have values and beliefs that align to the majority of the students and families in the school (Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Moreover, these values and beliefs of the leader can lead to them taking actions that can lead to positive outcomes for those students (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Grissom et al., 2021; Grissom et al., 2015). The literature also indicates that principals of color can impact the diversity of the teaching staff, the reduction of discrimination in disciplinary action for Black students and increased academic outcomes (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Grissom et al., 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Meier et al., 2004; Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer several implications for practice that should be considered for implementation within the education leadership field. These implications are primarily directed at a few different groups, including principal preparation programs, school district leadership, and policy makers.

Principal Preparation Programs

School leader preparation programs are integral to increasing the pipeline of emerging school leaders (Benedetti, 2022; Yamashiro et al., 2022). Currently there are no statistics that

show the demographics of candidates in principal preparation programs. This is because the U.S. Department of Education does not require that this information be reported (Fuller & Young, 2022). So, while we can identify the representation gap in current practicing principals, it is difficult to identify if there is a pool of potential principals that could fill in the gap. The first recommendation for principal preparation programs is to collect and report this information, in order to help the programs set measurable goals for increasing participation of underrepresented groups. Yamashiro et al. (2022) found that improving data collection methods to analyze the demographics of the leadership preparation programs was an important first step to understanding the challenges faced.

Another important recommendation for principal preparation programs is to include work around diversity, equity, and inclusion in their preparation program. Not only did participants express that they faced racism in their roles, but they also expressed the need to have tools to combat that racism. Furthermore, the participants expressed the importance of their social identity to their leadership. Yamashiro et al. (2022) found that reflecting on current programs and refining these by offering more anti-racist, social justice and culturally responsive approaches was a critical component to supporting emerging leaders of color.

The research revealed that all the participants in this study had previously been successful in roles as teachers and teacher leaders. The research points to the idea that the teacher leaders often bring with them a wealth of experience that is often aligned to school district vision and goals (Buckman & Sloan, 2022). A recommendation for principal preparation programs would be to partner with state and national teacher organizations to create pathways for highly effective teachers and teacher leaders to step into school principal roles. This partnership could be especially beneficial if it provided targeted support for teachers of color who are interested in

pursuing school leader roles. Principal preparation programs working in partnership with teacher associations is not commonly found but could be a promising practice with mutual benefits.

Matching candidates of color in principal preparation programs with practicing principals of color is another strategy that principal preparation programs could employ to support more Black leaders entering the principal pipeline. Participants in this study mentioned having mentors that have helped them along the way as key to their longevity. Gilbert et al. (2022) also found that a network of support, including mentoring, is a crucial strategy for supporting school leaders of color. Taking the data from this study, alongside the research that supports mentoring for practicing school leaders, employing mentoring for emerging Black school leaders, is a strategy that principal preparation programs could utilize.

School District Leaders

School districts have a responsibility to hire school employees that mirror the demographics of their students and families. The theory of representative bureaucracy is applied to the school leader representation gap to help frame the need to increase representation of people of color in our increasingly diverse school system. When people of color are a part of the leadership in schools that represent a greater number of Black students, they better represent the needs and interests of those populations (Grissom & Keiser, 2011). Participants in this study shared how they believe that they are role models for the students of color that they serve. Therefore, school districts should invest in practices that ensure they are hiring diverse school leaders.

Participants in this study named racism, particularly from White teachers, as a major source of challenge in their roles. The belief that racism is omnipresent, that there exists a racial hierarchy and that it is embedded within our systems and structures, is a tenet of critical race

theory and is often referred to as systemic racism (Hartlep, 2009). School districts have a legal and moral responsibility to identify when instances of racism occur and to provide staff with training to ensure that their actions are not harming others. Implicit bias training, is one type of professional learning that school districts can employ to mitigate the impact of staff bias on outcomes for students and staff. Kim and Roberson (2022) defined implicit bias as “...the automatic, spontaneous associations, thoughts, and evaluations we make about members of a particular (here, racial) group” (p. 20). The researchers contended that the best implicit bias training not only helps all employees judge the presence of bias, but it also gives them the language and framework needed to confront instances of bias. School districts must focus on strategies that build inclusive workplaces that stress a sense of belonging for all employees.

School districts should work with a sense of urgency to close educational gaps to allow for more success for students of color. The school leader representation gap is a manifestation of systemic racism within our education system. The persistent achievement gap among students of color and their non-White peers, as well as the lack of diverse school leaders aligns to the racial hierarchy present in the U.S. (Capper, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2018; NCES, 2022). The persistence of these educational achievement gaps, also leads to the persistent school leader representation gap (Gilbert et al., 2022). If students experience success in K-12 education, they are more likely to enter college, more likely to become teachers, and more likely to then become school leaders (Capper, 2015).

School districts should employ storytelling to minimize the harm that employees from marginalized groups experience, and to gain valuable information about how to improve the working conditions of school leaders. Centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in educational research and practice, also called counter storytelling, is a tenet

critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Participants in this research expressed that they enjoyed sharing their stories. Listening to the stories of marginalized groups in their school districts could provide opportunities to build a sense of belonging and heal some of the pain caused by systemic racism (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Investing in professional learning and professional learning networks will increase the retention of school leaders of color. Levin and Bradley (2019) found that providing principals with meaningful and high-quality professional learning is a key to improving principal retention. High quality professional learning and creating networks of professional learning communities with other colleagues are factors that Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) asserted supports the retention of school leaders. In this study, many of the participants declared that they had a desire to continue to grow as professionals. Many of the participants expressed being frustrated that their school districts did not provide this for them, and they had to seek their own learning from different places. Many also conveyed that they rely on a network of other principals to help support them in their work. Providing this professional learning and access to professional networks are strategies that school districts must employ to retain school leaders of color.

The principal supervisor plays an important role in supporting principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors should serve as coaches supporting the development of skills and helping school leaders with challenges (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Goldring et al., 2018). In their research into school districts with high principal retention rates, Cieminski (2018) found that differentiated and individualized support was a key strategy to increase retention. School districts should invest in the training and implementation of a principal supervision program that fully supports the needs of school leaders of color. In this research, all participants reflected on the role that their supervisor plays in either supporting or not supporting them as

school leaders. Several of the participants expressed having multiple supervisors over the span of their career with both positive and negative experiences. It should be a priority for school districts to invest in the important role of the principal supervisor to support and retain school leaders of color.

Lastly, school districts should prioritize their leadership succession plan by identifying potential leaders, investing in teacher leaders, and including assistant principals in their hiring process. All participants in the study mentioned that someone saw leadership in them and pushed them to seek out leadership roles. Gilbert et al. (2022) referred to this as the shoulder tap and described it as an important strategy to increase school leader diversity. All the participants in the study began as teachers, and several held roles as teacher leaders prior to serving as principals. Additionally, four of the five participants held assistant principal roles prior to serving as a principal, and the one principal who did not, expressed how challenging it was to go straight from a teacher to principal. Buckman and Sloan (2022) contended that growing teacher leader expertise is a successful strategy because internal expertise is often aligned with school district goals. If a school district has equity goals aligned to hire a diverse talent pool, the use of grow your own programs could serve a district well towards increasing their recruitment of school leaders of color. Intentional actions by school districts to ensure that they are promoting assistant principals of color is also a necessary step to closing the school leader representation gap. Bailes and Guthery (2020) found that Black assistant principals are 18% less likely to be promoted and wait longer for promotions when compared to White assistant principals. School districts should be intentional about including assistant principals of color in their hiring process to fill vacant school leader roles.

Policy Makers

The third group with implications for practice are policy makers. Policy makers shape the rules and regulations that govern our public education system. The school leader representation gap should be a priority for policy makers. Several of the aforementioned recommendations should inform the rules and regulations that our policy makers create. A first step that policy makers could employ would be to make it mandatory for principal preparation programs to report the demographics of the participants in their principal preparation programs. Additionally, goals should be set, and incentives provided to encourage principal preparation programs to diversify their participants. Monitoring and increasing the number of principal candidates of color will help to ensure that there is a robust pipeline to serve the diverse students in the nation's public schools.

Policy makers should also invest in ensuring that both principal preparation programs and school districts employ practices that support implicit bias training. As previously stated, implicit bias training can both help identify sources of bias and support educators with the tools necessary to address instances of bias. Policy makers should identify best practices in the field around implicit bias training in education and scale those to support school districts with implementing this type of professional learning. Resources should be dedicated to supporting school districts with this implementation.

Lastly, policy makers should mandate that there are high quality principal supervisors in each school district that support the needs of school leaders. Investing in a nationwide model of best practices for principal supervision should be a priority, along with providing resources for school districts to bolster this role in their organizations. The duties of principal supervisors

should be focused to allow them to invest in the growth and development of the leaders of the school.

Strengths, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

Strengths and Limitations

In assessing the strengths of this research, several factors were considered including the body of knowledge, the methodology and the analysis of the data. This research has added to a limited knowledge base around African American school leaders. This body of knowledge is important due to the school leader representation gap that exists in U.S. schools. Additionally, this research elevated the voices of school leaders that tend to be marginalized and underrepresented in school districts, and allowed them to share stories of strength, resilience, persistence, and passion. The careful analysis that I conducted was evidenced in the amount of detail reported in the findings section. Themes were identified along with their corresponding sub-themes. These themes were aligned to the guiding research questions and the review of the literature. Figures were used to illustrate the three levels of coding that was completed, and an abundance of dialogue was presented to provide a thick description. These strategies further strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Careful consideration was given to my ethical responsibilities as the researcher, to ensure the protection and anonymity of research participants. The master code list connecting the identity of the participants to the data was kept in a separate locked cabinet in my home and destroyed after data analysis. Member checking was completed, which increased the internal validity and credibility of the data. I practiced reflexivity, which allowed me to think critically about my position in the research and helped to ensure that my own biases were reduced in the analysis and reporting of the findings. The last

strength of this research, as is practiced in the critical paradigm, was that it allowed me to reflect and grow through the process and learn from the participants.

In conducting this research there were limitations that should be considered as well. The limited sample size does not allow for generalizations to a larger population to be made. However, the small sample size did encourage a meaningful and thorough examination of participants experiences. The smaller sample size also minimized the burden on participants, who are busy school leaders. Another factor to consider is that the participants are from the Midwest. School leaders from other regions of the country may have different experiences based upon their geographic location or even individual communities. Another limitation is that interviews were conducted virtually. In-person interviews might create a different relationship between participants and a researcher. In these virtual interviews, I used a semi-structured interview guide. This tool allowed for prompts to be used, I had also previously tested it. This tool was not, however, a standard or research-based tool, which would have allowed for more transferability of results. The limitations could not be avoided and did not negatively affect the results of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research and Next Steps

In reviewing the research conducted alongside the research questions and the literature review, there are several recommendations for future research that can be made. The first research question focused on how school leaders of color described their professional experiences. The theme of sense of identity emerged from this research question. Additional research could be conducted around the identity of school leaders and how this identity guides their decision making. This could result in rich analysis around the impact that school leader's

identity has on their leadership practice, and if this varies between school leaders of differing social identities.

The second research question focused on the recruiting and retention of school leaders of color. Three themes emerged from the data: 1) pathways to becoming a school leader, 2) keys to longevity, and 3) persistence in the face of obstacles. Additional research could be conducted in all three themes. Regarding pathways, school leaders of color with non-traditional pathways, such as those that did not serve as teachers or assistant principals first, could be explored as another way to recruit Black school leaders into the field. Concerning the keys to longevity, the experiences of these veteran school leaders could be explored more deeply to determine how principal supervisors can better support school leaders of color, and the types of professional learning that they desire. Studies into African American principals and their supervisors were severely lacking and could add to the body of knowledge. Persistence in the face of obstacles raised the issue of racism that school leaders of color face in their roles. Further research to explore the impacts of systemic racism more deeply, including microaggressions, and implicit bias could add to the body of knowledge around the school leader representation gap.

The third research question focused on how the leadership of participants influenced students of color in their schools. There is a limited body of knowledge that utilizes quantitative data to look at the impact of Black school leaders on students of color. Quantitative research could strengthen the body of knowledge around school leaders of color and better quantify their impact.

Conclusion

There is a school leader representation gap in U.S. schools. While the number of students of color is increasing in public schools, the demographics of school leaders do not match this

same trend. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how school leaders of color in Midwestern public schools interpret their experiences as school leaders. The focus of the study was on the experiences that led them to their current positions (recruitment), the things that they need to support them in their roles (retainment), and how they describe the impact of their leadership on Black students.

It is important to note that this study provides significant research in an area of school leadership that is lacking. There is currently limited research around school leaders of color and how to best recruit and retain more diverse talent for this important role. This research could be used by principal preparation programs, school districts and policy makers that are looking for ways to develop more diversity in the school leader role. Additionally, this research has implications for school districts and human resource departments that are actively seeking to find school leaders who represent the demographics of their school communities. Lastly, this research has social justice implications, due to its emphasis on disrupting historical inequities for populations of color in the U.S. Ultimately the goal of this research was to provide findings and recommendations to help disrupt and dismantle the school leader representation gap. Reforming current policies and finding justice for communities of color is a core tenet of critical race theory (Hartlep, 2009). The result of this research was in and of itself an act of social justice. This research was an attempt to provide information that can impact the disproportionate outcomes that so many people of color face as U.S. citizens.

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Appendix A

Initial Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear Colleague,

My name is Felecia Evans, and I am currently engaged in a dissertation research project through the department of education at Concordia University Chicago. My study is titled, *The School Leader Representation Gap: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color*. The IRB study number is ____.

The goal of this study is to understand the professional experiences of school leaders of color in the Midwest. Knowledge gained from this work will contribute to our understanding of the ways that school leaders of color describe their professional experiences, explain retention and recruitment factors, and convey how their leadership impacts students of color in their schools. Results of this work will also be valuable for/to our public school systems that seek ways to recruit, retain, and support more diverse school leaders.

You are receiving this email because you potentially meet the criteria I have established for participation in this study:

- Currently serving as a school leader or school principal role.
- Currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States.
- Have at least two years of experience as a school leader.
- Identifies as a person of color (Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, or Multi-racial).

This email is to notify you about the study, and to invite you to participate in the research. Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and there will be no negative consequences if you choose not to participate. If interested in participating, you will receive a follow-up email from me that will include an “Informed Consent” document for your signature, which will be secured through Qualtrics. After the Informed Consent document is returned, you will receive an email with a short demographic survey, also using Qualtrics to ensure that criteria for participation is met. If selected to

participate you will be invited to arrange a one-on-one interview with me, at a time and date that is convenient for you. The interview will be conducted virtually. Audio and video will be recorded via the Zoom conferencing platform, and all identifying information such as video and name identifiers will be concealed to protect your identity.

If you wish to participate in the study or know someone who might be interested, please reply to me via email at crf_evansfm@cuchicago.edu. *Please feel free to pass this information on to other colleagues that match the sample terms and who may be interested in participating.*

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary, there are no direct benefits to participants. Your responses to the interview questions will remain anonymous. You can choose to withdraw your participation at any time while participating in the interview, and you do not have to answer every question. I would greatly appreciate your participation in my research and your consideration of being interviewed. Your participation will help further the research on school leaders of color.

Sincerely,

Felecia Evans

Doctoral Candidate

Concordia University Chicago

Appendix B

Informed Consent Letter

Dear _____,

You are invited to participate in a dissertation study titled, *The School Leader Representation Gap: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color* conducted by Felecia Evans, a doctoral student in the department of education at Concordia University Chicago. I am seeking five to seven participants for this research study.

The goal of this study is to understand the professional experiences of school leaders of color in the Midwest. Knowledge gained from this work will contribute to our understanding of the ways that school leaders of color describe their professional experiences, explain retention and recruitment factors and convey how their leadership guides students of color in their schools. Results of this work will also be valuable for/to our public school systems that seek ways to recruit, retain, and support more diverse school leaders. The target enrollment number for this study is five to seven participants.

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire will be sent to you electronically using Qualtrics. Results from this questionnaire will be used to ensure that you meet the requirements for participation. Criteria for participation is:

- Currently serving as a school leader or school principal role.
- Currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States.
- Have at least two years of experience as a school leader.
- Identifies as a person of color (Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, or Multi-racial).

If you are selected to participate, you will receive an email from me inviting you to schedule one, approximately one-hour virtual interview at a time of your choosing. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. The data collected from this transcription will be used to analyze themes and patterns

related to the goals of the research. There is a risk of a breach of privacy and confidentiality. No other reasonably foreseeable risks are associated with participation in this study. All your answers will be confidential to the fullest extent possible. Due to the nature of this study, your self-identified race and gender will be shared alongside an assigned pseudonym. There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have a right to stop participation in the study at any moment. No consequences of any kind will follow from refusal to participate. Recordings and transcripts will become my property, as the sole researcher of the study. The master code list connecting your identity to the data will be kept in a separate locked cabinet in my home and destroyed after data analysis. Contact lists, recruitment records, and any other documents that contain personally identifiable data will be destroyed when no longer required for this research. Files containing electronic data will be stored on my home computer indefinitely. The files will be password-protected and encrypted using FileVault for Mac which utilizes Data Protection Class C with a volume key and may be used for future research.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Concordia University Chicago. If you have any additional questions or concerns, you can contact the research chair, Dr. Rebecca Hornberger PhD, Director of Ohio Programs, CUC-OAESA Partnership and OAESA Executive Director at Rebecca.hornberger@cuchicago.edu. Further, should you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Concordia University Chicago Institutional Review Board by e-mail at irb@cuchicago.edu

I affirm that I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me upon request.

_____ (signature).

I give permission to record the interview _____ (signature).

_____ (name printed) _____ (date).

CUC IRB Study #

CUC IRB Approval Date: _____

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study titled, *The School Leader Representation Gap: Recruiting and Retaining School Leaders of Color*. The IRB study number is _____. The goal of this study is to understand the professional experiences of school leaders of color in the Midwest. Knowledge gained from this work will contribute to our understanding of the ways that school leaders of color describe their professional experiences, explain retention and recruitment factors, and convey how their leadership impacts students of color in their schools. Results of this work will also be valuable for/to public school systems that seek ways to recruit, retain, and support more diverse school leaders. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have a right to stop participation in the study at any moment. No consequences of any kind will follow from refusal to participate.

The purpose of this email is to invite you to complete this demographic questionnaire to ensure that you meet the criteria I have established for participation in this study:

- Currently serving as a school leader or school principal role.
- Currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States.
- Have at least two years of experience as a school leader.
- Identifies as a person of color (Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, or Multi-racial).

This questionnaire is being conducted using Qualtrics. Please click on the link provided (INSERT LINK) to answer the following questions:

1. Are you currently employed in a public school in the Midwestern region of the United States? Yes/No/Prefer not to answer
2. Are you currently serving in a school leader or school principal role? Yes/No/Prefer not to answer
3. Do you have at least two years of experience in a role as a public school principal and/or school leader? Yes/No/Prefer not to answer
4. Do you identify as a person of color (Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, or Multi-racial)? Yes/No/Prefer not to answer

These additional questions will help to ensure there is a broad range of participants:

5. What level is your school? Elementary, Middle, High, Prefer not to answer
6. What is the setting of your school? Urban, Suburban, Rural, Prefer not to answer
7. How many students in your school? Less than 300, 300-800, more than 800, Prefer not to answer
8. Which racial/ethnic group do you most closely identify with? Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, Multi-racial, Prefer not to answer
9. What gender, if any, that you identify as? Male, Female, Non-Binary, Prefer not to answer

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and your responses to the demographic questions will remain anonymous. You can choose to withdraw your participation at any time. Should you be selected to participate, you will receive an email from me inviting you to schedule an interview, at a date and time of your choosing. The interview will be conducted virtually and recorded via the Zoom platform. It will take approximately one hour to complete.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in this research and your consideration of being interviewed. Your participation will help further the research on school leaders of color.

Sincerely,

Felecia Evans

Doctoral Candidate

Concordia University Chicago

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Before beginning the interview state:

This conversation is being recorded for research purposes. Please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded. You may request that the recording stop at any time without consequence. We are here today because I want to learn about your experiences towards becoming a school principal and remaining a school principal. I will be asking you questions about your experiences as a school leader. Any information you can recall, or any stories you can share, would be helpful. With your permission, I would like to record the interview so I can ensure accuracy in my transcription and data collection. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

1. How many years have you been a principal?
2. What level is your school? Elementary, Middle, High
3. What is the setting of your school? Urban, Suburban, Rural
4. How many students in your school?
5. Can you tell me the race that you most closely identify with?
6. Can you tell me the gender, if any, that you identify as?
7. Tell me about your path towards becoming a school principal.
 - a. Probes: How long were you a teacher? How long have you been a principal? Is this your first principal role?
 - b. Probe: Were there any experiences as a student that impacted your decision to become a school leader?

8. Were there any specific recruitment strategies that you felt were helpful in obtaining a role as a school principal?
9. Tell me about any mentors or role models along your path towards becoming a school.
 - a. Probe: What was this person's age, gender or race?
 - b. Probe: Do you still stay in touch with this/those mentors?
10. As you decided to become a leader in education, were you met with any resistance from anyone or anything?
 - a. Probe: Who (in what role, group, or culture) or what held you back or tried to hold you back as you became a leader?
11. What are some of the most challenging aspects of your job?
 - a. Probe: What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your job?
12. What role does your supervisor hold in the district and in what ways do they support you?
 - a. Can you tell me about your supervisor? Age, gender, race?
13. Can you tell me about the school leader role in relation to diversity in your district?
 - a. (If they don't mention race probe for race)- and you mentioned age and gender -- what is the racial make-up of school leaders?
 - b. What kind of impact do you think the diversity profile has had on you?
14. Have you ever left a school leadership role? What led to that decision?
15. What strategies, resources, and supports are helpful towards supporting you remaining in your current role?

16. In what ways does your leadership guide students of color in your school? What do you perceive your impact to be on students of color?
17. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences as a school leader?

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