

Career Advancement for African American School District Leaders: A Qualitative Study on Aspirations, Barriers, and Trust

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Abstract

In this article, the authors describe the use of phenomenology and thematic analysis to interpret raw data from interviews about the lived experiences of urban and suburban school African American administrators aspiring to the superintendentcy or another advanced school administrative position. The authors present overarching themes that capture the phenomenon of the lived-experiences of these administrators. Themes and findings are examined related to confidence, barriers, trust, and diminished aspiration. Recommendations are provided for further research to advance the opportunity for African American leaders to secure positions as school superintendents or other advanced administrative positions.

Key Words

superintendent, race, equity, barriers, confidence, African American, aspirations

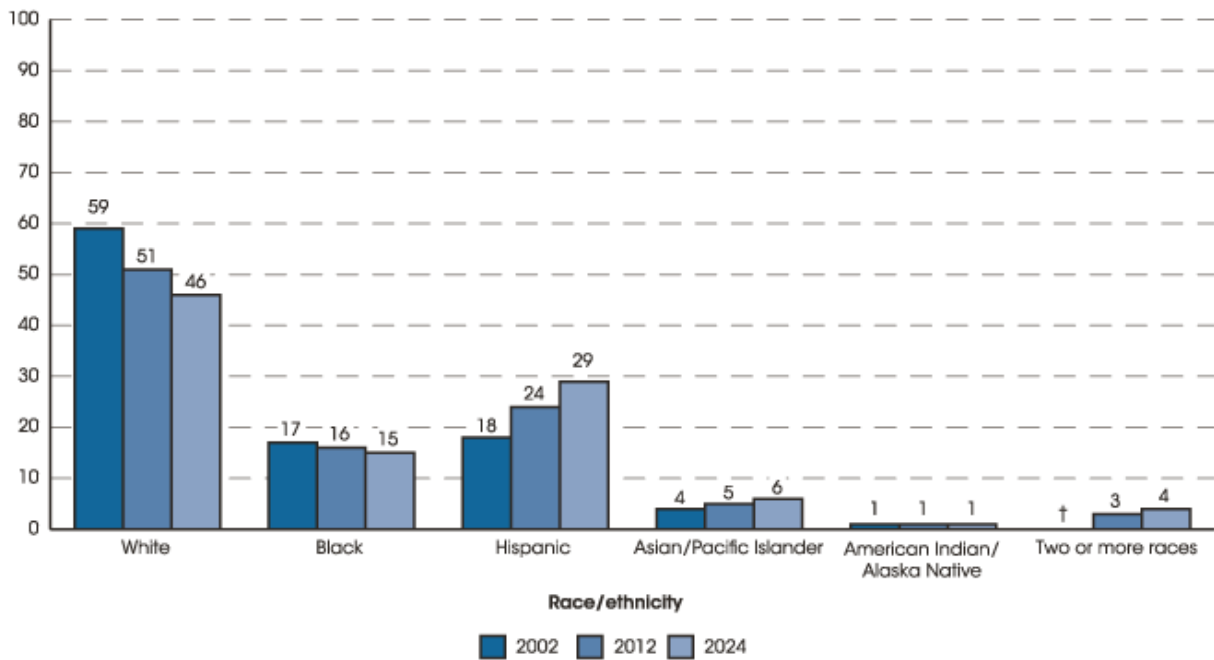
During the fall of the 2014 school year, it was projected that the racial makeup of children in schools nationally would make an important shift. Maxwell (2015) writes, "... for the first time in history, the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms is expected to surpass the number of non-Hispanic whites."

The United States Department of Education National Statistics (2014) previously

projected this shift in racial makeup. According to enrollment projections through 2024, White children enrolled in K-12 schools nationally will continue to decline, while Hispanic, Asian /Pacific and children of two or more races will continue to grow.

While Black students show a slight decline, this decline is minimal in comparison to the more significant decline for white students projected to enroll in K-12 schools as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: U.S. department of education student K-12 enrollment



† NOTE: Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Prior to 2008, separate data on students of two or more races were not collected. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Data for 2024 are projected. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD).

This same demographic shift is evident in Minnesota. Of the 857,039 students enrolled in schools in Minnesota in 2015, 29.5% are students of color. In the three largest school

districts in Minnesota (Anoka Hennepin, St. Paul and Minneapolis), the percentage of students of color ranges from 24.6% to 77.6 % to 66.4% respectively (MDE, 2015).

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education projects that by 2019, the composition of public high school graduates in Minnesota alone will shift significantly. White non-Hispanics will decrease as a share of the total population while Hispanics, Blacks, and Asian Pacific Islanders will all continue to grow (2013). While these data points alone signify a country with a changing racial makeup, they also illuminate the continued urgency we face to eliminate predictable educational racial disparities. We already know that children of color fare much worse in school than White children. This is a known national and local concern. The National Association for Educational Progress (2012) data indicate insignificant change in the width of the gap in achievement levels between students of color and White students (Raskin, Krull, & Thatcher, 2015).

The Minnesota Department of Education achievement data (2015) reveal predictable racial disparity patterns that mirror national trends. In the last five years, in both math and reading, the data reveal a steady and unchanged racial discrepancy between the achievement levels of White and Black students. Black students, for example, achieve results that are approximately 30 percent lower than White students in math and reading.

Given these two clear patterns, changing demographics and racial achievement disparities, there is an urgent need for leaders of color to serve as school superintendents or in top leadership positions within school districts. While there are several key strategies to eliminating predictable racial disparities in schools, one that emerges as obvious is the need for students of color to see people of color leading their school experience. Campbell (2015) contends that with more than half of American public school students as children of color, school leadership should reflect student

enrollment. Closing the leadership gap in education is integral to improving educational outcomes for students of color. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) reports that we have a long way to go in terms of more proportionately seeing leaders of color in leadership roles within the K-12 system: “We are nowhere near representing the population that is in our schools. These students need role models. When they see a brown or black face walk into their classroom, especially as the superintendent, they think ‘wow’ that could be me” (Domenech, n.d.).

Racially and culturally competent school leaders are essential to interrupting the predictable academic patterns of achievement for students of color. Leaders of color can empathize with students of color and provide a racial perspective when making decisions about student learning, as they have likely overcome barriers to achievement themselves. These attributes alone position them to allow students of color to see themselves in their leader and to guide school systems in eliminating practices and protocols that interfere with learning for students of color.

Leaders of color, because of lived experiences, bring a cultural and racial understanding of the learning needs of students of color. Camille Smith, (2005) indicated the importance of leaders of color, “Culturally competent leaders are individuals who develop and enact a vision of schooling that truly addresses the need for all students. They work to eradicate the distorted notion and stereotypes about students of color and create specific conditions and practices to address the needs of diverse students” (p. 28). Leadership matters when it comes to addressing changing demographics and racial disparities. We simply do not see leaders of color emerging as rapidly as needed into school leadership positions.

The AASA American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study of more than 1800 superintendents and 50 states found that only 2% of respondents categorized themselves as African American and another 2% as Latino. More than half of the superintendents of color were employed in school districts where the minority population exceeded 50% (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, & Ellerson, 2010). Additionally, in Minnesota, of the 320 school districts fewer than 4% have superintendents of color.

Statement of the Problem

Leaders of color are underrepresented as district superintendents or district leaders in proportion to the current and growing number of children of color in our schools. This is significant since historical efforts to successfully educate a growing population of children of color have failed. If we are to create pathways to leadership for more leaders of color, it is crucial to understand why leaders of color are currently underrepresented.

While candidates of color are striving for advanced leadership work, they are not securing the positions. According to Jackson (2008), "It's not that there aren't qualified candidates of color, instead they are not pursuing top school leadership positions" (p.25). Additionally, "African American candidates are rarely considered for positions in non-minority districts" (Jackson, 2008, p.25).

A study of the experiences of administrators of color found that the administrators believed the interview process for top executive positions was different for people of color than for white candidates. For candidates of color there was a more rigorous background check. The administrators further stated reservations about taking a top-level executive position. They questioned whether

the school and community would allow them to do their jobs without focusing on their race (Kane, Fontana, Goldberg, & Wang, 2008). Additionally, AASA reported that administrators of color were more than twice as likely as their white peers to report they had encountered discrimination in their pursuit of the superintendency (Kowalski et.al, 2010).

It is apparent that the experiences leaders of color have while aspiring to higher school leadership positions are marked by resistance and barriers. Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, (2008) write, "We started thinking that African Americans are not getting the credit they deserve; they do not always have the doors opened; and when they get there, they are evaluated differently" (para 2). They suggest that even though explicit barriers have disappeared, well-trained leaders of color do not advance to leadership positions at the same rate as whites, suggesting evidence of a "white standard" to which leaders of color are compared.

The study that follows is dedicated to understanding the experiences of African American leaders as they have aspired to the superintendency or other advanced leadership positions. Further, the results will, in part, explain why African American leaders are disproportionately represented in top leadership roles within the K-12 educational setting.

Method

The broad perspective governing this research is qualitative in nature. Phenomenology was employed as a means of qualitative research and "provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). The central phenomenon of interest for this study was the lived experiences of African American school leaders with aspirations

toward the superintendency or another advanced administrative position. Each participant shared the following two universal phenomena: (1) African American administrators, licensed as superintendents and (2) aspirations toward the superintendency or another advanced administrative position.

Through identifying, describing, and understanding these phenomena, the researchers were able to comprehend how the administrators viewed themselves and their experiences. Further, by listening to the varied stories, experiences, and conditions of the participants, a deeper understanding of the shared perceptions and apparent effects of those experiences emerged.

Finally, greater knowledge was achieved regarding the disproportionately fewer

African American leaders in prominent K-12 leadership roles.

Participants

The participants were selected to participate in the study due to their shared phenomenon as Minnesota school administrators. All were African American leaders with extensive levels of experience and advanced academic degrees. These leaders were also were licensed as principals and superintendents.

All participants were current school administrators in school districts ranging from 10,000 to 35,000 students. The participants were known to the researchers. This known background knowledge of the participants provided the needed information to include them in this study. Participants are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Description

| Participant Description | Educational Background | Years of Experience in Education | Positions Held |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1. African American Male (A.H) | Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Educational Doctoral | 8 years' experience in education | Teacher Principal Assistant Superintendent Superintendent* |
| 2. African American Male (J.P.) | Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree and Educational Specialist | 12 years' experience in education | Teacher, school administrator |
| 3. African American Female (C.S.) | Bachelor's degree, Master's Degree and Educational Specialist | 20 years' experience in education | Teacher, Principal Assistant Superintendent |
| 4. African American Female (A.L) | Bachelor's degree. Master's Degree and Educational Specialists | 17 years' experience in education | Teacher, Principal |
| 5. African American Female (G.J.) | Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree and Educational Doctorate | 25 years' experience in education | Teacher, Principal, Assistant Superintendent |
| 6. African American Female (J.T) | Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree and Educational Doctorate of Philosophy | 26 years experience in education | Teacher, Principal, District Office** |
| 7. African American Female (C.K.) | Bachelor's, Degree Master's Degree Educational Doctorate | 21 years' experience in education | Teacher, Principal, District office*** |

* Was appointed to a superintendent position during the study

** Appointed by the superintendent to a district level position.

*** Appointment was made just prior to the study.

Data collection

Two semi-structured focus groups and seven semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. Participants met first as focus groups to respond to the following two questions: What are your aspirations related to

advancing your career to either the superintendency or another advanced leadership position and what are your experiences related to aspiring to the superintendency or another administrative position? Each focus group met

for three hours. In addition, individual follow-up interviews were held with each participant for one hour. This created the opportunity to more thoroughly understand the context and effects of the lived experiences by the participants as discussed in the focus group.

This opportunity also gave the participants the chance to follow up on the focus group questions and speak more freely about their personal experiences. All group and individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis All transcribed text was downloaded and analyzed through NVIVO 10 (QSR International), a qualitative research analysis software program. NVIVO 10 was chosen because of the potential for complex coding, analysis, and code summary reporting

and thematic analysis support. NVIVO 10 was used by both researchers to separately code the text. Bryman's four stages of qualitative text analysis was followed (2008).

The text was read entirely first, establishing broad themes, then re-read and marked for more specific themes. The strength of the theme was determined through indexing, coding and frequency.

Finally, relationships and connectedness of themes and subthemes was confirmed. To validate the overarching themes and sub-themes, the researchers compared and contrasted their separately identified categories and code frequencies, searching for broad and then specific agreement on selected phenomenon, themes and sub-themes.

Findings and Themes

An analysis of the text revealed four overarching themes and three sub-themes relating to the lived experiences of leaders of color while attempting to advance their careers in education. These themes are listed in their order of appearance during the interviews:

1. Confident with Leadership Aspirations
2. Barriers
 - a) Racial
 - b) The Need to Prove
 - c) Microaggressions
3. Limited Trust in the Systems Designed to Advance Leaders in Education
4. Diminished Aspirations

These particular themes emerged because of the frequency of the citations coded under the same category and because nearly every participant described an experience of this same genre.

The themes are listed in the order in which the participants described their experiences and as their stories unfolded. The theme, racial barriers, was by far the most prominent theme with the greatest number of text citations.

1. Confident with Leadership Aspirations

Early on, the participants described themselves as confident and ready to make important change. They saw themselves as having the potential to lead with a clear aspiration to contribute:

When people talk about the achievement disparities, I get really serious, and it's always been in the center for me. I aspire to be a superintendent where I can help be the face of a system to make significant changes (C.K, personal communication, May 27, 2014).

All participants expressed a sense of confidence and a positive vision for their capacity to meet the expectations required for an advanced position:

I want to be a superintendent and say, 'I'm going to be the one that does it. The career chose me, meaning that there were things that I felt like I needed to do (A. H, personal communication, April 10, 2014).

They believed in themselves. Participants expressed the idea that they are leaders and that they were prepared:

I remember my counselor from my high school told me that I shouldn't go to college because I didn't have leadership skills. I said, that's interesting. I pretty much lead everything I've been involved in (J.P, personal communication, June 6, 2014).

C.K. discusses this aspiration as follows:

So I don't know that I had this grandiose plan to be a principal or superintendent, but it was that I am a leader and I truly have this confidence and this ambition and desire to help and make a change (C.K, personal communication, May 27, 2014).

This theme indicates that the participants could see themselves as advanced leaders: ready and hopeful. Early on in their pursuit of advanced positions, they expressed a strong vision for their own leadership.

2. Barriers: Racial, Proof and Microaggressions

While the participants had hopes and aspirations of either leading as superintendents or in advanced roles, they experienced roadblocks or barriers. These barriers, however, emerged in various forms. The participants described barriers through the following sub-themes: a) racial in nature, b) the requirement to prove their quality, and c) microaggressions.

a) Racial

Race emerged, to the participants, as an unwelcome interference. It was rarely present as a support for their interviewing or job-seeking experience. Universally, the participants described this barrier as overt, expected and unfair.

G. J says it in this way:

I have three different things against me. I'm a woman, I'm black and I have an accent. No matter how smart I am, no one believes me (G.J., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

Additionally, she explained:

I was told I was too dark for a picture for my badge. I came in and they said I was too dark for the camera. So I took a badge and I said, 'we have a camera for the black folks', and I left. Then they called me and I said, 'Oh, wait I have a better camera.' That is what kills me (G.J., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

Tied to overt racial barriers was the anticipation that their own beliefs related to equity leadership in schools would be an added, and often risky, problem. To the participants, this meant that their jobs were already on the line due to their race; therefore, leading on behalf of race would further compromise their job security:

I've watched too many other people's careers end who believe the same way I believe and they're white, so it'll be really quick for me to end my career being a black woman and doing the fight on equity work (C.S., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

The feelings of personal pain and anguish emerged as participants navigated their surroundings. Leaders hoping to advance their personal careers tried ignoring the racial barriers they experienced, almost hoping that the racial context was not actually what it appeared to be. However, the realization and confirmation of these barriers created emotional stress:

In the work I do, I try to suppress the notion of racism because we are really trying to make a difference for the people we're serving. Even if we know that the notion of racism exists and that lack of desire to give us an opportunity is there, I suppress it and then when it happens that frustration, anger, hurt and disappointment come up because it's confirmed (C.K., personal communication, May 27, 2014).

The theme of race as a barrier was both overt and covert. As they sought to advance their careers, they were confronted with direct and indirect racial inquiries. Moreover, women of color felt they faced not only racial barriers but gender barriers as well.

b) The Need to Prove

Participants described the need to prove their quality and readiness for advanced leadership work. The fact that they needed to over-sell themselves simply because of their race was evident:

I have to create my own job and sell it...I knew I had to work hard, had to create it and prove myself, and show I can do it. Even after observation, after observation, I knew I would have to prove myself and that's just the life of a black woman with an accent (J.T., personal communication, May 29, 2014).

These leaders appeared to internalize the need to be extra prepared--owning the notion that the organizations would not be a ready for them as leaders, therefore anticipating the requirement to “prove” and even fight for their jobs:

I feel like the people around this table have proven themselves. We know that as a black males or females we will always have to prove ourselves and play the game. Here in Minnesota, people aren't ready for the people who are sitting around this table. You just have to be ready as a black person and leader leading white people. When you're really in charge there is just something you really have to be ready for. You have to be ready for the fight. I don't know if the fight will ever go away (J.P., personal communication, June 6, 2014).

The constant feeling of having to appear much more qualified than other candidates was discussed as an unfair practice to participants. Further, the idea that who there were, as they were, was not nearly enough to achieve higher-level positions. The only way the participants could envision advancement was by becoming someone other than who they were. The challenges experienced by these individuals led to participants second-guessing their own identity, instilling a limited sense of self-efficacy.

c) Microaggressions

Sue et al. (2007) define microaggressions as, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).

Our participants found they experienced these kind of subtle interferences that often felt like small paper cuts every day. The constant and, at times, subtle snubs, insults and derailments contributed to their routine feelings of personal disappointment:

The following year I got a building and the first thing people said was that I'm not qualified. What qualification does she have to start this school? I was like okay, this is the test. It came as a huge price, a personal price (G.J., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

The microaggressions were often presented as frustrating and confusing experiences that contributed to self-doubt and second-guessing by the participants:

But then something comes up that I want to apply for, not in my district. I decide to ask the superintendent for a little reference. Normally when I ask for something or email my supervisor he emails me right back at least some time during that day. He never emailed me back and he never responded. I called to him out in the parking lot one day and I just asked him, What's going on? and he apologizes because he said, I know I didn't email you back. I said, Yes, I know. When you don't email me back, I make up stuff in my head about what's going on (C.K., personal communication, May 27, 2014).

These microaggressions disrupted the participants' thinking and sense of direction, because the rationale for the interactions was not fully understood. As barriers, microaggressions are often the most insidious because of their initial lack of transparency.

3. Limited Trust in the Systems Designed to Advance Leaders of Color

Eventually, the participants described the compounding effect of these barriers on their trust in the systems designed to advance leaders into higher positions. This diminished trust was either with the search firms dedicated to advancing leaders into higher positions or the systems they were working in:

I did not trust the search firm at all. I didn't trust the search firm that was pushing me forward. I think that they knew whom they were going to push forward. I actually thought the only reason why I was one of them (the applicants) was because I was pushing myself forward; it wasn't because they were pushing me forward. I was selling myself--but you see, I went in like that because they didn't come after me. They didn't recruit me. So I knew that I had to sell myself and as a black woman, you just know that (C.S., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

The lack of trust emerged because these participants expected the system to fail them. Having experienced it before, they described the patterns and anticipated the outcomes:

I don't necessarily trust the system. I truly don't because whether it's looking for entry-level or top-level positions, I believe that the system is set up to weed people out first. Obviously, there are people you don't want for the position, but then there are subtleties that are systemic or like soft racism infused into it to weed other people out and that's generally people of color (A.L., personal communication, May 27, 2014).

In general, participants believed that the very presence of a leader of color would be too much for the system to handle; therefore, they did not have faith that the system would advocate for them:

Well, I have very minimal trust. Looking at trust in the true sense of the word, I believe that one day there will be a time for people like men ... but to trust within the system to promote and uphold or value the skills that we bring is very, very rare, limited. Cause when you look at the situation, if you are really doing your job and due diligence, you are like a threat and people will try to either discourage you, undermine you, or even ignore you totally ... putting you in a situation where you don't shine (J.P., personal communication, June 6, 2014).

Mistrusting the process or people involved in advancing them professionally was a result of earlier experiences. These lived-experiences or barriers eventually turned into beliefs that the search firms or organizations of which they were a part would betray them, let them down, or simply not create a pathway to successful job advancement.

4. Diminished Aspirations

Eventually and finally, participants reported diminished aspirations their ultimate career goal, with a degree of fatigue and letting go:

I don't know if I'm willing to do that kind of hard work anymore but I am willing to, if the door was open ... but, the hard work I've already done I'm not willing to do it anymore. Either it's going to happen or it's not. It's kind of where I'm at now, because I've been through that, trying to do not only what I thought people expected, but what I expected (A.L., personal communication, May 27, 2014).

Participants altered the level of their aspirations. They still had a belief in themselves and passion for their work but not at the level to which they once had aspired.

For example, C.K explains:

My aspiration has changed. Not that I necessarily don't believe in fighting, because I've done that for 58 years (C.K., personal communication, May 27, 2014).

Further, C.S describes this in the following statement:

My aspirations have changed (but) I still think that there are a lot of things that I would like to offer in school systems where people may not understand differences. People who don't realize they need someone in there to help them see the bigger picture (C.S., personal communication, May 21, 2014).

Eventually some participants even determined that, in fact, they might be more effective in a position that was at a lower level within the system. They reframed their contributions and pointed themselves in a new direction with less authority:

At this point, I don't necessarily have a desire to be a superintendent. Again, I don't want to offend anyone, but I don't believe that you have the ability at that level to make the change that you really think you're making because of the politics. I truly believe that at the assistant superintendent, or even more so, at the building level, you can affect and have more change (J.T., personal communication, May 29, 2014).

This theme suggested that these leaders who began with high aspirations to advance their own careers in education eventually lowered their personal expectations or changed them. Often the changed personal goal was redefined to a lower level position that they felt would be a better fit with a greater opportunity to make a difference.

Discussion

A thorough analysis of the themes associated with the lived experiences of the participants in this study has led to a deeper understanding of the *meaning* of these experiences, along with the ability to tie them together for greater cohesion. What emerged were four broad themes with subthemes. It was clear that the African American leaders in this study began with confidence and a belief in their own

potential. As they pursued their professional goals, they were faced with barriers. These barriers emerged in various forms. At times, the interference was in the form of a micro-aggression, a subtle or confusing snub, jab or derailment. Additionally, participants either self-imposed or adhered to imposed requirements to over-prove their qualifications for the job. Finally, they believed they faced

barriers that were directly or indirectly linked to their race. As a result of barriers faced, participants expressed lower levels of trust.

This diminished trust was either with the search firms dedicated to advancing leaders into higher positions or within the school systems where they worked. Eventually, the participants showed less interest in advancing professionally, found reasons to stay where they were or sought a position that was less than they had originally intended. In the end, they aspired for lower level positions or even questioned the value of seeking higher-level positions. While the summation of these experiences marginalized career aspirations, the onset of racial battle fatigue (Smith, Yosso, & Soloranzo, 2006) is also present. The cumulative effect of racial microaggressions pointed to various forms of personal anguish, distress and exhaustion.

Additionally, the degree to which participants had internalized and nearly accepted the racial stereotypes as a way of navigating forward is not only concerning but a key factor in their personal career advancement.

Conclusion

The themes, described in the order in which they emerged, explain, in part, why these leaders did not emerge as school superintendents or achieve the advanced professional positions they had hoped to achieve.

These themes were (a) confident with leadership aspirations, (b) barriers, including racial, the need to prove, and microaggressions, (c) limited trust in the systems designed to advanced leaders in education, and (d) diminished aspirations. The sequential nature to which the themes emerged suggests that one experience led to another. These leaders moved from strong interest in career advancement as

top district leaders to a disbelief in possibility and personal potential. Therefore, based upon the themes and discussion, the following four recommendations are important and necessary:

1. Since search firms and school boards are key to hiring superintendents, it is imperative that these agencies engage in personal and professional training related to racial equity. This personal knowledge will arm them with the skills to advance African American leaders proactively and with intention.

2. Communities should strive for a more racially diverse school board. Board members of color will be equipped, because of their lived experiences, to offer perspectives and solutions for removing barriers that interfere with career aspirations for African American leaders.

3. The culture of a school district should be a place where the barriers described here are identified and removed. Therefore, all members of a school culture should be racially conscious and prepared to eliminate barriers for African American career aspiration. Further, in this kind of environment, African American leaders will be more trusting of career advancement possibilities.

4. Communities everywhere, especially suburban communities where racial demographic changes are rapid, are important settings for change. Communities that engage in dialogue and discussion about race will be more likely to see and remove barriers for African American leaders aspiring to advanced positions in school districts.

In order to see academic change going forward, it is imperative that many more African American administrators are leading at the highest levels of school systems where district-wide decisions are made. Ultimately, a

racially diverse top leadership team will inform and guide school districts toward success. Success of this nature means effectively reaching **all** students while ensuring that the predictable racial disparities we see today between children of color and white children disappear.

Limitations of the Study

Participants in the study were known to one or both researchers, thereby creating the potential for researcher bias. Bracketing was employed intentionally, as a method of setting aside any prior knowledge by the researchers. This study is generalizable only to this group of participants in one geographical area. Finally, only African American leaders were included in the study.

Implications for Future Research

The barriers, issues of trust, and diminished aspirations unearthed in this study are worthy of further examination with leaders of color on a broader scale both in terms of numbers and location. An intentional review of each barrier will provide insight into the complexity of the barrier itself.

A deeper analysis with a larger community of leaders of color including leaders who are not African American will provide needed and instructive insight regarding the comprehensive nature of these barriers. Finally, studying African American leaders whose administrative aspirations **were** achieved will inform us on what was successful, overcome, or immensely challenging.

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