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Beyond Representation: African American Administrators' Experiences as Reflections of Workforce Diversity Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The recollections of sixteen African American administrators who were some of the first hired in de/segregated school districts in the North are analyzed in order to understand their work lives and experiences in district processes. Findings are analyzed through the lens of workforce diversity perspectives. Five themes emerged from the data regarding race, African American administrators' roles and experiences. Findings indicate that elements of all three diversity perspectives were present, but the most inclusive, integration-and-learning was least present. Recommendations for further research in contemporary contexts are provided.

There is increasingly robust research about the lived experiences of African American P-12 administrators in different sociopolitical, educational, and historical contexts (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). However, Randolph and Robinson (2017) pointed out that while scholars have “advanced our knowledge of African American education history ... little of this scholarship focused on the African American northern urban experience” (p. 2). Much research about the experiences of African American administrators in the context of racial segregation and desegregation has centered on administrators in the South (Horsford, 2011; Randolph & Sanders, 2011; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 2000; Walker & Byas, 2003). One likely explanation for this is the longer prevailing existence of *de jure* race segregation laws in the South, compared to the North, as in those states on the northern side of the Mason-Dixon line (Sugrue, 2008). The experiences of African American administrators after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), which declared racial segregation of schools by law unconstitutional, were studied largely in the context of resulting unemployment and barriers to hiring in the desegregation era (Karpinski, 2006; Tillman, 2004).

Consequently, despite emerging research about administrators in the North (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Brown & Beckett, 2007; Johnson, 2006), not as much is known about Northern school de/segregation, (Dougherty, 1998; Randolph & Robinson, 2017) or the historical experiences of African American administrators in the North (Douglas, 2005; Sugrue, 2008; Theoharis & Woodard, 2003), especially in cities that are not sites of iconic racial struggles such as the desegregation busing conflicts in Boston (Chapman, 2005; Theoharis, 2003). However, enduring patterns of segregated residential housing patterns in Northern cities and racial discrimination against African Americans in all areas of life shaped hiring, employment and life experiences of African American administrators. This lack of collective knowledge and acknowledgment of these forms of segregation and discrimination in the North contributes to a misconception among some, that racism existed in the South but not the North. Sugrue (2008) explained one likely cause of this: “Most histories focus on the South and the epic battles between nonviolent protestors and the defenders of Jim Crow during the 1950s and 1960s” (p. xiii). He asserted that this focus on the “racial atrocities in the South gave northerners a badge of honor, a sense that they were not part of America’s troubled racial history”

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(p. xiv). However, the complex histories of African American civil rights struggles and victories in the North reveal that education was widely viewed as vital for economic and political equality (Douglas, 2005).

New questions ought be considered regarding the organizational experiences of African American educational leaders. In addition to understanding administrators' experiences during school de/segregation, researchers have investigated African American leaders of urban schools (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Brown & Beckett, 2007; Gooden, 2012), leadership styles (Johnson, 2006; Lomotey, 1993; Lomotey & Lowery, 2015), and how intersecting identities of race and gender shaped their experiences (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Byrd-Blake, 2003; Case, 1997; Dillard, 1995; Horsford, 2012; Loder, 2005; Peters, 2012; Pollard, 1997; Reed, 2012). Little, if anything, is known about how African American administrators' experiences might inform school district practices through the lens of organizational behavior.

Evans (2007) found that school leaders' sensemaking about demographic change was related to their local context. They "made sense of school situations and issues in ways that they believed reflected organizational ideology, values, or other key features of the school environment" (p. 183). In addition to this important finding, an analysis of African American leaders' experiences has potential to inform organizational learning and change. This is important for practitioners and researchers interested in how to best incorporate the assets of African American administrators beyond taking satisfaction in their increased representation in the organization.

The lens of workforce diversity perspectives affords an exploration of how African American administrators in this study experienced their work lives as racialized individuals – one dimension of diversity. Ely and Thomas (2001) identified three perspectives that influenced how a diverse work group engaged with colleagues from underrepresented groups: discrimination-and-fairness, access-and-legitimacy, and integration-and-learning. However, only the integration-and-learning perspective "provided the rationale and guidance needed to achieve sustained benefits from diversity" (p. 229).

I chose workforce diversity perspectives as the framework for this study because it reveals the simultaneous need for organizations to recognize the unique, contextualized, and complex experiences of groups, while creating access and inclusion for all groups. This is not to homogenize the experiences of all underrepresented people. Rather, an exploration of one dimension of diversity has potential to reveal how a general diversity framework can be applied to a specific underrepresented group. In order to do that, organizational leaders must understand the unique experiences of particular groups such as African Americans, while "harness[ing] the power of diversity by adopting practices of inclusion that improve and sustain performance outcomes at the organizational, group, and individual levels" (Bernstein, Crary, Bilimoria, & Blancero, 2015, p. 109). A challenge for multicultural organizations is to understand the general experiences of various groups while taking into account the unique experiences within groups, while simultaneously achieving equitable treatment and inclusion as a whole organization. Therefore, an examination of the experiences of African American administrators is one way to understand the extent to which school districts fully integrate diverse perspectives. This learning must be continually extended to individuals and groups as the organization becomes increasingly heterogenous.

The lived experiences of African American administrators in the North ought be continually added to the collective narrative to further contextualize understanding about how organizations operate, given the reality of racism in the North and in the South. By examining the experiences of these administrators through the lens of work group diversity, I seek to contribute to the larger body of research on how organizations can effectively include African Americans in core leadership processes beyond token representations of increased diversity hiring (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

Some school organizations in both the North and South have not acknowledged the legacy of racism and its impact on all people within their community. Efforts to create equitable access and opportunity for African American school administrators may be challenging in these environments. This problem is related to organizational behavior and diversity management. If school districts are to become multicultural organizations that affirm and value diversity (Cox, 1991; Wolfe & Dilworth,

2015), the voices, perspectives and experiences of African American administrators must be allowed to influence the school district's norms, core values, and district-level decision-making. To this end, learning from the experiences of administrators regarding the extent to which they were involved in such processes is important.

Since this study centered race to understand lived experiences, an analysis of how participants engaged in sensemaking about race is important. Drawing upon Weick's (1995) theoretical framing of sensemaking, Evans (2007) explained, "Socially constructed conceptions of race impose differential identities and images based on social status, power, and the cultural, physical, and intellectual attributes assigned to racial or ethnic groups" (p. 164). Scholars have explored how race influences African American leaders' leadership styles and commitment to African American students (Tillman, 2004). Furthermore, sensemaking about race can be understood by examining "their words, actions, nonactions, behaviors, and decisions" (Evans, 2007, p. 166).

Purpose and significance

This study, based on a larger study (Lowery, 2013), examines the ways in which 16 African American administrators who were the first hired in four Northern school districts experienced their work lives. This is significant for two reasons. First, these findings contribute to a growing body of literature that reveals the lived experiences of African American administrators in the north while problematizing the aforementioned false dichotomy of racism in the South and not in the North.

Second, these experiences provide historical context for identifying best practices for creating diverse organizations where underrepresented people make substantive contributions to organizational decision-making, as opposed to serving only as silent representatives of diversity efforts. In this regard, this study fills a gap in the extant literature about African American school leaders by investigating the workplace diversity perspectives of the school districts as experienced by the participants. Many studies identify various aspects of the lived experiences of African American school administrators that identify the sociopolitical contexts, racialized experiences, and leadership styles (for example, see Hunter & Donahoo, 2005; Walker & Byas, 2003). As a result, we understand how these principals are oriented toward their work, what contributes to their effectiveness, particularly for African American students, and what helps them persevere and overcome institutional challenges. This study extends this important body of work by considering how their leadership styles and lived experiences might inform institutional practices aimed at greater inclusion. The research question was: What do the experiences of the first wave of African American administrators in Northern school districts reveal about their districts' workforce diversity perspectives?

This paper is divided into four sections. First, I more fully develop an analysis of extant literature about African American administrators, followed by an explanation of organizational behavior and diversity management, and the conceptual framework of work group diversity perspectives (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Second, I explain the methods used and the contexts of the four school districts that were sites for this research. Third, I present findings; and fourth, I discuss the findings and implications for practice and future research.

Review of literature

First, I provide an overview of African American P-12 administrators' experiences to point toward issues that have already been researched and to illustrate how my research further develops the field. The second section summarizes race sensemaking. Third, I analyze scholarship regarding work group diversity.

African American administrators

Research about the experiences of African American P-12 administrators exists in four general contexts, three of which are rooted in our nation's Jim Crow (legally sanctioned racial segregation) past. These categories are certainly not strict; rather, they are one way to understand broad trends in the extant literature about African American school leaders. First, is the period of Jim Crow, when African American administrators were leaders of all-Black schools. Second, is the period after the 1954 landmark court decision, *Brown v the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas* (Horsford, 2010a; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 2000) which ushered in a period of public school desegregation. Much of this research contributes to the "familiar *Brown* narrative" (Dougherty, 1998, p. 122). The third context is within urban schools when many were segregated due to racially segregated housing and neighborhood patterns. I also include research about leadership behaviors and styles (Lomotey, 1993). The fourth context is the study of intersectional identities of race and gender (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Case, 1997; Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005).

African American administrators during the Jim Crow era

Scholars have documented the importance of African American educators to their communities as early as the 1700s (Franklin, 1990). Walker (2000), and others (Dougherty, 1998; Horsford, 2010a; Tillman, 2004) have investigated narratives of African American school leaders prior to desegregation. A tapestry of educational leaders who produced "valued segregated schools" (Walker, 2000) – racially segregated schools which were valued by their communities because of how the educators empowered and educated Black children – has emerged. Scholars assert that focusing solely on the material inequities within these schools obscures the positive outcomes of Black segregated schools and the teaching and leadership practices that contributed to them.

For example, Walker (2000) asserted that the "single central figure in the segregated school was the principal" (p. 274). She highlighted the ways that the principal of Caswell County Training School supported black achievement during the Jim Crow era by setting high standards, promoting an ethic of caring, demanding that teachers be involved in community service, and maintaining communication with parents and the community.

Further, Walker and Byas (2003) described the conditions and challenges that Ulysses Byas, principal of a segregated Black school in North Carolina faced, as he created a positive learning environment for his students and community. He had to "leapfrog" obstructionist superintendents and be politically savvy in gaining community support, while focusing on increasing the academic achievement of his students. Ultimately, Byas was seen as an exemplary leader who was able to capitalize on the effects of segregation to build a tight-knit community that supported education.

Johnson (2006) researched the life of Gertrude Ayer, the first African American woman principal in New York City. Her analysis of Ayer's leadership in the sociopolitical and historical context of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s sheds light on what elements of culturally relevant or proficient leadership looked like many years before the terms were created. In her comprehensive review of literature, Tillman (2004) supported the findings that Black principals served as important liaisons between school and community.

African American administrators during the de/segregation years

An indisputable consequence of the Brown decision was the displacement of black educators. In cities where schools were desegregated, Black children were sent to White schools, while Black teachers and principals were not, resulting in job loss. Walker and Byas (2003) reported that 31,504 African American educators were displaced by 1970, while white educators were hired. Others reported the same patterns in states throughout the country (Butler, 1974; Dougherty, 1999; Tillman, 2004).

Horsford (2010b) investigated retired Black school superintendents' experiences as students during segregation and their experiences as Black school superintendents under desegregation. She

found that they regretted the systemic problems that began as a result of *Brown* including “the displacement, demotion, and unemployment of Black teachers and administrators” (p. 301), while at the same time recognizing that there were benefits to integration on the individual level. Furthermore, many did not feel that schools had truly integrated.

Contemporary African American administrators, leadership styles, and in urban settings

African American principals in this context are often studied in segregated urban communities and schools in the decades since the *Brown* decision (Gooden, 2005; Randolph & Robinson, 2017). Challenges faced by Black urban principals after *Brown* were aptly described by two administrators: “Black school administrators are in trouble wherever they are, however, urban areas usually provide the most difficult circumstances for administrative achievement. Blacks must be able to ‘walk on water’ literally” (Townsel & Banks, 1975, p. 421).

Additionally, many articles written about superintendents are in the context of desegregation, the majority of which are in majority-Black and urban school systems (Horsford, 2011; Scott, 1983). Researchers often focus on the challenges those administrators face such as trying to uphold a “superhero image” (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005, p. 426) as they advocate for increased funding and student achievement and resolving racial issues in their schools and communities, while also addressing urban school funding disparities.

Lomotey (1987) concluded that culture seemed to make African American principals more effective for African American students. While the African American principals he studied exhibited traditional leadership characteristics as bureaucrat/administrators, he found that they also exhibited an ethno-humanist role identity: The principals “expressed their commitment to the education of African-American children (p. 407) ... compassionate understanding of African-American children (p. 408) ... a personalization of education based on their lived experiences, and they were confident that [their] children could do well ... ” (p. 410). Relatedly, Evans (2007) pointed out that researchers have identified leadership styles that are associated with their sensemaking about race. Gooden (2005) found that an African American urban high school principal exhibited an ethnohumanist role (Lomotey, 1993). The principal demonstrated commitment and concern for African American student learning, compassion for understanding his student’s lives without taking pity on them, and confidence in students’ abilities.

Dillard (1995) identified the ways in which an African American female urban high school principal created a leadership agenda aimed toward “the good of Black folks’ and other students of color particularly, and all students more generally” (p. 558). She exhibited a feminist and transformative framework of caring which was grounded in her own experiences, which leads to the next section.

Intersecting identities of African American female administrators

The fourth context is research on African American women administrators that exists in: historical contexts of de/segregation or urban schools (Loder, 2005); general research on women administrators; or particular issues related to race and gender for Black women often from an African American feminist perspective (Dillard, 1995; Pollard, 1997). Typically, scholars investigated experiences and challenges faced and overcome, leadership styles (Johnson, 2006) such as “other-mothering” (Case, 1997), or ways to increase the number of African American females in principal or superintendent positions (Alston, 2000).

The experiences of Black female administrators who are in the minority have been studied, often through the lens of Black feminism. Additionally, Black female administrators have been included in general research on female administrators, but often their unique experiences because of race are not highlighted. The shortcomings of a single-category analysis for Black women’s experiences are what led to the creation of Black feminist epistemologies which require an understanding of intersecting identities and lived experiences (Reed, 2012).

Several authors identify the strength and positive identity formation necessary for African American women to be effective in their roles. Bloom and Erlandson (2003) examined the

experiences of three African American women principals as they navigated sites where they experienced being visible and invisible. Researchers increasingly explore the experiences of Black female administrators using Black feminist methodologies (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). For example, Horsford (2012) explained how African American women serve as bridges for and between others. Researchers also identify organizational conditions that increase the likelihood of African American female administrators' success, such as mentoring and sponsors in university preparation programs (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995).

Workforce diversity

The conceptual framework employed for this study comes from workforce diversity, an aspect of organizational behavior, which explains the different ways that diversity impacts work group effectiveness (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Researchers using this framework seek to understand the conditions among diverse group members that are most likely to contribute to increased work group effectiveness. In organization behavior, much literature has been written about the influence of race on the experiences of African American executives in areas such as: tokenism (Brown, 2014; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015; Yoder, Aniakudo, & Berendsen, 1996); overcoming barriers (Collins, 1989; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015); networking and social inclusion (Brown, 2014; McGuire, 2000); the psychological impact of a racialized work experience (Brooks & Watson, 2018; Forman, 2003); diversity management (Nishii, 2013; Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2014); work group diversity (Rao & Tilt, 2016); and diverse work group decision-making (Nishii, 2013; van Dijk & van Engen, 2013). This research has mainly been conducted in human resource and business rather than education.

This study extends research on business organizations to school districts so that school district leaders might consider how they can (and should) effectively include African American administrators in substantive decision-making. This is similar to the concept of pluralism (Cox, 1991). Organizations shift from structural integration, wherein non-Whites are expected to assimilate into a fixed culture, to a two-way culture that ensures the “influence of minority-culture perspectives on core organization norms and values” (p. 41).

Diversity and work group performance

Researchers who study how individual differences impact group behavior study “work group diversity” (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004). By diversity, scholars generally mean “differences between individuals on any attribute that may lead to the perception that another person is different from self” (p.1008). However, there are multiple interpretations of diversity (Bernstein et al., 2015; Qin et al., 2014). Scholars typically describe two general dimensions: differences based upon socially constructed or demographic categories and are often observable characteristics (van Dijk, van Engen, & van Knippenberg, 2012); and differences in knowledge and experience – funds of knowledge that are relevant to the function of the job (van Dijk & van Engen, 2013; van Dijk et al., 2012). Scholars also explore inclusion, the levels of efficacy and value that underrepresented individuals or groups feel within an organization (Bernstein et al., 2015).

Conceptual framework: diversity perspectives

Ely and Thomas (2001) identified three paths organizations traditionally take when trying to create equity. One approach is to hire minorities with the expectation that they blend into existing norms: the discrimination-and-fairness perspective. A second approach is to hire minorities to perform work directly related to their backgrounds: the access-and-legitimacy perspective. The third approach is to internalize differences that exist among employees: the learning-and-effectiveness perspective.

Employers operating within the discrimination-and-fairness perspective demonstrate a commitment to eliminating racism or other forms of discrimination, and promoting equity through recruitment and retention goals. However, because employers are most interested in placing non-whites and other underrepresented groups in positions as a way of eliminating racism, they are ultimately not concerned about how to leverage the assets and perspectives of underrepresented groups. Essentially, this means that employers use race as a factor in hiring, but are ultimately color-blind. People within underrepresented groups are not able to influence the organization based on their unique cultural attributes because “there is no instrumental link between diversity and the group’s work” (Ely & Thomas, 2001, p. 246).

Employers operating within the access-and-legitimacy perspectives hire non-whites because they recognize there are changing racial demographics in relevant markets. Out of economic interest, they hire people who can directly talk to or represent the demographics of their clients. While this thinking has led to increased numbers of minorities in professional and managerial positions, a major problem exists because diversity is used at the margins. Employers “do not incorporate the cultural competencies of their diverse workforces into their core functions” (Ely & Thomas, p. 243). For example, African American executives often achieved career mobility in racialized roles, often to respond to civil rights protests or to be symbols of the company’s commitment to civil rights (Collins, 1989; Hirsh & Kornrich, 2008; Landry & Marsh, 2011). This is similar to the hiring of African American administrators as directors of human relations, or non-whites who were hired as cultural brokers, such as parent liaisons (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007).

Third, organizations who operate within the learning-and-effectiveness perspective internalize differences that exist among employees (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Members come together “for the express purpose of learning from one another how best to achieve the work group’s mission” (p. 247). This might include “tension-filled discussions” (p. 247) to understand differing points of view. In relation to this study, one would expect the quality of intergroup relations to be largely dependent upon the quality of communication between African American administrators, their colleagues, and other stakeholders as they worked through differences in point of view. Additionally, African American administrators’ perspectives would be included beyond pigeon-holed, initiatives targeted at African American stakeholders.

Methods

Data presented in this paper was collected as part of a larger study (Lowery, 2013) for which I conducted a qualitative, multiple case study of 16 African American administrators across four Northern school districts (Yin, 2009). For this paper, I reviewed interview data from the 16 participants as a basic qualitative study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a primary goal of such studies is to reveal and interpret “how people make sense of their lives and their worlds” (p. 25). Researchers who study phenomenon in this design identify “recurring patterns or themes that characterize the data” (p. 25). Those themes are presented as findings.

Site and participant selection

Site selection

For the purpose of this study, I defined *North* generally while acknowledging the specific contexts of each region of the north (northwest, plains, midwest, and northeast). I used the Mason-Dixon line as a horizontal divide between the north and south, in large part because two key historians of northern school desegregation described the North in this manner (Douglas, 2005; Sugrue, 2008). I sought four cities that were unique representations of a northern city in the west, two from the mid-west, and the east. After a review of literature about Northern cities and school desegregation, I selected four cities, so that each city was a representation of a unique aspect of race, de/segregation and education within different historical and sociopolitical contexts. I did not choose cities such as

Milwaukee, Detroit, or Boston because I sought to understand less well-known cases of Northern school desegregation. I selected: Denver, Colorado; Madison, Wisconsin; Rockford, Illinois; and Princeton, New Jersey.

Denver, Colorado has a history of racial segregation based on geographic quadrants. Blacks typically lived in the northwest quadrant, and in the historically Black community close to downtown called Five Points. Denver schools were at the center of *Keyes v. Denver School District #1*, a 1973 Supreme Court decision about school desegregation. The Court decided that the school board was actively enforcing racially segregated schools by purposely redrawing district lines to assign racially alike neighborhoods to specific schools (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006). The designer of the remedy for integration, an African American woman, eventually became superintendent of the Denver school district.

Madison, Wisconsin is the state's capital. The progressive tradition of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, contributes to the perception of Madison as a liberal place to live. Douglas (2005) noted that by the start of the twentieth century, "school segregation remained minimal with a few exceptions" (p.100). There was no *de jure* segregation of schools in Madison. However, *de facto* segregation led to school closings and a complaint of racial discrimination. In 1983, after a complaint in response to the district's closing of schools, including a predominantly Black one, the Office of Civil Rights declared that the school closings were discriminatory (Harris, 2012). As a remedy, the Board created a "school-paired plan" between elementary schools and recommended the building of a new middle school in a largely African American area of the city.

Rockford, Illinois is the second largest city in Illinois, and was racially segregated along the Rock River. In general, Whites lived on the east side and Blacks lived on the west side of the river. As a result, neighborhood schools were racially segregated. Rockford was an industrial city that experienced economic downturns in the 1960s due to the downsizing of factories. The economic crisis impacted the school district, which closed schools on the west side where Black students attended. Parents led the fight against segregated schools, engaging in two court battles for thirty years (Chapman, 2005). The first, *Quality Education for All Children vs. School Board of School District 205* (1973) was unsuccessful. In 1989, the second lawsuit, *The People Who Care* (1989), was filed by parents and community members who opposed another round of school closings on the city's west side. The district was found guilty of willful discrimination and a court order for desegregation was implemented until 2001 when unitary status was reached.

The state legislature of New Jersey created a remedy for racial segregation that became known as "The Princeton Plan" in response to pressure from the NAACP in 1947, seven years before the *Brown* decision. The desegregation plan consisted of pairing two formerly segregated elementary schools to become one integrated K-5 and one 6-8 (Sugrue, 2008). The state constitution was amended to forbid segregation based on race, creed or color. By 1950, Princeton's desegregation efforts were lauded by civil rights activists. However, many African Americans in Princeton still refer to the city as the "southernmost northern town," a phrase attributed to Paul Robeson, who grew up in Princeton.

Participant selection

I interviewed 16 retired African American administrators from across the four districts. Selection criteria were that they be retired (or no longer working in the district) African American administrators who were among the first to be hired during or after desegregation. I was able to accomplish that in each district except Princeton because the first hired is deceased. I selected participants via network and snowball sampling. Six participants worked in Denver, five in Madison, three in Rockford, and two in Princeton.

Denver participants

Abby Barrett was a teacher and guidance counselor in Denver Public Schools (DPS). She was hired as a community specialist, an administrative position responsible for designing the remedy and overseeing

implementation of the court order to desegregate schools. Barrett subsequently held positions as deputy superintendent and superintendent. **Christine Dyklin** was the first African American counselor at a junior high school. Abby Barrett hired her to conduct teacher training on diversity as part of implementing the court order. She became the first African American female and youngest high school principal in DPS and worked in various central office positions. **Eva Franklin** was an assistant principal. **Grace Hill** was a substitute, then full-time teacher, assistant principal, then elementary school principal. **Inez Johnson** was a third-grade teacher, elementary school assistant principal and then principal. **Kay Lewis** attended P-12 school and college in Denver. She was an elementary school teacher, then assistant principal, and principal. The earliest hired administrator began working in the early to mid-1970s, while the most recently retired one retired in the late 2000s.

Madison participants

Mabel North became the first Black female administrator in Madison when hired as a high school assistant principal. She was an administrator at a middle school, another high school, then an elementary school principal. **Oliver Pointer** was hired as an administrator in the Department of Human Relations, then was appointed as a middle school principal. **Quincy Roberts** was hired as the Director of Human Relations. **Shirley Thompson** was hired to develop a program to educate children about diversity and eventually joined the Human Relations department with Pointer and Roberts. **Viola Woods** was a school psychologist in Madison, then the Director of Multicultural Education. The earliest hired administrator began working in the late 1960s, while the most recently retired one interviewed retired in the late 1990s.

Rockford participants

Abe Brooks graduated from Rockford public schools. He taught in a suburb of Rockford, then at the same high school from which he graduated. He was a middle school principal, ombudsman, then assistant superintendent. **Cory Daniels** became the youngest high school principal in the state of Kansas. After several years as a Deputy Superintendent, Daniels became superintendent of Rockford Public Schools. **Hattie Jackson** was superintendent of Rockford Public Schools after working in a number of school districts around the country. The earliest hired administrator began working in the 1970s, while the two superintendents held their tenures during the 2000s.

Summary of princeton participants

Ken Larson taught and was an administrator before assuming the middle school principalship in Princeton for almost forty years. **Matthew Ross** moved to Princeton as a social studies teacher. He worked in the district's central office before Ken Larson hired him to be the assistant principal at the middle school. Larson was hired in the mid-1970s and retired in the late 2000s, while Ross was hired in the 1990s. Both administrators worked together in the 1990s.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. According to Siedman (2013), "The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the 'others' who make up the organization or carry out the process" (p.10). I conducted 13 interviews in person. Due to scheduling issues, three interviews were conducted by phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to guarantee confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Additionally, while I provide a general overview of the time period during which the administrators, I avoid providing specific dates in order to minimize the likelihood that they can be identified.

I examined relevant newspaper articles, personal documents such as resumés, and work-related publications. I contextualized the administrator's experiences in the city by reading local newspapers. I viewed documentaries about African Americans in Denver and in Princeton. A memoir from a life-long resident of Madison (Harris, 2012) provided sociopolitical context of Madison.

Interviewees' responses were transcribed then coded using first and second cycle coding techniques (Saldaña, 2016) During my first reading of the transcripts, I highlighted noteworthy passages and wrote analytic memos. I used a combination of In Vivo, structural, and descriptive coding techniques for my first cycle of coding, based on the interview transcripts and comparing responses question by question. I created themes after iteratively developing codes, sub-categories, and themes.

Positionality statement

My position as an African American female researcher who lived and worked as a teacher and administrator in Madison Public Schools shaped my interest in and analysis of this topic. My insider status because of my race, gender, and common employment experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) seemed to put participants who did not know me at ease, and they seemed genuinely interested in helping me complete my research. Rather than erroneously assert that my background does not influence my perspective, I state my position here and explain how I attempted to maintain consistency in my data analysis (Jay, 2009). I relied heavily on my analytic memos written during my coding process, which in turn, helped bracket my own experiences and focus my data analysis on content and ensure that my meaning making was consistently based on participants' data.

Trustworthiness & validity

Since several of the administrators referenced experiences that were also reported in newspapers, I triangulated their stories with archived reports, along with other professional documents when possible. Additionally, several participants were administrators at the same time and referenced each other in their recollections.

Findings

Five themes related to the administrators' experiences in their school districts emerged from an analysis of the data. First, race was a factor in many administrators' hiring. Second, district administrators were involved in decision-making around race. Third, administrators confronted racism. Fourth, the support of a supervisor contributed to their success. Fifth, although at the highest level within the school organization, superintendents had to navigate other political issues such as the school board and court oversight.

Theme 1: race was a factor in hiring

Administrators experienced the impact of race on their own hiring in two ways: first, they chose to apply for a job because they wanted to diversify (i.e. they felt a Black person needed to have the job), and second, race was a significant factor in them being hired.

In Denver, when Abby Barrett was a teacher and counselor at a junior high school, the deputy superintendent recruited her to be a community specialist. Her role was to oversee the implementation of the federal court order that was a result of the *Keyes* decision. When asked if she was hired because of her race, Abby believed the deputy superintendent recruited her because of her skills, and she took the job because she felt the central office needed Black people to do desegregation work. Christine Dyklin was motivated to apply for high school principal position for the same reason: there had never been an African American female high school principal in Denver. Kay Lewis, a principal, thought, "probably race did have something to do with it, because I was hired for a school, the same school that I went to

when the desegregation suit started.” That school was predominately Black, so she thinks “that the intent was to have an African-American principal in this setting.”

Three of the five administrators in Madison believed that their race was a primary reason why they were hired. Mabel North recalled that she was recruited while at a conference. She was pursued by an MMSD district administrator who explained, “We have to hire Black administrators. We don’t have any in our school district. At all. And we don’t have any that are qualified to be administrators ...” Eventually, North and her husband (also an administrator) accepted lucrative contracts and moved to Madison.

When asked if he felt race was a reason he was hired, Oliver Pointer responded, “Oh – Yes. And there was nothing wrong with it ... unabashedly they were trying to find administrators of color.” Quincy Roberts felt the same and said that the push to hire more African Americans came out of the protests and riots of African Americans (nationally). Whites “sliced off a piece of the pie and they invited the Blacks in.” Roberts was sure that was why he was hired. “And I was right there ... that’s exactly how I ended up here in Madison, as part of that pie.”

Roberts and Pointer also acknowledged that school district officials were not completely altruistic. Roberts felt that district officials showed him off for their benefit: “I feel that when I first got to Madison, I felt like I was like a showcase. I felt like where my office was, everybody could see me, you know?” Pointer remembers that although he was hired to work on diversity issues, his supervisors did not treat him fairly when he applied for other positions.

All three Rockford administrators believed that race was a factor in why they were hired.

Abe Brooks felt he was hired because of his race and because he had lived in the neighborhood. The school was under a court order to improve scores and increase parent involvement. Plus, “[t] here had been so many Caucasian principals that failed.”

Cory Daniels, Rockford superintendent, attributed his hiring to race as one factor among many. He did not believe they intended to hire a Black superintendent but once they interviewed him, “they realized that they had an opportunity, wanted to get someone [who] had lived the experience of deseg[regation] both as a student and as a staff member and who understood what they were going through with the court.” In retrospect, he thinks he was hired to “silence the Black community” and gain credibility with the court while under the court order. But, he clarified, “I don’t think I was hired because I was Black, because they had other opportunities to hire African-Americans, and they didn’t.”

Hattie Jackson, a superintendent hired after Daniels, was less certain about the impact of race on her being hired, although she believed that in comparison to the other finalist who she described as “dark skinned,” she was hired because she is “fair skinned.” She surmised, “So I think they decided what’s more palatable.”

Neither Ken Larson nor Matthew Ross viewed race as a significant reason why they were hired at Princeton’s middle school. Ken Larson thought he was hired to fulfill “an equal opportunity” statistic but found out that was not the case. He told the superintendent at the time “I thought you were just using me as, you know [a token for diversity data].” The superintendent explained, “No, you have the qualities we think that will make a difference in the school.” Matthew Ross felt that his respect of the intellectual culture of the Princeton community was a factor in his hiring, rather than race: “I think that they were interested in someone who was respectful of the kind of community it was but not afraid of the kind of community it was.”

Even though Ross does not think race played a role in him getting hired, he remembered that the presence of two African American principals at the same school might have raised the eyebrows of some community members: “My sense was there were probably some people who were thinking in the Princeton schools, ‘Why would they have two African-American administrators in the school?’” Ross’s rhetorical response was, “You didn’t seem to mind too much when there were two white administrators in the school”

Theme 2: district administrators were involved in decision-making regarding race issues

Principals in Denver, Madison, and Princeton felt that their voice was included in site-based decisions, likely because that was the principal's role – to lead their building. These issues ranged from community issues, such as when Christine Dyklin organized a “Stop the Violence” campaign which gained national attention after one of her students was killed, parent, community organizing, equity in student discipline and creating student empowerment and enrichment programs. The administrators who worked in district-wide positions were involved in discussions, training, and decision-making about race.

In her role as a community specialist, Abby Barret regularly testified in court. She remembers being “lambasted ... by the other side on what had not happened and what wasn't happening [in the school district].” At one point, Barrett explained to a judge that she was not God. The judge laughed, and Barrett said, “In other words what I'm trying to say is I might change some behavior, but I can't really change attitudes.”

In Madison, Quincy Roberts, the Director of Human Relations, provided district-wide training about race and human relations. He feels that he contributed to increased racial understanding and self-awareness among principals who, “ ... had never really been exposed to a Black population or Blacks, period ... ” He felt they listened to his perspective and experiences.

Similarly, Shirley Thompson taught about race and diversity while preserving the dignity of teachers. She did not ask teachers questions she knew they did not know and facilitated their learning. Additionally, Thompson created a popular children's television program that focused on cultural and racial diversity.

Viola Woods worked in Madison schools when teachers, as she described it, “didn't know what to do because more [Black people] were coming to Madison.” Teachers relied on her for help with race issues. She also developed a Saturday African American student enrichment program. Woods noted, “That's how we learned about African-American history.” Woods also worked with principals to eliminate inequitable treatment of African American students in school discipline.

Oliver Pointer used data as evidence that his decisions around race and hiring were implemented. As Assistant Director of Human Relations, he was also the Affirmative Action officer. He asserted, “I am confident we had more Black teachers then – almost 40 years ago – than there are now.”

In Rockford, Abe Brooks handled racial issues such as when he fired the White female principal of a high school on the spot because she did not follow his directive to let Black students into the building after the bell rang:

[I said,] “You can't do that. I don't want you. You can't go there and tell the kids to come inside the school or call their parents, you're gone.” And because of the neighborhood she was in, I got a lot of quotes in the papers from kids in the neighborhood, they called me all kind of names, but I didn't care.

Theme 3: administrators confronted racism that impacted their careers

In Denver, the school system's racist policy of enforcing racial quotas for African Americans led to Grace Hill being removed from a school. The school system created a policy that there could “be only so many Blacks in the building.” Hill had to leave her current school. When she found out there was an African-American teacher retiring from the school, she transferred back. Grace found out that when she left, she was replaced with a Black male, so she filed a grievance. She lost the grievance, noting, “ ... there was nothing I could do. I just filed a grievance for the sake of filing a grievance.” When asked if they moved White people around so they could have a certain number of White people in each building, Grace replied, “Not that I know of.” Evidence of the racial quota for African American teachers was mentioned in *Rebels Remembered* (2007), a documentary about the civil rights movement in Denver.

Administrators attributed many of the challenges they faced with White parents to racism. Dyklin said that she was “weary of fighting” her White parents who acted as if they “thought they ran the

school.” She tried to create common ground. “And I said, ‘you’re here working for your kid. I’m here for your kid and everybody else’s kid, too.’ Inez Johnson witnessed White families who lived across the street from her school choose to attend different ones because, “They didn’t want to send their kids to [my school].” Johnson also recalled that people did not presume she was the principal, no matter how professionally she dressed. One time, a substitute teacher asked her if she was the physical education teacher.

Although Oliver Pointer was hired to work on diversity issues in Madison, he felt that his supervisors were racist when he applied for other positions such as the Director of Human Relations. He recalled, “Even though I was the outstanding heir apparent because I was the assistant director, I was required to compete for it.” Then, when Pointer applied for an Area Director position, the superintendent told him, “I don’t know what this does to your career, but I’m picking the other guy.” Pointer filed a federal civil rights lawsuit because they picked as he described, someone who did not have a background in human relations, but was “a favorite son ... the quintessential six foot three White male ... so I think it’s those kinds of experiences that stand out more for me.”

Mabel North had a similar experience. After being hired as the first African American female administrator, she applied for an elementary school principalship. The superintendent told her that he did not want her to leave high school, and she was not hired. The assistant superintendent, who did not have elementary certification, got the job. North filed a grievance against the school district and her attorney successfully negotiated her placement at an elementary school.

In Rockford, Abe Brooks attributed his failure to collaborate with the union to create a charter school for African American boys to racism. The president and members of the teacher’s union traveled with him to see a school but then would not follow through about plans for Rockford. He reflected, “That’s racism. That’s true racism, that they don’t want those kids, our kids, to be that successful.” Another time, Brooks traveled to Los Angeles with teachers to learn about a program that facilitated Black parent involvement for student achievement. He said, “Nothing happened with that either.”

Ken Larson became adept at navigating race conversations in Princeton so that he never blatantly told teachers they were being racist: “I learned in this town don’t say racist ... you just describe the behavior. They [white people] know. They’re smart. This is a town of inferences.” Larson continually challenged negative stereotypes about African Americans among community members who were entrenched in intellectual elitism:

They all thought they were smarter than me. That was number one. Number two, they were always trying to cut you down for whatever you did. If I was at a school board meeting and a Caucasian gentleman got up and was very emphatic ... if I responded in the same manner, I was emotional. And then I would say “I am not emotional. I’m just responding the way he responded.” Well that would get them every time. They didn’t know what to do with that one. Because I said, why is he emphatic and I’m emotional? Thirty years of that fight ... back and forth.

Larson, a veteran, persisted despite the racism and double standards he endured. “I used to say that the Lord didn’t bring me back from Vietnam to be afraid of these fools.” He felt that he had to perform at a higher standard than his White colleagues to keep his job. For example, regarding professional attire, the White principals “looked like the bums of America,” while he “had a suit and tie on every day, shoes shined, fingernails cleaned, teeth brushed, the whole nine yards ...” Larson also saw a relationship between his race and the limited resources he received. When he wanted to fund a new initiative he was told, “Find it out of your budget,” but “Now [the White] guys, they get stuff ... but I realized that that was where they’d figure they were going to hold me in check.”

Theme 4: support of a supervisor contributed to administrators’ success

Without a doubt, administrators demonstrated their expertise, competency, and agency within their respective organizations. Additionally, they acknowledged the crucial role of a supportive supervisor as important for their success.

In Denver, Eva Franklin recalled the support she received from two different principals when teachers complained about her: “You know, one guy was White and the other one was Hispanic. But both of them were advocates for me when they were at [my school].” Inez Johnson noted that in cases where her immediate supervisor did not support her, “There was somebody above them who gave it [support] to me because I really think they believed in what I was doing.” Kay Lewis commented, “I liked my supervisors. I think they liked working with me, and they were very supportive of me.”

In Madison, one superintendent, Dr. Smith, was identified as a particularly supportive boss. Dr. Smith organized district-wide professional development to support Roberts’s diversity training sessions. He required all-day in-services for all faculty and staff, including custodial staff. Roberts remembers that Dr. Smith told him, “As long as I’m superintendent, the programs that you have developed here will continue to be implemented.” When Roberts left the district, Dr. Smith acknowledged the lasting impact of Roberts’s contributions. Relatedly, Shirley Thompson remembered, “Dr. Smith supported me every step of the way.”

Abe Brooks recalled that as an ombudsman and assistant principal in Rockford, he was able to garner the support necessary from the superintendent. He could tell the superintendent “‘I need to do this, and this, and this,’ and he said ‘Whatever you need to do. You’re my ombudsman, you change [the] schools.’”

Additionally, Brooks and Cory Daniels explained that the court order and subsequent oversight of the desegregation of schools in Rockford was a critical factor in supporting their success. For example, when Brooks fired an assistant principal that was paddling African American girls, “They assigned me to work with the judge, so the judge said ‘You report to me. You don’t have to report to the superintendent or anybody. Whatever you see wrong, you report to me.’” Brooks also relied on the power of the court when he disagreed with the superintendent.

Cory Daniels explained that by his fourth year in Rockford, only three of the original seven school board members who hired him remained. The four new members had vowed to fight the court order and were the majority. He was able to carry out plans to build new buildings with the court’s support despite resistance from the school board because the magistrate judge returned authority to him rather than the district. Daniels wanted to build schools and was able to do it “even though four board members opposed it, and never voted for any of the actions or contracts that resulted in the building of the schools.” This was because “the court gave [Daniels] authority that usually a superintendent doesn’t have, such as initiating contracts, and without requiring the ratification by the board.”

Theme 5: superintendents navigated stakeholders, school board, and court oversight

Being a superintendent did not mean that Barrett, Daniels or McDaniel no longer had to collaborate or seek approval for their decision-making. In fact, one might argue that being a superintendent required negotiating and navigating stakeholders on a whole new level.

As a superintendent, Abby Barrett had great influence on conversations and problem-solving. However, she recalled that creating the Denver School of the Arts required more than power. She negotiated, involved stakeholders and organized the right team to develop a plan. The district eventually built a new building and gave the school its own campus.

Hattie Jackson, Rockford superintendent, felt valued and respected by the community but excluded by the school board. She explained, “The voice that I lent to my term was one of inclusion, the voice of the board that followed me was one of exclusion. And that includes different people on the board that were elected, they didn’t listen to me.”

Cory Daniels clarified that as a superintendent, he influenced but did not solely make decisions:

As superintendent, you influence, because the final word is going to be the board. The final word is going to be through governance. However, the superintendent does have a tremendous influence, and whether he or she used it appropriately is a different question. I had tremendous influence in every position that I served in. I was pleased with the influence I was able to have.

Daniels evaluated his success in relation to the court order and subsequent court oversight of the desegregation process. Under his superintendency, Rockford met unitary status. Daniels felt that although it did not mean that students were really integrated in schools, he had worked to implement the “deseg order” according to the legal standards and was successful at doing that. His reflections demonstrate the extent to which his job was immersed in the political and legal issue of that time.

Discussion

The experiences of African American administrators presented here demonstrate that racism was not (is not) a condition relegated to the South. The administrators navigated and challenged racism as part of their work to educate faculty and staff, and also to sustain their positions and advance their careers. Therefore, it is critical that race and sensemaking about race be at the forefront (Evans, 2007). In general, administrators’ experiences demonstrate that in racialized roles, they needed the support of an administrator. Superintendents needed the support of the court order.

To answer the research question, I turn to an analysis of the extent to which the administrators’ experiences reveal workforce diversity perspectives of their respective districts. Examples from participants’ experiences align with all three perspectives. However, the integration-and-learning perspective emerged the least.

Discrimination-and-fairness

The rationale for diversifying within this perspective is to eliminate discrimination through increased numbers of underrepresented groups. In other words, people are hired to increase numbers (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Most of the participants felt that they were hired because they were Black; therefore, to increase the number of Black people in the organization. Their feelings ranged from thinking this was probably the case, as with Kay Lewis in Denver and Cory Daniels in Rockford, to being certain, as with three administrators in Madison. Mabel North recalled that she was explicitly told this.

However, although there is a moral imperative to eliminate injustice, often the inability to discuss race and conflicts, leads “employees of color to feel disrespected and devalued” (p. 261). Likewise, while those who hired African American administrators were likely proud to hire the first in the district, the inability to support their careers once they were hired was evident in the cases of Mabel North and Oliver Pointer who filed a grievance and lawsuit when they were denied promotions. It is as if there was a ceiling placed on their promotion in the district once they fulfilled a diversity number. Other examples of racism were recounted, such as Ken Larson who challenged the perception of him as emotional compared to White people who advocated for their schools. These examples demonstrate that they had many obstacles to overcome in districts that were “integrated.”

Access-and-legitimacy

The rationale for diversifying according to this perspective is to gain credibility with diverse markets (Ely & Thomas, 2001). There are several examples of this. Abby Barrett was hired as a community specialist to convince the Denver community to peacefully integrate schools. However, she eventually parlayed that into a superintendent position.

African American administrators were hired in the Human Relations department in Madison. These were racialized roles, in that the administrators focused on racial equity and training. I distinguish this from access-and-discrimination because in some instances, they were able to influence hiring, as Oliver Pointer, and had a lasting role with television programming, as did Shirley Thompson.

Integration-and-learning

The rationale for diversifying within this perspective is to inform and influence core workgroup processes, or the norms of the organization (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Coworkers see diversity as a “resource for learning and adaptive change” (p. 240). It is possible to consider district-level administrators’ decision-making around diversity training as evidence of the integration-and-learning perspective. However, this is debatable, given that a key factor that led to successful implementation of their decisions was the support of a supervisor or supervisory body, such as the courts in Rockford.

Perceived organizational support characterizes the extent to which the administrators were assured that “aid [was] available from the organization when it is needed to carry out one’s job effectively and to deal with stressful situations” (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). The perceived organizational support by administrators across the districts was high. Notably, the supervisors were often not African American. This confirms the importance of organizational support for African American administrators who are in the minority and affirms that it is possible for non-African Americans to effectively support African Americans to succeed in leadership roles. Furthermore, it is fair to conclude that one characteristic of a supportive supervisor is that they prioritize the inclusion of African American voices in work discourse.

Madison participants spoke favorably about the administrator and shared positive memories of the organization. This suggests that their perceived organizational support was high (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale (2006), the identification of deep-level similarities positively impacts group feelings toward each other. It appears that even though White supervisors and judges may not have understood the issues based on their own lived experiences, their commitment to the mission and purpose of equity and desegregation contributed to their support of Black administrators.

The more the inclusion of underrepresented voices influences the norms of the workplace (school district), the more the district is operating out of the integration-and-learning paradigm (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Even in districts where African Americans were superintendents, school board support was critical to their success, particularly around racial issues. Therefore, but for a supervisor, the extent to which their decisions could influence the core processes of the district is unclear.

During the tenure of African American administrators in this study, the school districts largely operated within the discrimination-and-fairness and access-and-legitimacy paradigms. The principals shared many examples of how they implemented decisions at their schools. Many of them also shared challenges faced within the district regarding seeking a new position on their own terms or fair distribution of resources. In order to move to the integration-and-learning paradigm, White employees of public school organizations that hire African American administrators must be prepared to acknowledge, seek out and understand the significance of race sensemaking about race on work perspectives, including that of the majority group. In short, a color-blind approach to supporting African American administrators won’t work. In order for the perspectives of African American administrators to be fully included, and for them to be supported professionally, White colleagues and supervisors must acknowledge that they may not see student achievement or workplace interactions the same way as their African American colleagues and that they have created a work diversity perspective that should be interrogated.

Implications for further research and practice

More research on the organizational decision-making processes and workforce diversity perspectives within P-12 school districts as a whole, and for underrepresented groups is needed. Particularly, a study of current administrators based on the research question in this study would be valuable. Investigation into how a workgroup is similar and different from an entire organization in the context of schools and school districts also is warranted. Future studies should also take into

consideration emerging and complex conceptualizations of diversity (Dwertmann, Nishii, & van Knippenberg, 2016; Qin et al., 2014). It is possible that there are work groups within an organization such as a school district that have different perspectives, or that an organization's diversity perspective varies based on how the work group is defined. For example, work groups might exist as a grade level team, department in a high school, school building or school district. I think it is important to focus on an entire district. Ultimately, people in underrepresented groups and their colleagues ought to experience work from within the integration-and-learning perspective regardless of the team, department, or building in which they work. This question of the unit to be analyzed is complex. Ely and Thomas (2001), whose research provided the framework for this study, investigated the diversity perspectives of three different firms: a law firm, a financial services firm and a law firm. By this example, one could conclude that a school district might be the unit of analysis. However, the number of employees in each firm were relatively small (12, approximately 120, and approximately 123, respectively). These numbers are smaller than most medium to large school districts.

As districts embrace inclusivity and diversity, the particular perspectives of employees must be taken into account. At the core of these processes is the purposeful discussion of race and the inclusion of those race-based perspectives (Gooden, 2012) into institutional problem-solving and decision-making that goes beyond an opportunity to air perspectives, to decisions that show evidence that racialized experiences and perspectives of employees and administrators are included.

Research on how African American administrators problem-solve with stakeholders needs to be expanded beyond a black-white binary. For example, the *Keyes* case was significant for Mexican American students and families, as they were recognized as a distinct racial group (Olden, 2015). Examining interactions between multiple, diverse groups is increasingly important.

Finally, an exploration of the intersecting identities of administrators will provide greater understanding into the ways that diverse perspectives can inform organizational norms and processes. Analysis of data collected for this study surprisingly revealed that very few women gave descriptive recollections that included gender as a significant influencing factor on their experiences. More pointed opportunities to reflect and explore this might lead to more nuanced understandings regarding raced and gendered experiences. Moving forward, purposeful examination of how multiple forms of identities and oppression interact (Mercer, Palud, Mills, & Mills, 2015) to create a context for diversity and decision-making in school districts is imperative.

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