

I don't feel no ways tired: a black woman's story of critical care leadership in predominantly
white schools

by

LaTisha Williams

B.S., Benedictine College, 2001
M.S., Benedictine College, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Many PK-12 school districts have expressed a desire to hire more culturally diverse leaders, yet the voice and representation of Black female leaders remain largely ignored. Despite a history of successful and transformative leadership, Black women continue to be underrepresented in educational literature, theory, and research. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 77% of public-school leaders in 2020–2021 were white, and existing research overwhelmingly focuses on the leadership experiences of Black males, leaving the unique challenges and contributions of Black female Leaders largely unexplored. This study, informed by critical care theory, cultural boundary crossing, and Black feminist thought, employs a blend of narrative inquiry and autoethnography to examine the experiences of Black female leadership leading in predominantly white school settings. This research focuses on the leadership experiences of a Black female leader working with white students and families in a Midwestern town. The findings of this study reveal a relational model of educational leadership rooted in the lived experiences of a Black female leader and the white families and students engaged in the study. This working model of critical care leadership is organized around several key themes: maintaining high expectations, fostering personal connections and relationships, being present, practicing patience, providing resources, and supporting big decisions. These elements work together to create a culture of critical care and bridge building, allowing for authentic cultural boundary crossing between families, students, and Black female leadership.

Key Words: leadership, boundary crossing, Black female leadership, critical care leadership, black feminist thought, bridge building, third space, autoethnography

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Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. Alex Red Corn

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xi
Acknowledgements.....	xii
Dedication	xiii
Chapter 1 - Introduction: Wisdom Warrior and Division Street to Critical Care and Boundary	
Crossing as a Black Female School Leader.....	1
Tron’s Story	3
Jimmy’s Story	4
The Mother	5
Community Background, Critical Care, and Boundary Crossing	6
Rationale	8
Research Purpose	10
Research Questions.....	11
Operationalization Definitions.....	11
Conceptual Frameworks	13
Critical Care Theory	13
Black Female Leadership, Feminism and Intersectionality (Black Feminist Thought)	14
Boundary Crossing.....	15
Methodology and Methods: Narrative Inquiry and Autoethnography	18
Data Collection and Analysis	20
Researcher’s Perspective and Subjectivities: Sunday School.....	20
Limits and Possibilities of the Study	23

Chapter Summary	25
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	27
Family Engagement	28
White Principals + Black Parent Engagement	29
White Principals + Black Student Engagement	30
Culturally Responsive Teaching	31
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.....	32
Black Female Leadership and White Family Engagement.....	34
Black Feminist Thought.....	35
Intersectional Leadership	37
Intercultural Social Dynamics.....	39
Black Female Leadership.....	42
Critical Care Theory	43
Conceptual Framework: Critical Care Theory, Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and Boundary Crossing	45
Boundary Crossing.....	46
Collective Memory	51
Cultural Memory.....	53
Chapter 3 - Methodology	56
Moving Towards Methods: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired	56
Research Purpose	57
Research Questions.....	57
Narrative Inquiry.....	58

Autoethnography	60
Informed by Critical Autoethnography.....	61
Standards of Quality	62
Research Design and Procedures.....	68
Ethics	68
Participant Selection	69
Research Site.....	71
Membership Role.....	71
Data Collection Methods	73
<i>Data Collection Timeline</i>	74
<i>Ongoing Analysis and Researcher Reflections</i>	77
<i>First Cycle of Coding</i>	81
<i>Second Cycle Coding</i>	81
<i>Third Cycle of Coding</i>	82
Conclusion	83
Chapter 4 - Results: I’ve Come Too Far from Where I Started From	84
Building Connections through High Expectations: Mama Don’t Play.....	86
Presenting Resources, Being Present, and Practicing Patience	93
Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative	102
“‘That Doesn’t Sound Crazy at All’: Supporting Big Decisions for ‘Lookin’ and Bookin’”.	104
Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative	115
School Culture: “‘It Doesn’t Matter if you're Black, White, Mixed - She will Listen to You”	116
Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative	121

Chapter 5 - The Song of My Journey: Moving Towards Critical Care Leadership	126
Moving Towards a Working Model for Critical Care Leadership	128
Towards Critical Care Leadership	131
Creating a Culture of Critical Care	134
Creating a Third Space as a Black Female Leader	141
Considerations for Future Research and Practice	148
Considerations for Leadership Preparation Programs, Schools Districts and Policymakers .	148
Considerations for Future Research.....	151
Final Autoethnographic Reflections: Guiding the Journey - The Bonds.....	154
Conclusion: He Bought Me this Far	159
References.....	160

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 <i>Conceptual Framework</i>	46
Figure 3.1 <i>Tracy’s Eight Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Research (2010)</i>	66
Figure 4.1 <i>Key Themes/Thematic Narrative Headings</i>	86
Figure 5.1 <i>Working Model of Critical Care Leadership</i>	129

List of Tables

Table 3.1 <i>Participant Description</i>	70
Table 3.2 <i>Data Collection Timeline</i>	74

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this to my Heavenly Father who walked with me throughout this whole process. There were many of nights of prayer to make it through and I know God was with me. I also want to dedicate this to my husband and children, my greatest sources of love and strength, this journey has been just as much yours as it has been mine. Every sacrifice, every long night, every moment of doubt was met with your unwavering support. You have been my rock, my motivation, and my safe place. This is for you, for the love that carried me through, and for the legacy we continue to build together. To my mother, the embodiment of strength, resilience, and unconditional love—you showed me what it means to fight through every obstacle with grace and determination. Your sacrifices paved the way for me to stand here today. You never gave up, and because of you, I learned that quitting was never an option. To my praying grandmother, whose words of wisdom still echo in my heart—you reminded me that faith, love, and unwavering belief in God is what sustains me and gets me through it all. Also, to my young self, the little Black girl who sat in my room, lining up dolls and dreaming of one day becoming a teacher and leader—this is for you. You didn't know then that the world would try to tell you that your voice wasn't meant to lead, that your dreams weren't meant to soar. But you never stopped believing. You kept teaching, kept dreaming, and kept pushing forward. Today, that little girl's dreams have become reality. You are the educator, the leader, the advocate you always wanted to be. And to every Black woman who has ever felt unseen, unheard, or underestimated—this is for us. Our voices matter, our leadership matters, and our presence in education is not just necessary, it is transformative. This work is a testament to faith, love, perseverance, and the power of never giving up.

Chapter 1 - Introduction: Wisdom Warrior and Division Street to Critical Care and Boundary Crossing as a Black Female School Leader

Sitting in class as a young Black girl who grew up living in a single parent household, I was told numerous times that being a teacher was not in my reach because going to college and paying for it, was not possible either. I remember going to see my guidance counselor and telling her how much it meant to me to go to college and become a teacher, and she would give me the side-eye. The message I received was that I would never be successful due to my family and my mother's marital status. However, I applied myself in every area of my life (academics and sports), so that I could stand out in front of the pack and excel far beyond society's expectation of a Black girl whose mother had her at the young age of 19. These low standards society, family, and even teachers set for me did nothing but set a fire within me to achieve the unthinkable for a Black woman who grew up in a single parent household.

Every hurdle was set up for me to fail, yet I was able to leap over these hurdles because I had *one paraeducator* in my life who pushed me past all the haters and negativity. This *paraeducator* was also a pastor's wife, short in stature, but mighty in giving words of wisdom and advice to many students who had hurdles and barriers to overcome. She was the "Wisdom Warrior", and she was relentless in finding students who had much to give but needed that extra push out of the "barrier mindset". Her smile and personality lit up the room and you knew she was going to find you and give you words of wisdom, which sometimes wasn't even asked for, but was coming without question. She was a walking testimony. She survived much in her life as well and she never shied away from telling her story to students so that they would know the possibilities of success. She would always quote the bible verse "*To whom much is given, much is required.*" There were days that I would seek her out because I knew her inner "Wisdom

Warrior” was going to stop and speak life into me. The day she quoted, “to whom much is given, much is required”, I had made it to school after helping my single mother with my brother and sister the night before. My mother worked nights, and I stayed home with my brother and sister through the night so that she could make a living to take care of us. There were days that I needed that one word from the “Wisdom Warrior” to affirm just who I was going to be in life. Her words allowed me to fight these battles within myself that told me that a daughter of a single mother could never be successful. I used her words of wisdom to fight those negative words, and those side-eyes from my teachers and counselors, and my barrier mindset.

I would ponder those words of wisdom over and over in my head and think about using all my academic abilities, my love for teaching children, and my growing love for education, to someday push my students past societal norms and outdated status quos. That wisdom warrior and the critical care that she showed me as a young high schooler ultimately skyrocketed me into an identity that I did not think that I had. I became a wisdom warrior, a community builder and school leader who worked and fought hard to first be a special education teacher who made sure that every student who was labeled with a disability knew that success and opportunities were available to them as well and that they too could achieve success in their own lives despite what labels were put on them. I was given room to grow and explore all the possibilities for my life. Today I am sitting as a fifth-year principal. I started out my career as an alternative school principal where students who are “at-risk” have a non-traditional option of being successful in school. This allowed me to champion for students with barriers right in my own community. It was there that I would establish *critical care* and *boundary crossing* as I worked to bridge the gap to make sure students were successful. Building a community within the walls of the alternative school became my greatest joy as a leader.

Then, I was offered an opportunity to be a wisdom warrior on a larger scale at our town's main high school. This means that I became the principal of that very school that I walked in years ago with the same mindset to help shape and create identities for students through critical care and crossing boundaries that were once thought should not be crossed. For deeper context, in our community there was a street named *Division Street*. Crossing boundaries was unheard of as a student in a predominantly white town, and I can count on one hand the number of teachers who looked like me growing up. However, this street was recently renamed to *Unity Street*, helping turn the page from this lingering symbol of division in the community where I grew up. It became a mission of mine, even as a young girl, to change the trajectory of division, and now I'm in a position to pursue that very goal. Those words from the wisdom warrior gave me the strength and the power within, and a desire to cross boundaries and become a teacher, community builder, and school leader of an alternative school and now a traditional high school. Now I have the opportunity to work with other likeminded community builders and channel the community spirit that eventually changed the street name of Division, to Unity, and engage in more boundary crossing as a principal working with white students and families.

Tron's Story

As an example, I once found a student (Tron) in my office at the alternative school, banished from our traditional high school due to low credits. I observed Tron as possessing a barrier mindset. Tron was a white male junior in high school when I met him. None of his family had finished school; his mother's intellectual ability was that of a seventh grader; his family was nearing homelessness; and he wanted to give up on education completely. He would arrive at school with disheveled hair, dirty clothes, and half asleep. Tron spoke of dropping out of school and told me, "*No one cares what I do at home, and no one cares at school.*" He had no real

relationship with any of our teachers and leaders and the easiest way forward in his eyes was to drop out. As a leader who deeply cared about the success of each student, I began to think about how to motivate Tron and how to make my words relatable so that the barrier mindset he possessed would begin to transition into a growth mindset. You see, Tron was a student who loved working with his hands, construction and working on roofs with his grandpa. I told him a story about “Being a Tree!” This was a story of resilience and overcoming obstacles. I felt it was critical that Tron listened and related to this story so that a continuous conversation could happen over the course of the school year to remind him of this story and to show how much educators cared about his success. Tron would go on to remind me each week of this story and how he appreciated hearing, “*Be a Tree!*” It would remind him that his principal, me, cared about his success and overcoming that barrier mindset. Stories like this are one of many in the role of Black female leadership and how critical it is to show students and families how much educators care despite their situation in life. But there were other white students that needed to receive this form of love and commitment.

Jimmy’s Story

When I first met Jimmy, he also carried a “barrier mindset”. Jimmy was white, male, and in seventh grade. He had siblings but was the middle child and often felt unseen by his family members. He would seek out attention by yelling and screaming curse words to get his way. He felt that everyone he came into contact with was the enemy because he had never seen real success in school. Behavior outbursts became the norm, because that is the way he sought out attention from educators. In walks a new principal (me). I took time to get to know Jimmy. The why behind his “barrier mindset” and ways to shift his thinking about education were at the forefront of my mind as his principal.

While I didn't necessarily have these words to describe it at the time, I knew that it would take critical care (Noddings, 2016) and boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to change his view of education. Noddings' (2011) critical care theory, which emphasizes the cultivation of caring students and caring teachers, and being cared for, is a basic human need. Furthermore, without establishing a caring relationship with others throughout life, boundary crossing would never happen with Jimmy. Boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) is defined as a person's transition and interactions across different cultures. I always considered the "building a bridge" between our worlds in order to maximize Jimmy's success and minimize his "barrier mindset" to be of utmost importance. We had ups and downs over the course of the school year, but one thing never faded. Jimmy was showing genuine care for his school needs. Those barriers that he had once built up soon began to fade away. We found common ground once he realized that I genuinely cared about his needs and what he wanted out of education and our system. Building a relationship with his mother, lost and confused about what to do with her son, was yet another way that I was able to break down barriers.

The Mother

We initially connected at a meeting at the alternative school about Jimmy's needs around a critical time in his education. His goal was to return to traditional school classes and we (his mom and I) had to make sure we had common ground and common vision next steps for him. His mom said, *"I have never had a principal that cared about my child the way that you look out for his needs and care for him."*

There were many critical steps to take to make sure he was successful in school. We worked together to break down barriers for Jimmy. There were many instances where our communication made the difference for Jimmy. In times of outburst and anger it was the critical

care from teachers and leaders that influenced Jimmy's desire to improve his approach to education. Noddings (2011) has repeatedly stressed that care is the cornerstone of all successful education, and contemporary school education can be rejuvenated by caring. Jimmy's mother always had the best intentions for her son, she just needed words of wisdom and a caring staff who would be intentional in helping Jimmy be successful.

Community Background, Critical Care, and Boundary Crossing

From my perspective, students at Midwest High School and many traditional schools come from a term that I like to coin as a "barrier mindset". A "barrier mindset" means that education is hard, walls have been built around education, and students believe that no one cares therefore the student doesn't care. Students who get into a "barrier mindset" begin to have problems with discipline and academics alike. They find ways to get out of class, turn a deaf ear to their teachers and administrators, and get into trouble in the community as well. Therefore, education becomes the enemy, and students look for other ways to obtain feelings of acceptance and love.

Understanding the student's emotions and difficulties with the subject matter is necessary for the caring teacher to continuously work towards involvement and acknowledgment (Noddings, 1992, 2013, 2016). Educators must provide critical care to overcome the barrier mindset. Noddings (2003) describes school as the center of care, a place where students are cared for and encouraged to care, not only to help all students understand the basic issues of human concern, but also to develop and encourage healthy growth of those who are capable, caring, loving, and worthy of love. This struck me as something I had always been engaging in as a Black female leader in a predominantly white community.

Looking back in history offers us a glimpse into how Black females played a critical role in crossing boundaries and caring for children of a different race and becoming the key to those children overcoming many barriers within their own families. In the past, white families depended on enslaved Black women to care for their children. From nurturing to wet nursing, Black women historically played a crucial role in caring for a significant portion of the nation's children for many years (Robert, 2024). During times of slavery, Black women became the mother figure (mammy) in many white households (Robert, 2024). The earliest use of the word mammy in reference to enslaved women caring for white children occurred in 1810 in a travel narrative about the American South. It is the hybrid of the words ma'am and mamma. Mammy was a docile, loving, and nurturing figure toward the white children she raised. Robert (2024) outlines the role of mammy during slavery within white (slave master) households versus the role understood within Black (slave) households. Although a derogatory term in the present tense, the role that Black females played during this time allows insight into why Black female leadership and the critical care theory play a major role in education today. Despite facing numerous challenges and systemic barriers, Black women continue to play a pivotal role in providing high-quality education and support to children during their crucial developmental years (Robert, 2024). But I also continue to reflect on that barrier that was actually named, physically, on a green sign with reflective letters acting as symbol of that history.

"Division Street." Many would argue that this street was never meant to be a barrier. However, I grew up in this town and it was seen as a barrier in my eyes as well as others – right in front of us in plain sight. Division represented a barrier and a way to hold students and families back from boundary crossing or crossing into "that side of town". The "separate but equal" stance that was once shown in this town represents why it is important to celebrate

boundary crossing. The victory in this is that the street name has been changed to Unity Street with the help of a group called “Midwest United”. This shows that uniting our differences and showing that it is important to care about breaking down barriers so that educators, like me, have a chance at breaking “barrier mindsets” with students. Black female leadership is crucial. Therefore, I also find value in Akkerman and Bakker’s (2011) concept of boundary crossing, which they describe as the competence to learn from and co-create with others outside one’s own scientific domain, institute, culture, or context. Furthermore, boundary crossers see differences between people as learning opportunities.

This research shows the need for boundary crossing within Black female leadership and the educational system. It requires people to effectively collaborate and make use of the diversity of perspectives, with a critical and open stance towards their own perspectives, values and expertise. However, collaborating with people different from you is difficult and can lead to tensions and misunderstandings and sometimes brings about internal – or identity – conflict as well. This is where boundary crossing competence becomes essential, also as part of students’ educational path (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Later in this chapter and following chapters, I outline how critical care (Noddings, 2002), boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), and black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) work together as my core framework in this research.

Rationale

The vast inequities in the representation of Black female leaders in schools across the United States are troubling. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2016-17 data reveal wide racial and ethnic disparities in administrative leadership (NCES, 2017). As Ahmad and Boser (2014) explain, 82 percent of public-school teachers and administrators are white. At the same time, however, the

nation's students have become increasingly diverse, and within three decades, by as early as 2043, people of color will make up more than half of the American population. White leaders are systematically overrepresented, and with little to no diversity many schools are looking for Black female leaders to come in and engage families and communities in ways that have never been done before. Complicating matters is a marked decline in the number of students enrolling in traditional, university-based teacher preparation programs, resulting in a shortage of 60,000 teachers in 2015-16 (Sutcher et al., 2016). While literature on Black female leadership is growing there is still not enough research to justify the need for the leadership of Black females. Research shows that on average, Black principals serve schools with relatively higher percentages of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch and relatively higher percentages of students of color (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). Most Black female leaders are chosen to serve in districts with a high percentage of students of color. There is very little research on Black female leaders who have crossed boundaries and have been successful serving students in traditional, white secondary schools.

Many programs are geared toward African American males, such as the Call Me MiSTER programs at Kansas State University and Clemson University (Sedlacek, 2020). The primary mission of the Call Me MiSTER program, founded in 2000 and headquartered at Clemson University, was originally developed in collaboration with three private historically Black institutions to address the significant shortage of African American men teaching in K-8 public elementary school classrooms (Jimmyes et al., 2019). However, there are an inadequate number of programs and literature geared toward researching African American females and how important their presence is in the classrooms across the United States. The voices of African

American women have been powerful in the world of education, yet our schools lack their presence in classrooms.

Critical care theory is another core framework that continues to lack literature on its intersection with Black female leadership. Critical care theory, with its emphasis on Black females' expressed needs, also recommends listening to students and engaging in discussion to learn about their interests and help them to make intelligent choices (Noddings, 2012). The importance of Black female leadership has shown that caring is a direct foundation of our foremothers. With the emergence of Black feminist thought over the decades and intersectionality theory (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Hooks, 1990), increasing attention has been paid to the leadership of Black women principals.

The silencing of Black female leaders and the lack of literature on boundary crossing and critical care theory is evident in leadership literature. In addition, the traditional conceptualizations of leadership, which normalize Whiteness and emphasize masculinity and charisma, contradict the positionality of Black women that stems from their race or ethnicity and gender and may contribute to Black females remaining institutionally invisible (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1991; Maher & Tetreault, 1993). Therefore, there is value in pursuing research about Black female leadership experiences at the intersection of critical care (Noddings, 2013), boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the intercultural social dynamics between a Black female Leader and white students and parents in a midwestern school. Specifically, this study explores parent and student engagement through the lens of boundary crossing, narrative inquiry,

interview study, and critical care theory, accompanied by an autoethnographic thread focused on my experiences as a Black female leader.

Research Questions

1. What are my lived experiences as a Black female principal engaged in cultural boundary crossing when working with white families? (Autoethnography)
2. What are the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal? (Interview Study)
3. What are the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal? (Interview Study)

Operationalization Definitions

Terms:

Definitions:

Autoethnography	This is a form of qualitative inquiry where the researcher takes a personal, reflexive journey into parts of her experiences and systematically analyzes those experiences within the cultural context of where those experiences occur (Bhattacharya, 2017).
Critical Care Theory	Critical care theory provides the conceptual structure that guides essential content and practice experiences. Philosophy of caring education guides teacher actions and choices (Noddings, 2013).
Alternative Schools	An alternative school refers to the various courses, programs, and learning opportunities offered by schools that are outside of traditional schools and programs.

Cultural Boundary Crossing	Boundary crossing is the competence to learn from and co-create with others outside one's own scientific domain, institute, culture, or context (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).
Interview Study	In this type of qualitative inquiry, interviews are the primary mode of inquiry, although other data sources are often used as additional data sources (Bhattacharya, 2017).
Black Feminist Thought	Black feminist thought examines the intersection of race, class, and gender, and the ways in which Black women have been marginalized in society. examines the intersection of race, class, and gender, and the ways in which Black women have been marginalized in society (Collins, 2000).
Black Female Leadership	Black women who lead schools.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989).
Family Engagement	Family engagement means building relationships with families to support family wellbeing, strong parent-child relationships and the ongoing learning and development of parents and children.

Narrative Inquiry Narrative inquiry records the experiences of an individual or small group, revealing the lived experience or particular perspective of that individual.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study focuses on critical care theory, boundary crossing, and Black female leadership with a focus on intersectionality. The following paragraphs give a brief explanation of each theory and are discussed more in the literature review. The following are the frameworks most relevant to this study.

Critical Care Theory

As we navigate the era of heightened accountability in education, we must not overlook one of the most fundamental needs of students and staff—leaders who genuinely care. Noddings (2013) asserts that the experience of being cared for is instrumental in developing a person’s ability to care for others, underscoring the transformative power of leadership rooted in care. However, in a time when top-down leadership and high-stakes accountability dominate educational discourse, caring is often neglected in favor of rigid policies and performance metrics. Greenleaf (2002) reminds us that effective leadership requires attentiveness to the needs, interests, and well-being of others. This attentiveness is a key factor in fostering meaningful relationships between school leaders, students, and staff.

True leadership in schools extends beyond academic rigor and standardized benchmarks; it is about creating an environment where students and staff feel valued, supported, and empowered. Noddings (2013), a former professor of education at Stanford University, provides a critical examination of traditional educational theories and proposes an alternative framework—one that redefines education as a relational and caring process rather than a sole academic pursuit. Critical care theory does not oppose academic excellence; rather, it enhances it by

prioritizing the well-being of those engaged in learning. Students and staff thrive in environments where they feel emotionally and socially supported, leading to higher levels of engagement, motivation, and success. The urgency of adopting a caring leadership model is underscored by alarming societal trends. For example, the teen suicide rate doubled between 1985 and 2005, children are bringing firearms to school, and homicide remains the leading cause of death among minority teens (Noddings, 2013). Additionally, an unacceptable number of children continue to live in poverty, yet policymakers and educational leaders often prioritize increased academic rigor over the immediate well-being of students. This focus on achievement without care neglects the social-emotional realities that shape student success.

In direct contrast to this detached approach, Noddings (2013) argues that the primary responsibility of schools is to care for children—not just intellectually, but holistically. She conceptualizes caring as a deeply interconnected process that extends beyond relationships with people to include relationships with ideas, environments, and lived experiences. This perspective challenges school leaders to prioritize human connections over bureaucratic demands, reinforcing the idea that students who feel seen, heard, and cared for are more likely to excel academically and socially. Ultimately, Noddings (2013) demands a shift in how we perceive school leadership. Leadership is not just about enforcing rules or improving test scores; it is about ensuring that every student and educator in the building feels valued, supported, and empowered. As we move forward, embracing a culture of care will be essential in creating equitable, inclusive, and thriving educational environments.

Black Female Leadership, Feminism and Intersectionality (Black Feminist Thought)

Historically, women and minorities have been underrepresented in school leadership positions. Furthermore, African American women faced substantial scrutiny during their

professional careers and were obliged to take different routes to acquire administrative positions. Although this has been an historical account, the value of Black female leadership continues to be launched into the forefront due to the elements of leadership that are brought to the table by Black female leaders on a daily basis. History tells us that many families would not have survived without the leadership of Black women. Many schools today need this type of critical leadership in their buildings in order for students to be successful each and every day (Robert, 2024).

According to Edwards (2016), the representation of African American and other racial and ethnic minority women in superintendent and school leadership roles reduces as they move through the leadership pipeline. Black feminist thought is another example of a deep dive into the importance of the Black female voice in leadership. Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). This theory is important in the context of PK–12 education because it provides a voice for, and rationale of, African American women’s views of the world and how to overcome oppression and stereotypes in the workforce (Olow, 2021). To advance a leadership framework that is rooted in the historicity of brilliance embodied in Black women’s educational leadership, and their proclivity for resisting oppression, we expand on intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020) or boundary crossing that makes Black females critical to leadership roles.

Boundary Crossing

Diversity and mobility in education and work present a paramount challenge that needs better conceptualization in educational theory. This challenge has been addressed by educational

scholars with the notion of boundaries, particularly by the concepts of boundary crossing and boundary objects (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), boundary crossing is the competence to learn from and co-create with others outside one's own scientific domain, institute, culture, or context. Boundary crossing theory and related concepts provide insights and tools for getting a grip on working and learning across practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Boundaries are often seen as obstacles and barriers for working and learning processes (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Boundary crossing should be seen as ways to break down barriers. In the coming chapters, this study will explain how collaboration and crossing boundaries can lead to effective outcomes where leaders and staff can create new knowledge of one another which leads to more student success and collaboration across systems. Boundary crossing is also regarded as essential to allow for transformation, i.e. new practices as a result from working across boundaries of different practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). School systems often find themselves stuck in the same system for too long which causes students to be bored, tired, and stressed out. This is a problem that was highlighted by Yale researchers in 2020 when they asked students about their feelings on high schools. In a nationwide survey of 21,678 U.S. high school students, researchers from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Yale Child Study Center found that nearly 75% of the students' self-reported feelings related to school were negative (Belli, 2020). There needs to be a call for transformative leadership and new practices as a result of boundary crossing.

The unique challenges facing Black female leaders remain under examined and overlooked. None of this is surprising especially when looking at the history of this country and the treatment of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) stated, "people who are "both women and people of color" are marginalized by "discourses that are shaped to respond to one [identity] or

the other,” rather than both (p. 1244). Intersectionality analyzes and advocates for the experiences of Black women and beyond that, it has grown and evolved. Intersectionality brings together two frameworks that inform this research: Culturally responsive teaching and feminism. One must first start with the center of these theories and that is the Black woman. Over many centuries, Black women have been programmed to think that discrimination because of the color of our skin is the only reason we have been marginalized. Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Culturally responsive Teaching points out that racism is a pervasive part of American culture, and it is not an aberrant occurrence (Bhattacharya, 2017). Consider the founder of culturally responsive teaching, Derrick Bell Jr., and how he highlighted the inequities of race from minority perspectives in the U.S. Later, these intersections between race, class, gender access to other resources, such as legal and property rights, were highlighted by other scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching points out the vast inequalities that many Black women consider to be a normalized part of their lives. Young Black women like me expect to be discriminated against in some form or time in our lives. It becomes a part of who we are and yet so many of us have yet to tell our stories.

My research study of Black female leadership in a small white midwestern school district aims to connect critical care theory, Black female leadership, and boundary crossing and storytelling with the voices of a Black female leader. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), the reason for the emergence of culturally responsive teaching was dissatisfaction with liberal approaches to pull up people slowly from where they were. The strength of storytelling was a recognition that people’s construction of reality differs, and a space needs to be created to

acknowledge this variation. In connection to the conceptual framework, culturally responsive teaching, feminism is directly related and is an intersection with my research purpose and questions. Emphasis on culturally responsive teaching is creating awareness that social structures of oppression and Black feminism directly correlate with this theory. Feminism, from the perspective of my research study, is directed toward Black feminism which is focused on more specialized analysis of social structures of oppression as they relate to the experiences and subjectivities of the members in the group (Bhattacharya, 2017). These experiences and subjectivities cause one to closely interrogate various social systems of power that intersect with patriarchy and create multiple social structures of oppression. Now more than ever, it's important to look boldly at the reality of race and gender injustices – and understand how the two can combine to create even more harm to marginalized groups. Black women and their experiences and their stories as leaders in a predominantly white school district will allow exploration of the intersectionality of culturally responsive teaching and Black feminism.

Methodology and Methods: Narrative Inquiry and Autoethnography

According to Kim (2009), narrative inquiry utilizes interdisciplinary interpretive lenses with conceptually, philosophically diverse approaches and methods, all revolving around the narratives and stories of research participants. Narrative inquiry is a storytelling methodology in which a story(ies) of a research participant(s) is researched as a way of knowing (Bhattacharya, 2017). Stories captivate audiences in ways that create meaningful connections that are thought provoking and purposeful (Harley, 1982). We use narrative questions that aim to elicit further narrations, that is, questions that invite more stories about our interviewee's experiences (Kim, 2009). Narrative research causes out of the box thinking in ways that stories can be told not just by mouth but in other creative ways. It is necessary to remember that while narrative somehow

implies verbal accounts of stories, stories exist in other spaces too, such as pictures, music, videos, dances, and so on (Bhattacharya, 2017). Active collaboration with the participant is necessary, and researchers need to discuss the participant's stories as well as be reflective about their own personal and political background. This shapes how they "restory" the account (Creswell, 1998). According to Creswell (1998), there are five qualitative approaches to inquiry and narrative research is among those five. Traditionally, it is understood that narrative research is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines and "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Creswell, 1998, p. 1243). The different types of narrative include thematic narratives, biographical study, autoethnography, life history, oral history, and arts-based narratives (Clandinin, 2013).

Ellis et al. (2011) state that "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (pg. 273). Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological theory and method exploration, reflection and application (Wall, 2008). There remains considerable creative latitude in the production of an autoethnographic text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Jimmyes (2013) describes autoethnography as (1) disrupting norms of research and practice representation; (2) working from insider knowledge; (3) maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty and making life better; (4) breaking silence and claiming voice and "writing to right"; and (5) making work accessible. This method is unique and compelling. Through this methodology, I align my research and explore the perceptions and lived experiences in a mostly white small midwestern

school district. Ellis and Adams (2013) also explain the importance of working with insider knowledge. I will add my personal, cultural experiences in my research, with detailed descriptions (through song, art, or music). Day-to-day experiences are vital to my research.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research utilizes narrative interview techniques paired with autoethnographic narratives. This includes semi-structured interviews and artifact collection (Bhattacharya, 2017), along with autoethnographic approaches through writing as method (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). This positions me as a researcher, as well as participant, simultaneously. This allows me to bring visibility to the stories of boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), critical care (Noddings, 2013), and parent engagement between myself (a Black female principal) and the students and parents that I work with, considering the diversity of subjective lived experiences involved in these social interactions. In this manner, this approach allows me to offer a more in-depth and complete narrative, and the autoethnographic components simultaneously act as a form of transparency regarding my subjectivities.

I identified students (n=2) and parents (n=2) to participate in interviews (three times each) throughout my research and used their testimonials and lived experiences to deepen my own understanding. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to use open-ended questions for an hour of interviewing with follow-up probes that I used to deepen my knowledge about the participants' experiences during follow-up interviews. As the fifth participant in my research, I explored and analyzed my own autoethnographic stories and lived experiences.

Researcher's Perspective and Subjectivities: Sunday School

My grandmother was my first teacher and leader. I am not talking about a teacher in school but a teacher of life and spirituality. She was the one who taught me that it was ok to be

different and unique. She would give me nuggets of wisdom that I still hold on to today. One of those sayings was: “*Bullets ain’t got no eyes. How do you dodge bullets in life.*” My grandmother always kept me on my toes and challenged me to the fullest, using wisdom, learning lines in the church play, asking me to remember scriptures for Sunday school, or calling her daily to give her the latest stories from my classroom. She was the first influence on my leadership identity, and it molded the leader I am today. My grandmother gave me unconditional love and she made sure that I knew it too. She would tell me how special and beautiful I was and there were plenty of days that I did not feel that way at all. She instilled in me greatness and the ability to never settle. She wasn’t afraid of anything and if she was, I never knew it. I watched her wrestle down a snapping turtle when everyone else was afraid of it. Her fearlessness was something I watched day in and day out. She became my first teacher-leader of living fearlessly. I dare not forget to share these same thoughts and actions with students in my building. *So, what motivates me in this work?*

This is my story, this is my song

Praising my Savior all the day long

This is my story, this is my song

Praising my Savior all the day long

I can remember vividly my grandmother telling me in Sunday school, “Dare to be Different.” I didn’t realize at the time that she had a message far beyond what she learned as a young, Black female living in the Jim Crow era. You see, my grandmother was a strong woman who raised eight children on her own due to her husband dying of a heart attack. She didn’t back down to anyone and she utilized Sunday school, God’s strength, and experiences to teach her grandchildren the ways of strength and wisdom. I gathered many nuggets of wisdom from my

grandmother in the Sunday school classroom at Shiloh Baptist Church. She raised me to be strong and to use my voice to be a leader and walk differently than the crowd.

The Black female voice and how it relates to my own lived experiences with the lack of leadership diversity within my school district has prompted me to research ways in which diverse leaders impact a predominantly white, student population. Diversity benefits all students and the lack of diversity in leadership is not beneficial to anyone. People of color have a voice and an impact that should be embedded and taught to all students each and every day. The experiences I had as a student continue to haunt me because I always thought teachers were only white people until I went to sixth grade, and I had a Black English teacher. I could not believe my eyes when I walked into a classroom and saw someone who looked like me in a professional role. I knew then that my dream of becoming a teacher was within my reach and those limitations that I had once believed vanished when I could physically see and relate to someone who looked like me.

My passion and my lived experiences are a catalyst to my research design and methods. In reflecting on my experiences and assumptions related to working with white families, parents, and students, I recognize that my background, personal experiences, and societal influences shape my perceptions and interactions. I have identified important assumptions. The first is socioeconomic status assumptions. I assumed that white families typically come from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds, with access to financial resources and stability. This assumption can overlook the economic diversity within white communities.

Another assumption I possess is educational expectations. I have presumed that white parents place a high value on formal education and are actively involved in their children's academic lives. This can lead to expectations of consistent parental support and engagement in school activities. There may also be cultural norms and communication styles. I believed that

white families adhere to certain cultural norms and communication styles that align with mainstream societal expectations, potentially leading to misinterpretations or overlooking the unique cultural identities within these families. In my assumptions, white families have access to opportunities. One thing that I assumed is that white students have better access to extracurricular activities, advanced coursework, and enrichment opportunities due to perceived systemic advantages. This overlooks the individual challenges and barriers that some white students may face. Finally, my assumptions on behavior and discipline are factors as I held the belief that white students are generally well-behaved and disciplined, influenced by stereotypes that contrast them with students from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. This assumption can lead to biases in disciplinary practices and expectations of behavior.

I acknowledge these assumptions because it is a critical step towards fostering more equitable and inclusive practices. It allows me to be more reflective and intentional in my interactions, ensuring that I approach each family, parent, and student as an individual with unique experiences and needs. By challenging these assumptions, I aim to build stronger, more authentic relationships and provide better support to all members of the school community.

Limits and Possibilities of the Study

This is an interview study. Due to working in the Midwest Public School District, I have many strengths and possibilities. These possibilities helped to shape this autoethnography. I was also able to share the insider status that I possess as an employee in the school district. This study relies heavily on data reported by students and parents in the building that I serve, which were subject to biases due to me knowing the families and interacting with students on a regular basis.

This study also includes autoethnographic components that offer significant insights and capture the experiences of the researcher that bring specific personal stories and background

knowledge to this study. Autoethnography also privileges the study with personal voice and an emotional experience that surrounds the researcher's truth. Oftentimes in traditional research we see objectivity and control, but autoethnography brings voice and experiences that unfold throughout the study. The limited scope of the study, focusing on specific personal experiences, may not adequately represent diverse viewpoints and may face scrutiny by researchers who want to validate the findings of this research.

There are other limitations to this research study as well. I am a Black woman so I can only tell my experiences and perspective through the lens of a Black woman. Interviewing white parents and families presents certain limitations in terms of my own positionality and potential biases. As a researcher, these biases can result in a partial understanding of white families' perspectives. However, despite these limitations, the value of engaging in this research with white parents and families presents important opportunities for boundary crossing which brings collaboration, conversations of openness, and highlighting shared human experiences. This is *one small step forward in Unity*. Picture a community rallying together to get a street name changed. This isn't the end; it is only the beginning of breaking down barriers in the community. For me, these barriers begin with the name "Division Street," now turned "Unity Street". It takes leadership, people to critically care about the future of the community, bringing the experiences of the community to the forefront, and allowing them to lift their voice and cry out to make a change for the better. There will be barriers, but boundaries can now be crossed and there will be one small step forward in Unity because of intentional progress.

This chapter explores foundational intricacies between boundary crossing, critical care theory, and Black feminist thought which guide this study. The importance of highlighting each theory enhances the understanding of how they work well together in an educational setting. The

personal and professional experiences of Black female leaders, utilizing autoethnographic methods provides reflections and experiences that reveal the need for transformation in cultural and institutional boundaries. Black feminist thought provides a critical framework to analyze these experiences, emphasizing the significance of intersectionality and the unique challenges and strengths of Black women in leadership roles. By weaving together these conceptual perspectives, the chapter offers an understanding of how Black female leaders transcend traditional boundaries, challenge systemic inequities, and cultivate transformative spaces within their communities and schools.

One small step forward in Unity. Picture a community rallying together to get a street name changed. This isn't the end; it is only the beginning of breaking down barriers in the community. These barriers begin with the name "Division Street," now named "Unity Street". True leadership means critically caring about the future of the community by centering its lived experiences and empowering its members to raise their voices and advocate for meaningful change. When leadership is rooted in intentional progress, boundaries become opportunities for connection rather than division. In this way, barriers are broken, bridges are built, and we take one intentional step closer to unity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explores foundational intricacies between boundary crossing, critical care theory, and Black feminist thought that guide this study. The importance of highlighting each theory enhances the understanding of how they work well together in an educational setting. The personal and professional experiences of Black female leaders, utilizing autoethnographic methods, provides reflections and experiences that reveal the need for transformation in cultural and institutional boundaries. Black feminist thought provides a critical framework to analyze

these experiences, emphasizing the significance of intersectionality and the unique challenges and strengths of Black women in leadership roles. By weaving together these conceptual perspectives, the chapter offers an understanding of how Black female leaders transcend traditional boundaries, challenge systemic inequities, and cultivate transformative spaces within their communities and schools.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

“Oh, look back and see how far we have come, Oh look back and see how far we have come.

Over hills and mountains, through the storm, through the rain.....”

This chapter offers insight on how Black female leadership is critical in creating a caring school environment that engages families, crosses boundaries, and therefore, sets students on a journey of success. For this to be understood, it is critical that the leader explains her own experiences and background that took her on this journey of being a caring school leader. Many Black female students must overcome systemic barriers in their own community, through embracing a need for family engagement or a mentor in education who shows that they care during critical times of their lives. This sets up Black female leaders to then cross boundaries in their very own school and make engaging families a priority. This is a journey that only a Black female can sing about:

There will be mountains that I will have to climb

And there will be battles that I will have to fight

But victory or defeat, it's up to me to decide

But how can I expect to win if I never try

... I just can't give up now

I present the literature analysis in four sections. The first section includes relevant literature that explores the historical context of underrepresented Black female leaders in education broadly, and then specifically in the context of alternative school settings and family engagement. The second section explores Black female leadership roles, responsibilities, and experiences when crossing cultural boundaries to help students achieve healthy development and work with non-Black students and families. The third section explores a variety of theories and

frameworks relevant to Black female leadership in schools, as well as highlighting critical care and how students deserve attention and advocacy (Beauboeuf, 2005) from Black female school leaders. This study works to deepen our understanding of Black female leadership utilizing intercultural social dynamics by utilizing critical care theory, boundary crossing, and Black feminism and intersectionality.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is one of the most crucial elements to a student's school experience and the school building. Family engagement improves classroom dynamics and student-teacher relationships, including cultural competence, regardless of students' age groups (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Family engagement is defined by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) as a "shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and which families are committed to actively support their children's learning and development" (NAFSCE, 2010, p.1). Family engagement often helps to cultivate cultural awareness between students, teachers, and families. Many schools seek help through surveying parents and families to see what family engagement activities will work within the school building. Fostering relationships with families is important to help bridge the gap between what goes on in the classroom and activities that happen outside of the classroom. These activities can be joined together to become great events for families and school staff to enjoy together.

The level of family engagement in a school is a significant predictor of students' cognitive and social emotional skills by providing enriched social experiences. Benefits include higher student motivation, attention, impulse control, and self-confidence (Boberiene, 2013). Heckman (2008) argued that changes in family structure in the last several decades have

contributed to low academic achievement. While much of the research examines the role of white principals and schools and boundary crossing with Black American parents, less research has focused on the role of Black leadership and schools and parent involvement with white families.

White Principals + Black Parent Engagement

For decades, white principals have been working to strengthen family engagement to connect with families of students of color. According to Anderson (2018), white men have the edge in the school principal pipeline. Educators who run U.S. schools aren't a diverse group. This means that there is plenty of research on white school principals bridging the trust gap between students of color and white leadership. According to the *Hechinger Report*, almost 80 percent of the nation's 90,000 principals are white (Barshay, 2020). The 47th Annual PDK Poll states that school principals of diverse schools must be very attentive to the multitude of perspectives within their schools (Starr, 2015). This includes white principals being in tune with students of color because building those connections and trust amongst parents is key. Principals understand that involving parents means creating a space where their voices are heard and valued within the school. In a recent podcast episode, *Walking the Talk*, a principal by the name of Jimmyathan Crossley was interviewed about building community and trust within his school building that is made up of mostly Black and Hispanic students (Anderson, 2018). He reinforces the importance of building relationships across race and socioeconomic lines by focusing on the following:

- Establish a collective identity for your school that includes teachers, students, staff, and families.
- Stay humble. Empathize with students and parents but remember that it's nearly impossible to fully understand the challenges they face.

- Invest time in relationships with families. Remember it will take many interactions and conversations to grow trust and understanding.
- Push for agency, not advocacy. Families and community members already have strong voices; they work to make sure they're heard. Give them room to push for what they and their children need.
- Make your school a hub for the community — a place where adults can also find resources on housing, jobs, and basic necessities.
- Assume positive intent on the part of parents and emphasize the positive work of their children.

When looking further into how other principals across the country involve parents of color these sentiments above are mirrored. White principals have also discovered that parental voice and trust are keys to involving parents with students of color.

White Principals + Black Student Engagement

NCES (2004) reported that Black students continue to trail white students with respect to educational access, achievement, and attainment. White principals recognize the need to build relationships and trust among Black families and Black students. Carter (1992) suggests that white leaders must think strategically about Black learners, their cultural differences and their differing needs, the community context, and ways to engage Black students with substantive ideas. White leaders have found that involving teachers in the process of engaging Black students is of the utmost importance. Engaging teachers means utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2018) posits that a high level of proficiency is a part of capacity building in a child. Meeting the child where he is at is a significant part in laying the groundwork needed in building proficiency. Building capacity in classroom teachers to engage in culturally

responsive pedagogy must be an element of student engagement. According to Howard (2001), teachers create “a school experience that enables students to pursue academic excellence without abandoning their cultural integrity” (p. 136). In other words, the ways that educators present concepts a student should learn, the student’s methods of learning, and the context of how learning occurs must be situated within a framework that is consistent with the student’s cultural background. culturally responsive teaching provides that framework.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching means using students’ customs, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as tools for better classroom instruction. The term was coined by researcher Geneva Gay (2000) who wrote, “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 29). Culturally responsive teaching stems from the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, which was introduced by scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1998. White principals and classroom teachers continue to learn that students walking through their doors come with different experiences that we must respond to each day. Emily Style (1996), the former founding co-director of the National SEED Project (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity), once wrote, “Half the curriculum walks in the door with the students” (p. 1). More and more of the school population are students of color. What is unfortunate is that most schools are organized around white mainstream students which then puts students of color at a disadvantage. There is culturally responsive teaching that makes sure that the experiences that students walk in with from home and their communities are represented in the curriculum that is taught every day. We then begin to look at culturally responsive teaching on the flip side of the table with white

students and Black leaders. This critical framework has been used to engage Black students and their white leaders, but little has been explored with Black leaders leading white students. It is critical to explore the research on ways Black leaders have made an impact on white students just like their white counterparts. We must also explore how to sustain such critical pedagogy in our schools. It is not enough to begin culturally responsive teaching if we don't explore culturally sustaining pedagogy in schools today.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In education, we often witness the rise of new initiatives—buzzwords that take center stage for a year before fading into obscurity. The cycle of short-lived educational trends prevents meaningful and sustained progress. Instead of embracing temporary solutions, we must prioritize the longevity of pedagogical approaches that foster inclusiveness, cultural understanding, and boundary crossing. Culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy must be upheld as cornerstones of modern education, ensuring that diverse leadership styles, particularly those of Black female leaders, are recognized for their profound impact. Ladson-Billings (2017) aptly states, “we teach what we value.” (p. 15). Yet, despite the value that Black female leaders bring to school communities, research on their contributions remains minimal. Their presence in leadership positions is not merely a matter of representation, it is a necessity for fostering equitable, student-centered learning environments. Black female leaders bridge cultural divides, challenge traditional norms, and cultivate school cultures that prioritize both academic rigor and emotional well-being. However, their leadership remains understudied and undervalued, reinforcing a need for systemic change.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is critical in today's educational landscape because it moves beyond mere diversity efforts and instead seeks to perpetuate, sustain, and celebrate

linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as integral components of schooling for positive social transformation (Paris & Alim, 2014). Unlike traditional approaches that often view cultural differences as deficits to be remediated, culturally sustaining pedagogy frames diversity as an asset and positions cultural dexterity as additive rather than subtractive. Unfortunately, traditional educational mindsets continue to confine students within rigid frameworks, limiting their exposure to perspectives that challenge, expand, and enrich their worldview. The 51st Annual PDK Poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools highlights the evolving goals of public education. According to the report, 53% of parents believe schools should prioritize academic preparedness, while 18% emphasize workforce readiness, and 28% stress the importance of developing good citizens (*The Phi Delta Kappan*, 2019). If we are to meet these goals effectively, we must equip students with the skills to navigate cultural boundaries, engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions, and cultivate empathy and critical consciousness. History has demonstrated the necessity of critical care and boundary crossing in fostering inclusive societies. It is imperative that we sustain culturally sustaining pedagogy as a guiding framework rather than allow it to become another fleeting trend.

However, we must not fall into the historical trap of viewing integration as a one-sided effort. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) remains a landmark case in educational history, yet it was largely defined by Black students crossing into white schools, with little effort to create reciprocal boundary crossing. The assumption that only marginalized students should integrate into dominant cultural spaces perpetuates systemic inequities. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (1993) challenged this limited perspective, resisting what she termed the "white gaze" in literature and advocating for authentic representation and self-determination in storytelling. As she stated, "as though our lives have no meaning, and I have spent my entire writing life trying to

make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in all of my books” (Morrison, 1998, p.152). Morrison’s words resonate deeply in education, where curriculum, leadership, and pedagogy have historically been filtered through a white-centered lens.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to reverse this imbalance by fostering boundary crossing in all directions, ensuring that students from all backgrounds engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges rather than merely assimilating into dominant cultural norms. Black female leaders are uniquely positioned to spearhead this transformation, drawing upon their lived experiences and ancestral knowledge to create school environments that are culturally affirming, academically rigorous, and emotionally supportive. By centering the wisdom, resilience, and leadership of Black women, we can reshape educational spaces to honor diverse narratives, foster inclusivity, and sustain meaningful progress in ways that transcend the limitations of past reforms.

Black Female Leadership and White Family Engagement

Black school principals can make a difference in the outcome of student success when crossing boundaries and critical care is applied and when students are beneficiaries of being cared for and loved (Hong et al., 2010). Alston (2005) discusses how Black women in leadership positions create more inclusive and affirming environments for Black students, which supports their success. *Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers* reports that Black educators and leaders play a crucial role in supporting and encouraging Black students’ academic growth and confidence (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). This shows that Black students excel under Black leadership; however, the question remains, “What about white students under Black leadership?”. There is a scarcity of research in this area that must be explored. With the emergence of Black feminist thought and intersectionality theory (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw,

1991; hooks, 1981), increasing attention has been paid to the leadership of Black women principals. In addition, traditional conceptualizations of leadership, which normalize whiteness and emphasize masculinity and charisma, contradict the positionality of Black women that stems from their race or ethnicity and gender and may contribute to them remaining institutionally invisible (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1991; Maher & Tetreault, 1993). It is time to explore the work of the Black female leader. White leaders are systematically overrepresented, many schools are looking for Black female leaders to come in and engage families and communities in ways that have never been done before.

Black Feminist Thought

This study is grounded in Black feminism. Because it is grounded in Black feminism, it is important to explore the journey of becoming a Black female leader. Black feminist thought is based on the work of Collins (1989). Black feminist thought is grounded in Black women's experiences, many of which are tethered to their spirituality and activism. There are four distinct tenets of Black feminist thought: (a) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the importance of dialogue; (c) an ethic of caring; and (d) personal accountability (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). The road to leadership is never easy and being Black and female makes it ten times harder. This road leads me to sing: *"I don't believe HE brought me this far to leave me"*.

Feminism is multifaceted and has taken on different perspectives and roles within different races of women. Black feminists have argued that current literature lacks adequate representation and analyses of the unique voices and experiences of Black women. Black women's life experiences are different from those of Black men and white women given their history. Culture and socio-political factors include the effects of years of worldwide racial oppression (Crenshaw, 1988). The stories of Black women have taught us the value of Black

female leadership and it continues to be launched into the forefront due to the elements of leadership that are brought to the table by Black female leaders daily. American history tells us that many families would not have survived without the leadership of Black women. Many schools today need this type of critical leadership in their buildings for students to be successful each and every day. Black feminist thought is another example of a deep dive into the importance of the Black female voice in leadership (Collins, 2000). This theory is important in the context of PK–12 education because it provides a voice for, and rationale of, African American women’s views of the world and how to overcome oppression and stereotypes in the workforce (Olow, 2021). To advance a leadership framework that is rooted in the historicity of brilliance embodied in Black women’s educational leadership, and their proclivity for resisting oppression, we expand on intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020) or boundary crossing that makes Black females critical to leadership roles.

Black women in educational leadership find themselves in two worlds--being Black and female. These two worlds often silence the voices of Black women in leadership because of the fear of not being able to navigate to the next level of leadership. Lomotey (2019) has also confirmed the silencing and marginalization of Black women, asserting that Black women principals are significantly understudied. Collins (2000) emphasized the need to evaluate the power behind whose story is being told and who is empowered to tell the stories. The scholarly literature insists that this habitual practice of forgetting Black women and how their gender and race intersect to create specific experiences, oppressions, and therefore, outcomes, is customary and normalized (George, 2020). Given that females of color will comprise approximately 53% of the U.S. population by the year 2050, the idea of dismissing or leaving them out of a national discourse on education and asking them to subsume themselves under other group identities (by

gender and/or race) is educationally unsound and inequitable (Center for American Progress, 2013).

Intersectional Leadership

Crenshaw (1989) defines intersectionality as, “the idea that we experience life, sometimes discrimination, sometimes benefits, based on a number of identities” (p. 18). Intersectionality was in effect in the 1960s and 1970s when women of color activists had to navigate being Black, women, and members of the workforce simultaneously—hence these women had to situate the intersections of their lives to fruitfully navigate their lived experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The life experiences of a Black female leader can be utilized as a tool to intersect with the lives of students, and cross boundaries that may push them to success. This success can be catapulted from a mere story of a Black female leader’s life experiences. First, we must examine the background of Black female leadership and intersectionality. Rooted in Black women’s educational leadership, let’s examine the unique contributions and the intersectional leadership framework by acknowledging its roots and motivations grounded in the work of our foremothers in the field (Peters, Miles & Nash, 2021).

Black women school leaders have created spaces to challenge white, hegemonic, racist structures while acknowledging their existence in leadership is an act of resistance (Alston, 2005; Dillard, 2000; McCluskey, 1997). Resistance to the status quo is what gives Black female leaders the opportunity to create spaces and opportunities for students to rise above the norm in school systems today. Therefore, the experiences of Black female leaders do not go unnoticed, and it goes against the norms of what many traditional schools see as the “norm” in school systems. There are three dimensions within intersectional leadership that must be addressed to understand the importance of intersectionality and Black female leadership. These dimensions include:

historical foundation of Black women's leadership in education, the epistemological basis of Black women's racialized and gendered experiences, and the ontological characterization of Black women's expertise in resisting anti-Black racism in educational settings (Alston, 2005; Dillard, 2000; McCluskey, 1997). The historical foundation is based on the leadership of many Black female leaders who have much in common and education of students and communities against the norm. The history of Black women in educating communities goes back to post slavery, civil rights, and an engagement in activism. The journey of our foremothers comes along with exclusionary practices to keep Black women out of leadership positions they should have possessed long ago. Our foremothers did not go down without a fight. Because of the intersection of race and gender for Black women, these experiences were necessarily different from their Black male and white female counterparts. Collier-Thomas (1982) detailed:

Historically, Black women have shared with Black men the discrimination and deprivation that characterized their sojourn from slavery to freedom. They share with white women some legal prescriptions that have limited their access to public institutions. However, despite the common problems, their historical experiences in every area of American life have been in very specific ways different from that of Black males and white females. (p. 174)

The very radical difference of discrimination with Black women as compared to their counterparts created the notion that Black women had to be leaders in their own community and carry education on their back for Black students to be successful. Black women were educated and professionally trained, despite their field of expertise, sexism and racism often limited their opportunities within the field of education (Harley, 1982). Often given limited resources and access to the field of education, Black women utilized opportunities outside of the school walls

to press toward more leadership and opportunities in their communities. The Black church was another hub for Black women to utilize their leadership skills and to push education to families and community members. Black leadership was not limited to the school building. According to Randolph (2009), “leadership always has had to attend to the context in which Black people lived outside of the schoolhouse doors” (p. 20). It is imperative that intersectional leadership continue to be explored through the lens of Black female leaders.

The historicity of Black women’s leadership expertise is rooted in their intersectional perspectives and informed by their unique lived experiences (Collins, 1989). Unique lived experiences lead to relatability and leaders who are important in their school communities enjoy much success and opportunities for greatness within the walls of the school building. Black female leadership and its intersectionality has allowed the knowledge of Black women to shine through. The brilliance that Black women possess and utilize to influence individuals come directly from their lived experience. Though Black women have historically focused on the needs of Black students, families, and communities, Black women have delivered on their intentions to use what they know, experience, and prioritize to successfully lead schools.

Intercultural Social Dynamics

Intercultural social dynamics refer to the complex interactions and relationships that occur between individuals or groups from different cultures. These dynamics can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including cultural norms, values, beliefs, communication styles, and behavioral expectations. Understanding and navigating intercultural social dynamics is crucial in our increasingly diverse and interconnected world. This also goes for schools and the events in our school systems. Schools have a responsibility to be culturally aware and when schools are in small midwestern towns, schools do not have experiences with people outside of their culture.

This is called a monocultural mindset. According to Hammer et al. (2003), people who operate from a monocultural mindset are only able to see the world from their own cultural lens and lack understanding of people who are culturally different. Enter a Black female leader who has ways of developing cultural awareness and making it a fundamental step in understanding intercultural social dynamics.

Stereotypes and prejudices can shape intercultural interactions. Being aware of these biases and working to overcome them is essential for building positive relationships across cultures. Coming into a school where the leader is from a different culture is an eye-opening experience. Established educational leadership discourse has been dominated by white American male perspectives that can sometimes be oblivious to the cultural diversity that characterizes the contemporary world (Collard, 2007). Schools have frequently privileged mono-cultural, mainstream values and in many educational settings, have become used to these practices. Intercultural social dynamics call for something new, value systems that are different from what is known, and perspectives on how to communicate with families and communities in different ways.

Students and families become aware that the communication styles in intercultural social dynamic work occur in ways they have never been aware of until a different culture of leadership comes into play. Different cultures have unique communication styles. This is important to bridge the gap between school and families. When Black female leaders begin to bridge the gap between families and school systems, the growth in students becomes evident with families and attributes to student success. An intercultural mindset becomes evident in students and students begin to understand and respond to the value and norms of the leadership in the building. From an intercultural mindset, individuals can conceptualize multiple truths and understand and

appreciate both their own culture(s) and the culture of others (Hammer, 2003). As Bakhtin (1984) explains: “I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another... [E]very internal experience ends up on the boundary” (p. 287).

Boundary Crossing

Diversity and mobility in education and work present a paramount challenge that needs better conceptualization in educational theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). This challenge has been addressed by educational scholars with the notion of boundaries, particularly in boundary crossing and boundary objects. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) emphasize that boundaries are not merely barriers, but sites of potential learning and transformation. In their review of boundary crossing literature, they identify how collaboration across professional, cultural, or institutional boundaries can lead to new understanding, practices, and identities.

By reviewing this literature, it is important to offer an understanding of boundaries as phenomena. The review of the literature reveals four potential learning mechanisms that can take place with boundaries: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. These mechanisms show various ways in which sociocultural differences and resulting discontinuities in action and interaction can come to function as resources for development of intersecting identities and practices.

Wansink et al., (2023) explore how engaging students in discussions on controversial topics can serve as a form of boundary crossing, facilitating learning through exposure to diverse perspectives. They identify that navigating between academic and personal approaches to multiple perspectives enhances students' critical thinking and understanding. This suggests that boundary crossing draws attention to how intersections of cultural practices open third spaces—

spaces that enable the negotiation of meaning and hybridity, leading to the creation of new cultural forms and dialogues. Within school buildings this could mean opportunities which provide students with a world of new meaning that shifts their form of thinking as well as their families. Sociocultural differences, at times, can seem problematic, something that should be overcome or avoided. The boundary literature initially values such differences.

Black Female Leadership

The presence of African American and other racial and ethnic minority women in superintendent and school leadership roles diminishes as they advance through the leadership pipeline (Edwards, 2016). Black feminist thought offers a critical lens to examine the significance of Black women's voices in leadership. Within the context of PK–12 education, this theory serves to amplify African American women's perspectives, providing insight into their lived experiences while addressing systemic oppression and stereotypes in the workforce (Olow, 2021). To cultivate a leadership framework that acknowledges the historical excellence of Black women in educational leadership and their continuous resistance against oppression, we draw on the concepts of intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020) and boundary crossing, both of which highlight the indispensable role of Black women in leadership positions. Black women in educational leadership must navigate the dual realities of their racial and gender identities, often leading to the suppression of their voices within leadership spaces. The challenge of advancing through the leadership ranks is compounded by the structural barriers that impede their progress. Lomotey (2019) highlights the persistent marginalization of Black women in leadership roles, noting that their experiences remain significantly understudied. Furthermore, Collins (2000) underscores the necessity of critically examining who holds the

power to tell these stories and whose narratives are being acknowledged, emphasizing the importance of centering Black women's leadership experiences in educational discourse.

Critical Care Theory

As the era of accountability in education continues, it is easy to overlook one of the most fundamental needs of students and staff—leaders who genuinely care. In a time when leadership and reform often prioritize top-down approaches, the critical element of care is frequently neglected. However, we must not forget that at the core of human nature lies the need for love, connection, and compassion. Effective school leadership must not only uphold high expectations but also demonstrate care for both staff and students, fostering an environment where both groups feel supported and valued. Critical care theory (Noddings, 2013) and how it functions in schools today is not to take away from academic rigor but to enhance the work of classroom teachers who are responsible for achieving academic rigor. This theory is important to discuss as it is critical to students and staff and the leadership in the building. The first reason critical care theory is important is students are beneficiaries of this model. Having caring adults in their lives increases the odds of students performing well academically. It is worth repeating that students and their needs come first. All students benefit greatly from the critical care model. The second reason this theory is critical is that teachers and staff benefit. How does a school operate without caring for adults in the school, teachers and staff, who are in the trenches with students daily. They need the utmost care. The final reason why critical care theory works in schools today is because it emphasizes interpersonal relationships that leaders must have to be successful in their leadership. Showing families, students, and teachers that there is a level of care and concern for all students, staff, and families is an important goal in education.

Being caring should be central to school leadership, especially in a world where students must maintain mental health as well as acquire educational wealth. The leader in the building is the core person who sets the tone and provides the care net for everyone in the building. In education there are many pressures, including high stakes testing, career preparation, athletics and activities, and needs assessments that all students and staff deal with daily. Caring is intersubjective and phenomenological (Noddings, 2013; Tarlow, 1996). Students who feel academically and socially supported have a better chance of being successful in school. Leaders have to consider the voice of students in the buildings they serve. Noddings (2013) argues,

Natural caring [is] the condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as 'good.' It is that condition toward which we long and strive, and it is our longing for caring—to be in that special relation—that provides the motivation for us to be moral. (p. 83)

First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an on-going relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach (Noddings, 2013). Such mutuality is often with students and principals, teachers and students, and teachers and principals. This allows an extension beyond the school building. Families, patrons, and superintendents become increasingly willing to be involved in the happenings of the school setting. This is because mutual respect and caring relationships are visibly seen and brings out the best in everyone working hard to help students achieve.

In continuation of critical care theory is that caring itself brings positivity and a mindset of compassion, empathy, kindness, honesty, trustworthiness, and respect for others and their integrity. Several mindsets also contribute to a foundation for caring. Two stand out as particularly important (Noddings, 2013). Caring is recognized as beneficial and rewarding for

both the ones caring and the ones cared for. This systemic change is an important aspect of leadership. Many students at Midwest High School have said this school year feels different because I feel cared for and seen by teachers and administrators. Noddings (2013) contends that caring is enabled in relationships that are: 1) enduring and personally deep, 2) open and honest, and 3) characterized by trust. Relationships that are enduring and personally deep means the effect is long lasting and will be felt even after the student is no longer in the school system. The personal connection students have with educators will run so deep that the connection and relationships will stand the test of time. Caring brings forth openness and honesty in individuals which gives students an opportunity to be vulnerable and honest with educators so that students give their best work in the classroom. We should care about caring in schools because there is substantial empirical evidence that the social and academic support arising from caring is good for students and their success (Murphy & Holste, 2016; Murphy & Torres, 2014).

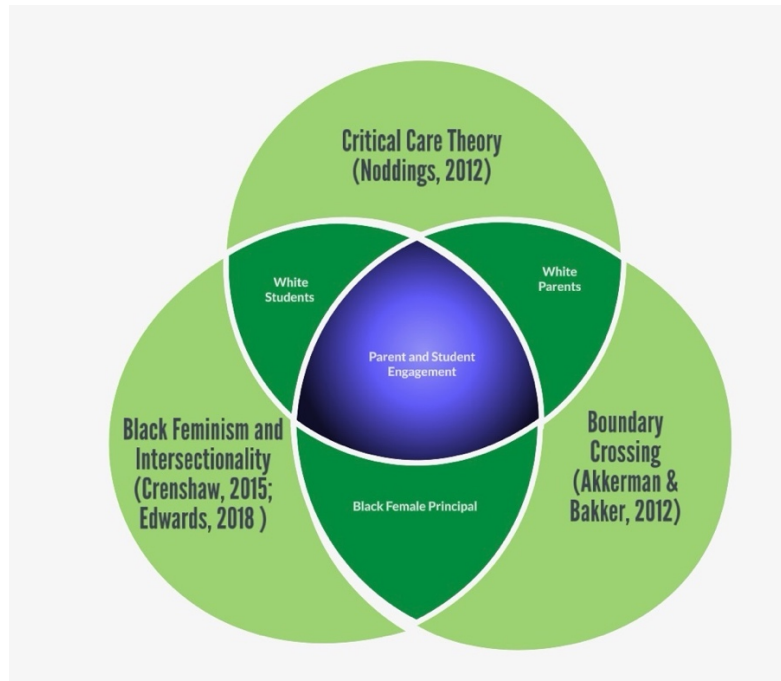
Students are more willing to take on challenging work when they can trust their teacher or school leader. Positive relationships encourage students' motivation to learn. As a student, I remember wanting to give my best work to a teacher that I trusted and that I knew genuinely cared about what happened to me long after high school. Caring may be reflected in proactive initiative, in direct support, in being with, even in doing and saying nothing (Benner 1994).

Conceptual Framework: Critical Care Theory, Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and Boundary Crossing

In Figure 2.1, the conceptual framework integrates critical care theory, Black feminism and intersectionality, and boundary crossing, illustrating the interconnectedness of these theories in shaping Black female leadership in predominantly white school settings. critical care theory (Noddings, 2013) emphasizes the role of relational care and attentiveness in leadership. Black

feminism and intersectionality (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991) provide a lens for understanding the unique challenges and strengths of Black female leaders who navigate systemic barriers. Boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) highlights the ways in which Black female leaders navigate cultural, social, and institutional divides, serving as bridges between diverse communities and creating inclusive school cultures. Together, these conceptual frameworks construct a leadership model rooted in care, equity, and cultural responsiveness, offering a holistic approach to transforming educational spaces for students, families, and staff.

Figure 2.1 *Conceptual Framework*



Boundary Crossing

While "boundary crossing" is a broader term, "cultural boundary crossing" specifically refers to the act of moving across or engaging with a different cultural space, implying a conscious effort to navigate differences between cultures. Whereas "boundary crossing" can refer to any situation where a defined line or limit is crossed, not necessarily within a cultural context (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Cultural boundary crossing, as explored throughout this study, plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusive environments across educational, social, and professional landscapes. It challenges individuals to navigate between different cultural norms and practices, allowing for a richer understanding of diverse perspectives and the capacity to effectively cross the “*bridge*”. Cultural boundaries are integral to promoting equity, enhancing collaboration, and encouraging innovation in diverse contexts. Boundary crossing can be a source of learning opportunities, as it involves working with people from different groups and organizations (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Research reveals that cultural boundary crossing is not merely about adaptation but about creating a dynamic interaction between cultures, where individuals are empowered to bring their full cultural selves into new environments. This is particularly significant in educational settings, where students from diverse backgrounds often navigate between home and school cultures (Khalifa et al., 2016). By validating and sustaining students' cultural identities within academic contexts, educators can enhance engagement, reduce dropout rates, and foster a more inclusive educational experience (Paris, 2012).

As individuals and groups continuously interact across cultural lines, they gain valuable insights that challenge assumptions and promote more inclusive practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Yahya and Wood (2016) examine how students and teachers can create a *third space* in educational settings that *bridges* the boundaries between students' home cultures and school literacy practices. Moreover, educational institutions and organizations must provide the necessary support structures—such as mentoring programs, inclusive leadership, and culturally responsive policies—to ensure that boundary crossing is a positive and affirming experience for all individuals.

The exploration of cultural boundary crossing in communities highlights the importance of active engagement and leadership in fostering intercultural understanding and inclusivity. As communities around the world become increasingly diverse, the need for effective strategies that promote cross-cultural interaction becomes ever more critical (Banks, 2008). By encouraging community engagement, utilizing cultural mediators, and supporting local leadership, communities can create spaces where diverse cultural groups can come together to form cohesive, vibrant social environments.

Cultural mediators are equally essential in navigating the complexities of cultural boundary crossing. A cultural mediator is an individual who acts as a *bridge* in translation between the culture of the school environment and the child's family to enhance understanding, share information, and create a relationship that supports families as full participants in the assessment process and delivering education services (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2001). Cultural mediators, often individuals who are deeply embedded within the community and understand multiple cultures, play a vital role in resolving conflicts, facilitating communication, and ensuring that all voices are heard. The role of fostering cultural boundary crossing cannot be understated. Leaders who prioritize cultural inclusivity, serve as a *bridge* and actively promote cross-cultural dialogue to help shape the value of diversity (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2001). In doing so, they play a crucial role in *bridging* cultural divides and fostering environments where all students and families, regardless of their background, can thrive.

Finally, the success of cultural boundary crossing initiatives depends on the willingness of school leaders to engage with communities to engage in ongoing learning of one another's cultures. As demographics shift and cultural practices evolve, school leaders and their communities must remain flexible and open to new ideas. This process requires continuous

dialogue and reflection, particularly in addressing systemic inequities that may hinder the full participation of marginalized cultural groups (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Moving forward, the sustained commitment of both individuals and school leaders to these principles will be key in building equitable, inclusive societies that not only acknowledge but also celebrate their cultural diversity.

Culturally Sustaining Instructional Leadership

The concept of cultural sustaining instructional leadership is essential for creating educational environments that prioritize equity, inclusion, and the validation of students' diverse cultural backgrounds. This concept builds on Ladson-Billings (1995) original concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, extending it to what she calls *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0*. It discusses the evolution of teaching that affirms students' cultural identities while promoting academic success and is foundational to the understanding of culturally responsive and sustaining educational practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach emphasizes that cultural diversity is an asset to student learning and success rather than a barrier. By fostering environments where students' cultural identities are affirmed and integrated into educational experiences, leaders can ensure that all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, have equitable opportunities for academic and personal growth.

Khalifa (2018) outlines a framework for culturally sustaining instructional leadership, which begins with critical self-reflection. School leaders must examine their own biases and understand how those biases shape their decisions, interactions, and the broader school culture. Paris (2012) first introduces the concept of "culturally sustaining pedagogy," which calls for education to maintain and sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism. Khalifa (2018) continues to build on this reflective practice, helping leaders dismantle power structures that

marginalize certain cultural groups, enabling them to adopt more inclusive practices that affirm all students' identities. Khalifa emphasizes that continuous professional development in cultural competence is essential to this process, allowing leaders to refine their ability to serve diverse student populations effectively.

Building an inclusive school culture is another cornerstone of this leadership model. Schools must create physical and social environments that reflect the cultural diversity of their student body (Khalifa et al., 2016). This includes revising curriculum to include culturally relevant content that resonates with students' lived experiences. Schools should also foster welcoming spaces where cultural symbols, languages, and traditions are visible and celebrated. Again, it is important to examine how students and teachers can create a third space in educational settings that “*bridges*” the boundaries between students' home cultures and school literacy practices (Yahya & Wood, 2016). By doing so, schools not only validate students' cultural identities but also promote a sense of belonging, which is critical for their academic engagement and success (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Engaging families and communities is a key strategy for sustaining cultural identities within schools. Khalifa (2018) highlights the importance of building authentic partnerships with families from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their perspectives are integrated into school decision-making processes. Culturally responsive engagement strategies, and organizing culturally relevant school events, help *bridge* the gap between home and school, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for student success (Johnson, 2014). Moreover, engaging with community organizations and local leaders allows schools to draw on the cultural knowledge and resources that exist within the community, further enhancing students' educational experiences (Khalifa, 2018).

In terms of pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching is critical for sustaining students' cultural identities in the classroom. Gay's (2018) work is pivotal in the development of culturally responsive teaching strategies that school leaders can support through policies, teacher development, and curriculum choices. According to Khalifa (2018), school leaders must ensure that teachers are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to implement teaching practices that affirm and celebrate cultural diversity. This includes professional development focused on culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as ongoing mentorship and coaching to help teachers integrate these practices into their daily instruction. By promoting student-centered, inquiry-based learning that connects academic content to students' cultural backgrounds, teachers can enhance student engagement and achievement.

Lastly, culturally sustaining instructional leadership provides a powerful framework for creating schools that not only recognize but sustain and amplify the diverse cultural identities of students (Khalifa et al., 2016). By embracing cultural diversity as a strength, culturally sustaining leaders can promote academic success, equity, and inclusivity for all students. As Khalifa (2018) suggests, the long-term success of this leadership approach depends on the ongoing commitment of school leaders to embrace self-reflection, community engagement, and culturally responsive teaching.

Collective Memory

Halbwachs' (1992) concept of collective memory centers around the idea that memory is not just a personal or individual process but is significantly shaped and maintained through social interactions and group affiliations. He argues that individuals recall the past by anchoring their memories within the framework of shared experiences and cultural narratives of the groups to which they belong, such as families, religious communities, and nations. Originally published in

1950, Halbwachs' foundational work on collective memory argues that memories are not individual, but they are shaped by social contexts and group memberships. Halbwachs (1992) also emphasizes that these groups provide contexts, language, and symbols that enable individuals to remember. For example, the memory of a historical event is often influenced by the collective identity and values of a society. This means that memories are not static; they can be reinterpreted and reshaped over time as the collective memory of a group evolves to reflect current beliefs and values.

Halbwachs (1992) also makes a distinction between historical memory, which is more objective and based on documented facts, and collective memory, which is more subjective and connected to group identity. He suggests that collective memory is more about how the past is used to sustain a group's present identity than about accurately recounting events. Therefore, different groups may remember the same event in varying ways. Connerton (1989) explores the role of social memory in shaping historical consciousness, focusing on how societies memorialize and transmit memories through rituals, commemorations, and bodily practices. This work provides a sociological perspective on how memory is embodied in everyday life.

Collective memory can change over time. This topic continues to be explored more and more because of the complex relationship between historical facts and how societies collectively remember them, essentially examining the processes by which historical events are transformed into cultural memory within a community or nation (Assmann, 2008). Assman (2008) describes this as an intimate link between history and memory and how it shapes the accounts of the past in a specific way. Assman (2008) also makes the connection that history and memory can be forced based on a specific power structure. In addition to this, only such events were selected that supported the opinions and interest of the ruling class. Many marginalized groups of people were

obviously not the ruling class, so their stories and historical moments were only told by the ruling class. When Halbwachs (1992) described collective memory, he compared historical discourse to an ocean that frames all the partial narratives and memories. The French historian, Pierre Nora (1989), some sixty years after Halbwachs' work, also explored how memory is embodied in physical spaces, objects, and rituals that become symbolic for a group's collective memory. The ruling classes' collective memory can be changed based off this very statement by Nora (1989). Cultures each have a collective memory and stories to be told; therefore, it is important to begin exploring cultural memory.

Cultural Memory

The concept of cultural memory, as developed by Erll (2010), explores the ways in which societies create, sustain, and transmit memories across time. Building upon the foundational work of Halbwachs (1992), who introduced the idea of collective memory, Erll (2010) extends this framework by emphasizing the significance of cultural artifacts and practices—such as literature, media, monuments, and rituals—in shaping collective memories. Unlike Halbwachs, who primarily focused on social groups as the primary agents of memory transmission, Erll (2010) stresses the role of cultural products, which serve as conduits for memory, carrying it across generations. Erll (2010) categorizes cultural memory into two primary forms, communicative memory and cultural memory as stated below.

1. **Communicative Memory:** This form of memory is based on everyday communication and interpersonal interactions. Communicative memory is typically confined to the living memory of three to four generations, relying heavily on direct transmission from one person to another. As individuals who carry these memories pass away, communicative memory tends to fade.

2. Cultural Memory: In contrast, cultural memory involves the preservation and transmission of memories through institutional means, such as texts, symbols, rituals, and artifacts. Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory is more enduring, as it is embedded in various media and ritualistic practices. These carriers of memory ensure that collective memories persist even after those who initially experienced them are no longer alive.

Erll (2010) argues that cultural memory is not static but dynamic, constantly being shaped and reshaped by contemporary concerns and identities. Cultural texts, whether they are films, novels, or memorials, do not merely reflect pre-existing memories but actively participate in shaping them. These texts influence how groups understand their past and frame it in relation to the present. For example, cultural products can serve as a means for societies to reconcile historical trauma or assert national identity, depending on the current socio-political context. Erll (2010) provides a robust framework for analyzing how memory is constructed, reinforced, and reinterpreted within societies. These insights into cultural memory have profound implications for understanding identity formation, the exercise of power, and the continuity of culture over time. By showing how cultural memory functions as both a repository of shared history and a tool for negotiating contemporary identity, Erll (2010) contributes significantly to the broader field of memory studies.

Through detailed examination of the mechanisms by which societies construct and transmit cultural memory, Erll (2010) demonstrates that memory is not merely a reflection of the past but a means through which societies interpret and navigate their present realities. This work has profound implications for understanding how collective memory is maintained and transformed, influencing everything from individual identity to national narratives. The

exploration of critical care theory, Black feminist thought, intersectionality, boundary crossing, and collective and cultural memory in the literature review provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the lived experiences of Black female leaders in predominantly white school settings. These frameworks highlight the significance of relational care, cultural responsiveness, and the navigation of systemic barriers in leadership. To further examine these concepts, Chapter three outlines the research methodology, detailing the qualitative approach used to capture the narratives of a Black female leader, white students, and parents.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Moving Towards Methods: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired

I don't feel no ways tired

I come to far from where I started from

Nobody told me, the road would be easy and

I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me

This study is qualitative in nature and uses a blend of narrative inquiry (Kim, 2015) and critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Ellis et al., 2011). The narratives of boundary crossing by Black female leaders with non-Black students and families are few and far between. The stories of their triumphs and failures should be told so other leaders, students, and families who are in the same situation can understand and relate in a way that makes them want to be equally as successful. Students who come from diverse backgrounds, single parent homes, and homes of low socioeconomic status are vastly underrepresented. Their stories of triumph and transformation are yearning to be told to the masses.

Qualitative research begins with one or more relatively broad research questions that may be revised iteratively as the research is carried out to narrow the research aim or purpose. With this, students' experiences in schools are based a great deal on their daily interactions with teachers and staff members. Many of these interactions shape their thoughts and feelings about school and who they can trust within the school. What better way to help other students, teachers, parents, and staff than to retell their stories and construct an understanding of their experiences?

In Ladson-Billings' (2009) book, *Dream Keepers*, she asks, “Does Culture Matter?” Some would say that culture is all that matters, especially when it comes to serving

underrepresented youth in an alternative school setting. Black female leaders recognize the importance of community and having a family-oriented atmosphere conducive to learning and growing. A community that is founded on building relationships with students and their families is key. There is an African Proverb that states, “It takes a village to raise a child”, which means an entire community of people must interact with children for them to continue to grow in a safe and healthy environment. Ladson-Billings (2009) said it best, schools should be like a family. Leaders should expect students to take responsibility for each other and to teach and take care of each other. What an amazing culture to create in a school where all students feel supported, loved, and cherished by not only their leaders, but their families also feel equally valued. This narrative and autoethnographic inquiry help us deepen our understanding of how these lived experiences unfold while practicing critical care and boundary crossing across Black-white leader-family dynamics.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the intercultural social dynamics between a Black female principal and white students and parents in a midwestern school. Specifically, this study explored parent and student engagement through the lenses of boundary crossing, narrative inquiry, interview study, and critical care theory, coupled with an autoethnographic thread focused on my experiences as a Black female leader.

Research Questions

1. What are my lived experiences as a Black female principal engaged in cultural boundary crossing when working with white families? (Autoethnography)

2. What are the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal? (Interview Study)
3. What are the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal? (Interview Study)

Chapter 3 outlines each component of the research design. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that focuses on the stories people tell about their lives, allowing researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. In the following sections, I also outline how I utilized critical care theory, Black female leadership, and boundary crossing to conduct this narrative and autoethnographic inquiry. Overall, I blended these elements to provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the lived experiences of the participants' cultural, social, and personal contexts and the connections to my own lived experiences.

Narrative Inquiry

Mitchell et al. (2017) declared, "the study of narrative is no longer the province of literary specialists or folklorists borrowing their terms from psychology and linguistics but has now become a positive source of insight for all the branches of human and natural science" (p. ix). These branches of insight become the stories of those humans who want their stories to be told in a way that offers literary specialists a significant amount of information that one may never know without stories being told. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives" (p. 2). This saying is so profound in that humans have little knowledge of how much power their stories have when

others read the stories of their lives. It creates an impact on researchers that no one can understand or fathom because these stories come from deep within and all experiences of life are seen from different perspectives. That is why the importance and phenomenon of narrative inquiry is very important in the field of research. First, the word narrative is from the Latin narrat- (“related,” “told”), narrare (“to tell”), or late Latin narrativus (“telling a story”), all of which are akin to Latin gnârus (“knowing”), derived from the ancient Sanskrit gnâ (“to know”) (Kim, 2016). It is important to note that the word narrative is a two-part word that means to tell and to know. A narrator can be one who knows and tells stories, and it goes all the way back to Aristotle, known as the first great analyst of narrative (Boyd, 2009). Without narratives our history would not be told, and we would have no real idea of our origins and our ancestry. I speak from a narrative inquiry perspective and how much storytelling meant in my family and culture. I can still see my grandmother sitting in her rocking chair telling stories of our family and singing,

“Look how far God brought us from, look how far God brought us from! He has kept us day by day, look how far the Lord has brought us from. He brought us, he kept us, he brought us, he kept us. Look how far the Lord has brought us from.”

These stories resonate within me and give meaning to my origins and let me know just how much was sacrificed for me to be in the position that I am in today. Many critics have questioned the difference between narrative and stories. These terms can be interchangeable but there is a difference. Kim (2015) states that a narrative is a recounting of events that are organized in a temporal sequence, and this linear organization of events makes up a story (Abbott, 2008). Thus, a story is a detailed organization of narrative events arranged in a (story) structure based on time, although the events are not necessarily in chronological order (Kim, 2016). Stories are told daily

but to narrative inquiry, these events must be sequenced and in order. We then look at narrative inquiry as a theory and its critical role in many other theories in the “academic world”. There is strong disagreement across the social sciences about the role of theory in narrative inquiry (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Rorty (1991) offers more insight into stories that are more paramount than theory as theory serves as a medium to fulfill the purpose of telling a story better. Narrative inquiry is “the main thing” and the theory that is attached should not be the “main thing” but open to interpret and inquire more about the topic that is being investigated. It gives researchers a place to explore more, and to add “... what conceptual language does the student think [micro-level of discipline] ... with what concepts [meso-level of methodology] . . . what lenses” (Kim, 2016, p. 233). These lenses lead us into other theories like critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), another form of storytelling from an author’s lived experiences, and connect the researcher’s insights into self-identity and cultural rules.

Autoethnography

According to Ellis et al. (2010), autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. Let’s explore an overview of autoethnography to get a better understanding of the process and the product. Scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplines began to consider what social sciences would become if they were closer to literature than to physics, if they proffered stories rather than theories, and if they were self-consciously value-centered rather than pretending to be value free (Bochner, 1994).

Personal experiences influence research, and many scholars cited in this study have many personal experiences that were influential in my research as well. When researchers do ethnography, they study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and share experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture (Maso, 2001). However, autoethnography seeks to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994). I intended to do the same in this research by molding perfectly together the research and my very own experiences and personal journey.

Informed by Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography is personal, narrative storytelling taken from the experiences of the researcher. Autoethnography is a form of narrative research that seeks to systematically analyze the researcher's personal experience embedded in a larger social and cultural context (Kim, 2016). These personal experiences serve as insight into the researcher's life, their backstory, and how they interconnect with the research topic. Autoethnography as a genre of narrative inquiry, then, refers to a research form that presents critical self-study or an analysis of the experience of the self (Hughes et al., 2012). The word "self" does not mean that the world is a stage, and the researcher writes solely of oneself but to utilize experiences and how one's culture creates an openness and a connection of ways to serve others and make an impact on them. In the book, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* by Boylorn and Orbe (2020), these stories blur the boundaries between humanities and social

sciences, expressing concrete lived experiences in novel and literary forms, depicting local stories and including local authors' critical reflections of their lives and writing processes. It's important to emphasize that this form of transparency gives the reader a way to connect and relate to the researcher. As the researcher and writer of my very own lived experiences in this midwestern town, I connected my culture and lived experiences to the students that I serve on a daily basis. My identity comes from my cultural experiences and no matter what the difference, there is a commonality with the students I get to serve every day which is a critical lens to this research. Boylorn and Orbe (2020) write that stories should compel us as readers and participants in the diverse world in which we live to think with open hearts and minds. In Kim's (2016) book it states that although reflection is at the heart of autoethnographic storytelling, the autoethnography researcher goes beyond reflection and makes herself or himself a subject for critical analysis.

Standards of Quality

The quality of writing has continued to evolve, and qualitative research continues to evolve with it. Critical analytical processes (CAP) are also a part of this evolution (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, it states ethnographic projects are humanly situated, through human eyes and human perception. CAP is also a methodological approach used in qualitative research. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) emphasize the importance of criticality and reflexivity in qualitative research practices. A reflexive and critical stance towards research encourages researchers to continuously interrogate their assumptions, biases, and power dynamics that shape the research process. The authors argue that qualitative research should not only aim to describe or interpret phenomena but also to challenge dominant

narratives and power structures. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) offer the following key elements of CAP ethnographies:

1. Reflexivity: Researchers are encouraged to reflect on their own positionality, values, and perspectives that may influence the research process and findings. This reflexivity helps to acknowledge and address potential biases and subjectivities in the research.

2. Criticality: The approach emphasizes critical thinking and analysis, where researchers question underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and taken-for-granted beliefs. Criticality involves examining how social, political, and cultural contexts shape the research topic and findings.

3. Engagement with theory: Researchers are encouraged to engage with existing conceptual frameworks, concepts, and literature relevant to their research topic. Theory provides a lens through which researchers can interpret and analyze their data (Kim, (2016).

4. Dialogical Writing: The approach emphasizes the importance of writing as a method of inquiry. Researchers are encouraged to write in a reflexive, dialogical manner, engaging in an ongoing dialogue with their data, conceptual frameworks, and the broader scholarly community.

Overall, CAP offers a set of standards that promotes critical engagement, reflexivity, and conceptual sophistication in qualitative research practices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Additionally, there are eight key markers to qualitative research articulated by Tracy (2010), and the importance of having this standard of quality within research is of utmost importance. This research adheres to the “bigger tent” and standards put forth in qualitative research. High quality standards in methodological research include: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d)

credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). This conceptualization is designed to provide a parsimonious pedagogical tool, promote respect from power keepers who often misunderstand and misevaluate qualitative work, develop a platform from which qualitative scholars can join in unified voice, and encourage dialogue and learning amongst qualitative methodologists from various paradigms (Tracy, 2010).

Narrative writing and CAP ethnographies can be integrated to offer a robust approach to qualitative research that combines the storytelling power of narratives with critical reflexivity, conceptual engagement, and dialogical analysis. Applied in this research, this integration gives way to uncover complex social phenomena with the stories of students in the school environment, challenge dominant narratives where Black female leadership has not been discussed nor researched enough to give credit where credit is due and contribute to broader discussions within the field. Narrative writing encourages researchers to reflect on their own experiences, perspectives, and biases, which aligns with the reflexive stance advocated in CAP ethnographies. In this research, I used CAP ethnographies to critically examine the positionality of students and parents throughout the research process, acknowledging how their personal experiences shape the interpretation and analysis of data.

Narrative writing involves stories or narratives based on qualitative data. In this research, I used narrative writing methods focused on capturing and representing the lived experiences of participants through storytelling. This approach aligns with CAP ethnography emphasis on engaging participants with their storytelling and using narratives of research where participants critically play a role in the research process. Richardson (1999) defines creative analytic practices in this way:

In the wake of poststructuralist, feminist, critical race literary and queer theory, ethnographic work now appears in multiple venues in a variety of forms. The ethnographic genre has been blurred, enlarged, and altered to include autoethnography, poetry, drama, conversation, new journalism, readers' theater, performance, hypertext, fiction, faction, creative nonfiction, true fiction, aphorisms, comedy, satire, layered texts, writing stories, songs, museum installations, photographs, body painting, choreography and so forth. (p. 660)

Finally, CAP ethnographies emphasize writing as a method of inquiry. As the researcher in this work, it was my honor to engage in an ongoing dialogue with participants and gather data, apply theories, and weave together the voices of participants with theories, insights, and critical reflections. The dialogical writing process fosters deeper understanding and interpretation of the qualitative data. Figure 3.1 shows the criteria for excellent qualitative research and gives a comprehensive view of expected quality and the end goal.

To summarize how Tracy's (2010) eight significant criteria applied to this research, I offer the following considerations. Black female leadership is most certainly a worthy topic that needs more exploration in its entirety. There are very few research topics that explore and go into depth on the relevant literature and interesting knowledge of the Black female leader. Worthy topics often emerge from disciplinary priorities and, therefore, are conceptually compelling. However, worthy topics just as easily grow from timely societal or personal events. Indeed, a phrenetic approach suggests contextual priorities are integral when developing a project (Tracy, 2006).

Figure 3.1 *Tracy's (2010) Eight Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Research*

Table 1. Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research	
Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethical	The research considers • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
Meaningful coherence	The study • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

This research also has rich rigor that uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate yet complex conceptual constructs. Tracy (2006) asks the following questions:

- Is there enough data to support significant claims?
- Did the researcher spend enough time gathering interesting and significant data?
- Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study?

- Did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures?

Descriptions of personal stories and interviews from participants are the heart of this research.

This leads to the next standard of qualitative research which is sincerity. Sincerity as an end goal can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing (Tracy, 2010). There are many different levels to the word sincerity, significant is the concept of self-reflexivity. Autoethnography plays a huge role and takes a great deal of self-reflexivity and transparency as it relates to the interviewees and their stories. These stories resonate with the audience and bring about the next critical criteria. Additionally, resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability (Tracy, 2010). Aesthetic merit and transferability work hand in hand because of the uniqueness of participant stories in this research. All the interviewees, including myself, had a unique narrative or story to tell but how the story transfers across all stories were not the same. However, some commonalities exist. Each story contributed significantly to the research, being a major criterion of qualitative research. These stories “bring clarity to confusion, make visible what is hidden or inappropriately ignored, and generate a sense of insight and deepened understanding” (Tracy, 1995, p. 209). This includes procedural ethics and relational ethics. Gonzalez (2000) argues that the researcher as a human instrument should always respect others, which includes allowing participants to assist in defining the rules of the research. Finally, the last standard of quality is meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). This study interconnected research designs, data collection, and stories of oneself in relation to the participants, and provided space for additional findings in the end. I represented these pieces through coherent and meaningful storytelling.

Research Design and Procedures

The research design for this study was structured to effectively address its purpose through a qualitative approach. Specifically, the study employed narrative inquiry and autoethnography to explore the lived experiences of Black female leadership in predominantly white school settings. Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and boundary crossing, the research design allowed for a deeper analysis of bridging leadership across cultural boundaries.

The data collection process included semi-structured interviews with participants and an examination of participant narratives, incorporating their personal reflections. The semi-structured interviews followed Bhattacharya's (2017) framework, allowing for flexibility and depth in exploring participants' experiences. This methodology ensured that both individual stories and broader conceptual frameworks informed the study, providing a comprehensive understanding of Black female leadership within the context of cultural boundary crossing and critical care.

Ethics

When conducting research on human subjects, researchers must minimize harm and risks and maximize benefits (Resnik, 2020). Participants should be treated with the utmost respect when they return to school after an interview session. Narrative inquiry is all about storytelling and building a trusting relationship with participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) plays a crucial role in safeguarding the rights, welfare, and well-being of human participants involved in research. The IRB reviews research proposals to ensure that studies are designed in compliance with ethical principles. Ethical standards must be upheld, particularly regarding informed consent, risk minimization, and confidentiality.

This research study was reviewed and approved by the Kansas State University IRB, ensuring that all ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects were met. Approval was granted prior to the initiation of data collection, affirming that the study adhered to protocols designed to protect the rights, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Participants were informed of their rights, including the voluntary nature of their involvement and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. IRB approval reflects the university's commitment to upholding ethical standards in academic research.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected from a midwestern school. I called the families of the participants to inform them of the study and asked if they would be interested in their students participating in an interview. The families chosen for the study were part of the midwestern school, but their identities were not revealed to maintain confidentiality. Participants were all white students and parents from separate families. I chose students and parents from the midwestern school because the rapport and trust built with these families were important to accomplishing the aims of the study. I contacted students and parents who showed interest in the research. After reviewing the purpose of the study and answering questions, students signed a consent form, along with their parents who signed a separate consent form. It was important to make sure all students and parents felt comfortable sharing their experiences, as qualitative researchers work with interpreting people's stories, experiences, and specific discourses (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Researchers who use narrative inquiry are interested in understanding how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of a story (Bhattacharya, 2017). Polkinghorne (1988) argues that working with stories holds significant promise for qualitative researchers

because stories are particularly suited as a linguistic form in which human experience can be expressed. It is imperative that participants can articulate their life experiences to the researcher due to the importance of their story to the researcher's study. In narrative inquiry it is worth saying that participants and data may not be huge in numbers, but it matters that the researcher gets quality data from the participants of the study. Although the midwestern school has a plethora of students and parents for the research, I selected four participants. The participants in this study included two white students and two white parents (see Table 3.1). It was important to ensure the relationship between the researcher and participants.

Table 3.1

Participant Description

Tina	White parent who lives in the midwestern town and has a student who attends Midwest High School. Strong feisty mom who didn't play about her son's education; she is supportive and willing to work with the school to make her son successful. Our professional relationship developed over five years.
Sheila	White parent who lives in the midwestern town and has a student who attends Midwest High School. She is quiet and wants her child to succeed more than anything else. She depends on the strong support system of the school and relies on the trusted adults in her daughter's education. Our professional relationship developed over four years.
Grahm	White student who attends Midwest High School. He has been a student at Midwest High for five Years. He began as a student who was troubled, and his relationships depended on who he trusted which were not many people. He thrived on knowing that we valued his outspokenness and depended on his support system. Our professional relationship developed over three years.

Gina	White student who attends Midwest High School. She was a student who was anxious and fearful about school. She wants to be heard at all costs. She is in need of lots of support and thrives on positive communication and affirmations from the building leader and trusted adults. Our professional relationship developed over two years.
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This study centered on collecting life experiences, so the number of participants was smaller, but the interviews were of an appropriate length (Kim, 2016). The criteria used to select participants were: 1) must attend the midwestern school, 2) be a white parent of a student at the midwestern school, 3) be willing to participate and share life experiences, 4) commit to data collection procedures, 5) willing to be interviewed more than once, 6) know the interview would be recorded and transcribed, 7) willing to sign an informed consent to participate in the research, and 8) know the interview data would be published and read. Lastly, participants in the study had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Hence, the notion of informed consent is grounded in the principles of confidentiality, individual autonomy, and beneficence (Marzano, 2012).

Research Site

Data collection occurred at Midwest High School. Many of the participants were familiar with me, the researcher, allowing more opportunity to gain trust. Participants were made to feel comfortable within an office setting at the school and informal conversations before the interview commenced.

Membership Role

As the researcher in this study, I played an important role due to having been the leader of the midwestern school. This allowed a preexisting relationship with the participants and their

families. This familiarity allowed participants to discuss and talk more freely with me when given the opportunity to discuss perspectives about their school experiences and upbringing. It was important to understand my role and position in this study as a Black woman who is in a leadership role and seeks to build relationships every day. It was also important that I understood that the experiences of being a Black female leader may or may not directly reflect on my experiences with the participants.

The reason for this research is that many times the stories of Black females and their experiences in leadership are not told. Black feminist thought was first developed by Collins (1986) to differentiate traditional feminist theory from experiences of women of color, who also struggle with racism. Black feminist thought is based on Black women's use of marginality to reflect on and incorporate self-definition and self-evaluation to become effective change agents who can defy societal oppression (Collins, 1986). These are all factors that influenced my research design and data collection.

Because this study was also founded in critical care theory, it was crucial to make sure that each participant felt at ease and comfortable during all interview sessions. A second dimension of caring school leadership focuses on cultivating caring communities in schools (Fuqua & Newman, 2002; Lawrence & Maitli, 2012). Cultivating a relationship with the participants and giving them the opportunity to express their experiences and life stories was important to me. Cultivating caring communities within schools also involves developing aspects of school organization that are conducive to the development and expression of caring (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Noddings, 2005).

Boundary crossing also plays an important role in this study and my membership role was also as a person from the outside looking inside. I am not white, nor am I the mother of a

white student. I am culturally different from the students that I serve in the school building every day. There are many differences in cultural upbringing that I was not privileged to know before delving into this study. Although I work closely with the students and families within the school, I do not go to their homes, and I also do not have an inside look at the happenings within their home environment. Research has identified “other-mothering” as an example of how Black women show this compassion for students (Cooper, 2009). Cooper (2009) describes “other-mothering”(p. 389) as a form of communal care offered by African American women, provided to assist others. This other-mothering effect has allowed Black female leaders to cross culture boundaries and become a mother-like figure for students. These are all factors beneficial or non-beneficial to the interview studies conducted regardless of the relationship between researcher and participant.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection is not always a linear process. My data collection began as I interviewed participants and continued through the coding process. It continued through the process of writing the final product because the act of rewriting, editing, and retelling their stories and mine was a process of deepening the narrative through ongoing analysis. Kim (2015) states, “interviews provide unique insights into the complex lives of individuals in a society. Individual interviews are the most commonly used data collection method in qualitative research and the foremost method in narrative inquiry” (p. 157). I collected the data with launch dates (interviews of participants), participant writings, and collecting artifacts. There are many ways qualitative researchers use conversations as a way of understanding an experience. These include but are not limited to formal semi-structured interview in-depth, open-ended interview, and informal open-ended interview natural conversations (Bhattacharya, 2017). In semi-structured interviews, the

researcher prepares general questions they want to ask, but uses the questions only to guide the interview, helping the researcher maintain the focus of the study rather than dictate its direction. These interviews are also called guided interviews or guided conversations in which the researcher may prepare six to ten questions providing a general order to guide the course of the interview (Kim, 2016).

In this study, I used a semi-structured interview process for the students and parents. An initial interview was conducted with students and a second interview to dive deeper into student perceptions followed. The same process was used for parent participants, an initial interview followed by a second interview to better understand and clarify parent perceptions regarding the research purpose.

Data Collection Timeline

The interview format used guided interviews or guided conversations where the researcher prepares six to ten questions providing a general order to guide the course of the interview (Kim, 2016). Table 3.2 below presents the timeline for data collection.

Table 3.2

Data Collection Timeline

Narrative Inquiry	Semi-Structured Interview (Launch Dates)	Data Collection Analysis	Written Accounts	Auto-Ethnographic Memos/Reflexive Writing
Week 1	Parent A (First Interview 1x 60 minutes) Student A (First Interview 1x 30-60 minutes)	Orientation meeting with participants, intro research, signing informed consent, calendar dates for future meetings	Prompt 1: Introduction of Written Reflections Give permission to ask questions and clarity	Memos and “Brain Dumps” notes to self

Week 2	Parent B (Interview 1x 60 minutes) Student B (Interview 1x 30-60 minutes)	Transcribed from recording and uploaded to NVivo	Prompt 2: How has the leader helped you?	Memos and “Brain Dumps” notes to self
Week 3	Parent A (Interview 1x 30 minutes) Student A (Interview 1x 30 minutes)	10 Pages Transcribed from recording and uploaded to NVivo	Prompt 3: Same prompt to allow tenets to finish	Memos and “Brain Dumps” notes to self
Week 4	Parent B (Interview 1x 30 minutes) Student B (Interview 1x 30 minutes)	10 Pages Transcribed from recording and uploaded to NVivo		Memos and “Brain Dumps” notes to self
Note:	1st Round of Coding happened after the first round of interviews to compare data to data, code to code, category to category 2nd Round of Coding happened after the second round of interviews to compare data to data, code to code, category to category			
Week 5	Researcher wrote up findings from Research Participants, member checking, and ongoing analytical memos			

Week 6	Researcher wrote up findings from Research Participants, member checking, and ongoing analytical memos
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Week 7	Researcher wrote up findings from Research Participants, member checking, and ongoing analytical memos
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Each source of data represented in Table 3.2 above was utilized for narrative inquiry. In semi-structured interviews, general questions guide what the researcher wants to ask, but serves only to guide the interview, helping maintain a focus on the conversation rather than dictate its direction. My interview skills were attentive, sensitive, and responsive. It was critical to aid in generating interviewee responses that yielded meaningful data. The interviews were by invitation only from the researcher. Helping students know that they are knowledgeable and capable beings who can learn and figure things out (Ladson-Billings, 2009) was important to keep in the forefront when interviewing student participants. Parents also participated in writing prompts with semi-structured interviews to elicit responses, providing each parent with the same opportunity and questions to answer. Keeping a research journal also allowed me to keep track of notes, interviews, dates, and flexible schedules. Knowing that stories are not told linearly, a journal provided me with a format to record important notes and provide flexibility when needed.

Ongoing Analysis and Researcher Reflections

Data collection is extensive and extremely important; therefore, the researcher must keep memos and a detailed record of the process and data. The process includes an exhaustive list of data (i.e., memos, journals) and managing the data (i.e., transcripts, written reflection). Knowing that stories are not told linearly, my analysis started with interviews, the coding process, and the writing process which entailed the acts of rewriting, editing, and retelling participant stories to deepen the narrative through ongoing analysis. Narrative interviews were completed in two phases: narration phase and the conversation phase. The narration phase is an extensive narration by the interviewee/narrator, during which the interviewer restricts his or her interventions to the minimum while keeping the narration going, just as in open-ended interviews (Kim, 2016). This provided study interviewees an opportunity to express their lived experiences without interruption.

Kim (2015) provides valuable insights into the benefits of crafting a life story. According to Kim, life stories serve as powerful tools for self-reflection, allowing individuals to make sense of their experiences and construct meaningful narratives of their past. Kim (2015) emphasizes that "the process of recounting one's life story enables individuals to identify patterns and turning points," which can foster a deeper understanding of personal growth and change (p. 190). Moreover, life stories contribute to the preservation of personal and cultural identity. As Kim (2015) notes, "sharing one's story helps in bridging generational gaps, passing down values and traditions to future generations" (p. 190).

Interviewees were asked to give full narration of events and experiences from their own life, encouraging their narrative thinking processes. This narrative was not interrupted by questions but encouraged by nonverbal expressions of interest and attention. It is best to let the

interview take its course naturally to cover all that the interviewee wants to cover in his or her life. Thus, it is almost as if the researcher keeps a “vow of silence” (Kim, 2016), although this does not mean that the researcher approaches the interview with no structure or preparation. The narration phase is most important as it creates an atmosphere of listening to participants and taking those moments to relate to the interviewee’s journey through their personal storytelling. In the narration phase, the researcher’s main role is that of a listener and observer (Kim, 2016). Spence (1982) posits that in psychoanalysis “active listening is required” (p. 9). This should not be confused with being a psychologist or counselor but reinforces the interview should be taken seriously to tune into the sequence, coherence, continuity, meaningfulness, and transformation during the interviewee’s story. Through a researcher’s narrative competence of listening, a sense of feeling, seeing, hearing, and even vicariously experiencing the narrator’s mental, intellectual, cognitive, and emotional engagement emerges with the telling of his or her own life story (Kim, 2016). This process of the interviewer being able to relate to the storytelling of the interviewee brings me right back to the storytelling of my grandmother and the picture that would come to mind of her in her rocking chair going back to those memories and places she was once before. She would say, “*As a youngin’ I knew my past and my future were under the blood of Jesus Christ*”. This confirmed just how important listening and storytelling is to springboarding someone else’s journey in the narrative phase.

The conversation phase is a period of semi-structured, in-depth questioning or interchange when the interviewer seeks clarification of the issues presented in the first narration. In this phase, the researcher introduces additional topics related to conceptual interests to get more detail than the narrator’s original narrations may have provided (Spence, 1982). It is important in this phase to have the interviewee go into depth about their experiences.

I scheduled a date or set of dates for each interview, ensuring enough time in between interviews to conduct transcription and preliminary data analysis. Conducting transcription and preliminary data analysis provided an opportunity for me to record meaningful questions to ask in subsequent interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017). In this study, I followed the following sequence:

- Interviewing/data collection
- Finding Common Themes
- Journaling/Reflective Writing

Data were articulated and grounded in narrative inquiry, critical pedagogy, and narrative inquiry.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Researchers systematically analyze the data to identify recurring ideas, concepts, or topics that emerge across interviews, observations, or documents (Tisdale, 2016). This process involves coding the data, organizing codes into themes, and interpreting the meaning of these themes in relation to the research questions. Thematic analysis served as a foundational process in this study, allowing me to identify and explore recurring patterns across interviews and personal reflections. After each participant interview, I engaged in multiple rounds of listening, journaling, and coding to ensure the voices of students and families were honored. Through this iterative process, themes emerged, such as care, trust, and boundary crossing. These themes aligned closely with the study's conceptual frameworks of critical care theory, Black feminist thought, and boundary crossing. These themes were not only consistent across the narratives, but they also revealed deeper insights into how my leadership as a Black female leader served as a bridge across cultural divides.

According to Kim (2015), qualitative researchers often emphasize the importance of reflexivity and awareness of the researcher's positionality. Researchers reflect on their own biases, assumptions, and experiences that may influence the data collection and analysis process. This reflexivity helps ensure transparency and rigor in qualitative research. In this study, reflexivity played a crucial role in shaping both the process and outcomes of the research. As a Black female leader conducting narrative inquiry and autoethnography, I was deeply aware of how my own lived experiences, cultural identity, and leadership journey intersected with the participants' narratives. In alignment with Kim (2015), I continually reflected on my positionality—how my presence, questions, and interpretations might influence the data. By engaging in journaling, memo writing, and self-reflection throughout the study, I worked to ensure transparency and authenticity, allowing the findings to be grounded in both the voices of the participants and my own critical reflection.

Qualitative research prioritizes the understanding of participants' lived experiences by situating their voices within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. Researchers are called to consider how power dynamics, societal norms, and historical influences shape these experiences and perspectives. In my study, this meant understanding how participants' experiences with a Black female leader were shaped not only by school culture but by wider societal patterns of race, leadership, and belonging. Building on this foundation, qualitative data analysis goes beyond surface-level descriptions to explore deeper interpretations of meaning. This includes examining contradictions, complexities, and alternative perspectives that arise within participant narratives. I employed this method to carefully consider the ways that care, cultural responsiveness, and boundary crossing were reflected in both the students' and parents' stories, and how these concepts influenced their perceptions of leadership. Specifically, narrative

analysis served as the primary lens through which I analyzed data. This approach allowed me to focus on the structure, content, and themes embedded in the personal stories shared during interviews. As Kim (2015) explains, sharing one's story "helps in bridging generational gaps, passing down values and traditions to future generations" (p. 193). Through the participants' stories and my own autoethnography, I uncovered how decision making and leadership are constructed across cultural lines, revealing a bridge of understanding shaped by care, trust, and mutual respect.

First Cycle of Coding

In qualitative research, the process of coding is essential for organizing and making sense of large amounts of data. First cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) involves the initial examination of the data. This phase is often broad and exploratory, aimed at generating a large pool of potential themes. In this cycle, I assigned labels or codes to segments of text that represented key ideas, patterns, or concepts in the first cycle coding process. I examined the first portion of my conceptual framework, critical care theory, for important connections. I focused on the stories or narratives participants shared in their testimony of experiences in the school building.

Second Cycle Coding

The second cycle of coding built upon the initial codes derived from critical care theory, where I refined, categorized, and grouped the codes into more specific themes (Saldaña, 2009). I also added the additional conceptual framework of boundary crossing. This process allowed me to go deeper with the analysis of the relationships between different codes and themes. Throughout both cycles, I utilized analytic memos from my participants' writing. This created an opportunity to write reflective notes that documented the thought process behind coding decisions and helped development of ideas. The reflective notes and my own personal memoirs

and personal experiences with education provided a place for me to also reflect on patterns, emerging insights, and potential meanings within the data. The qualitative tool, NVivo (2020), significantly assisted me with coding, memo-writing, and organizing and visualizing the data that I collected. NVivo (2020) streamlines both the first and second cycle coding processes, making it easier to handle large datasets and provides advanced features for deeper analysis, including automatic coding suggestions and the ability to track memos alongside coded data.

Third Cycle of Coding

The third cycle of coding in qualitative research moved beyond categorizing themes to interpreting and synthesizing data at a higher conceptual level (Saldaña, 2009). I examined the final portion of my conceptual framework, autoethnography, which explored my experiences as a Black female leader during this cycle of coding. I explored my personal narratives and how they intersected with broader intercultural social concepts, critical care theory, and boundary crossing. My primary focus in third cycle coding focused on interpreting the intercultural dynamics and leadership strategies involving Black women's stories, identifying patterns of resilience, critical care, and family engagement. The third cycle of coding explored how Black female leaders handle systemic barriers and redefine leadership within their communities. By layering personal experience with conceptual frameworks on race and leadership, the coding process worked to go deeper with an understanding of how Black women's leadership is unique and is shaped by their lived experiences in a predominantly white, midwestern school system. I focused on this cycle transforming the raw data illustrating my individual and collective insights on Black female leadership.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the qualitative research methodology used in this study, with a focus on interview-based narrative inquiry. This approach captured the richness and depth of participants' experiences and perspectives, providing a detailed understanding of the research problem. The use of interviews served as the primary data collection to explore individual narratives in participants' own words. Through narrative inquiry, participants' stories are valuable sources of data, allowing for exploration of themes and meanings that emerge from their lived experiences. To analyze the data, cycles of coding were employed, ensuring an identification of patterns and themes. The coding process allowed for both descriptive and interpretive insights, which contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. The methodology outlined ensured that the research remained grounded in the participants' voices while maintaining and analyzing the necessary information for credible and trustworthy conclusions. The next chapter presents the findings generated from this interview study, offering a detailed analysis of the narratives and themes that emerged from the coding cycles, bringing to life the experiences and insights at the heart of this work.

Chapter 4 - Results: I've Come Too Far from Where I Started From

I walked into the office, at my alternative school building, dropped my keys on my desk, and just as I was sitting down to catch up on emails before the morning rush, a parent walked in. Her vulnerable white face held a mixture of hesitation and urgency, emotions I had come to recognize well in my years as a Black female principal in a predominantly white school. She took a breath and then spoke, her voice slightly shaky. *"I just needed to talk to you about something that's been weighing on me."* I motioned for her to sit, bracing myself for whatever conversation was about to unfold. These moments, unplanned, deeply personal, and sometimes uncomfortable, were the essence of what I consider good leadership. In that instant, I wasn't just an administrator or an authority figure. I was a bridge, a listener, and a problem solver. This encounter, like so many before it, reflected the reality of my leadership—balancing expectations, navigating cultural boundary crossings, and leading with care, all while ensuring that every family felt seen, heard, and valued in our school community. As a Black female principal in a predominantly white school, I have often found myself positioned at the intersection of race, leadership, and education. While the broader societal narrative often frames black and white dynamics in opposition, in my leadership experiences I have found when care, advocacy, and accountability take center stage, racial barriers can be transcended.

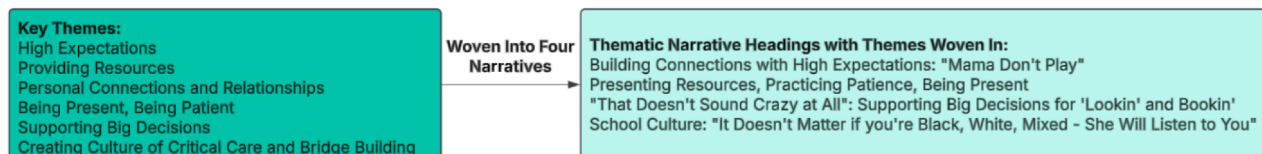
She sat down across from me and nervously fiddled with the zipper of her coat. *"It's about my daughter,"* she said softly. *"I just... I don't know how to help her anymore. She cries before school, and lately, she says she doesn't feel like she belongs."* Her words landed heavy, not because they were new, but because they echoed what I had heard so many times before—parents were unsure, students felt lost, and the system being ill-equipped to catch them before they fell through the cracks. I *leaned* in, gently placing my hands on the desk between us,

softening the space between principal and parent. *“She does belong,”* I said. *“And you’re not in this alone.”* Her eyes welled up, and I could feel the tension begin to ease just slightly. This wasn’t just about grades or attendance. This was about trust—her trusting me, a Black woman in a position of leadership, with her fears and her child’s well-being. We talked for nearly an hour. She shared stories of her daughter’s struggles with anxiety, challenges at home, the isolation she felt in a community where differences often stood out more than they were embraced. I listened deeply, intentionally because that’s what this role requires. *“I’m so glad I came in,”* she said. *“You didn’t make me feel judged. You made me feel like I mattered.”* And that’s when it hit me—again. leadership is not about having all the answers. It’s about building the kind of trust that allows people to ask hard questions. It’s about being a bridge between discomfort and understanding, between fear and courage. This wasn’t just a parent walking into an office. This was boundary crossing in action. This was a moment where race, culture, and power met at the intersection of care. And I was ready to meet her there—every time.

The findings of this study are organized around key themes that are woven throughout Chapter four that emerged from both personal reflection and participant interviews: high expectations, personal connections and building relationships, being present, being patient, providing resources, supporting big decisions, and creating a culture of critical care and bridge building as seen in Figure 4.1. These themes illuminate not just the challenges and successes of leading in a racially complex environment but also the deeper human connections that shape the experience of Black female leadership.

Figure 4.1

Key Themes/Thematic Narrative Headings



In this chapter, these themes represent the main findings, and I’ve woven them throughout four narratives found throughout this chapter, as seen in Figure 4.1. I channel the voices of my student and parent participants, illuminating leadership experiences with family engagement which refused to operate within the confines of race, bridging the gap between cultural divides, and demonstrating how effective leadership occurs when human connection and relation is prioritized above all else. What follows is a mixture of my journey as a Black female principal in a predominantly white school, complete with stories of cultural boundary crossing, resilience, and transformation. As I reflect on my experiences and synthesize with the voices of students and parents, a deeper narrative emerges—one that intertwines my past and present leadership, the ongoing shaping the school culture, and the consideration for how being a leader comes with the responsibility of influencing those around me.

Building Connections through High Expectations: Mama Don’t Play

Growing up, I was expected to follow the same path as my mother, work a 9 to 5 job and never finish college. But the *Wisdom Warrior* once told me that I had more to give than what was being presented to me. She empowered me to *break generational cycles and redefine expectations for myself*. She challenged me to step outside of my comfort zone and she gave me the strength to take accountability for my future. The “system” never meant for me to reach certain expectations, but the *Wisdom Warrior* became the “bridge” that I needed to leap over the

expectations society had for me. This gave way to my own personal leadership. As a Black female leader, I have put into practice listening to students while having expectations for them to aim high. This has become of utmost importance. I remember very vividly the first time as a leader that expectations and accountability met me face to face. I had to be the “*bridge*” in the situation with *Tina*.

My first encounter with *Tina* is interesting because she came barreling through my alternative school doors after her son would not take no for an answer. I was able to intercept her and explain the situation to her, but she knew what was best for her son, so she spoke to him sternly with me standing nearby. We had several encounters like this but eventually our relationship became one where she knew I cared about the well-being of her son. There were many instances that our school-to-home relationship came into play when connecting on what was best for her child at school:

Fighting with siblings at home,

Acting out,

Being stubborn,

Defiance,

Serving lunch detentions

The expectation that the principal didn’t care about her son began to change after each encounter. She noticed that I was going to hold her son accountable for his actions and in turn, this helped her at home. I appreciated that she was willing to help at home and continuously followed through and held her son accountable. I truly admired her. She never gave up on her son, which is something that we have in common. This meant a great deal to both of us on both sides of the relationship – the parent side and the educational side. She described herself to me

in my office early on. As she told me, She “*didn’t play*”. Her support and expectations were also a reflection of the professional culture I hoped to convey to everyone employed at our alternative school. We “*didn’t play*” either and worked to maintain high expectations for every student in the building. *Expectations and Accountability* were at an all-time high, and *Tina* recognized this and spoke about this in her interview. She indicated as much through our time visiting, and on several occasions explained how, “*It was the relationships that mattered in every way.*” She further explained how, “*The connection with my principal made the difference in my son succeeding. She never pushed us away.*”

In many ways I considered *Tina* as an ally in the journey of Black female leadership. It was the relationship that mattered to her, allowing for bridge building and boundary crossing for the sake of maintaining high expectations for her son. Her way of caring for her son meant to show folks that she *did not play* when it came to education and her family, and she was serious about the opportunities that she knew education opened up for her children. She *loved hard* and she made sure school was a top priority; running away from those priorities was not an option. She also wanted to convey this to me through our connection, as I was a representative of the school’s side of these expectations. Connecting was a fundamental aspect of *Tina*’s experiences with Black female leadership. The ability to form meaningful connections with high expectations became a part of who I was and a part of my leadership philosophy. I work to bridge the gap and cross boundaries that go beyond traditional administrative roles. These connections are also found in the connection to the student, as well.

As a student growing up in our predominantly white community, I also remember the power and influence of high expectations and strong relationships. I can still remember the smell of fresh paper and the weight of my brand-new backpack as I walked into Roosevelt School as a

sixth grader. My hair was freshly pressed, my outfit carefully picked out, and I felt the kind of confidence that only the first day of school could bring. Beyond the excitement of a new year, there was one defining force waiting for me in that classroom, my sixth-grade teacher. She was a strong, tall, compassionate Black woman with full, fluffy hair and a presence that commanded respect. In a small town where, Black teachers were few and far between, she stood out not just because of her appearance, but because of what she represented. She was the only Black teacher I had during my time in school, and in that role, she carried the weight of being a role model, a mentor, and a bridge in a predominantly white school system. She saw my potential, even when I doubted myself, and she refused to let me settle for anything less than my best. But it wasn't just me. She held every student to a high standard, no matter what their background. Whether they looked like her or not, they knew they were expected to show up, work hard, and push themselves. Her classroom was built on the foundation of relationships. She didn't just teach content, she taught character, compassion, and courage. And because she was one of the only Black educators in that space, her presence alone was a powerful lesson. She navigated cultural boundaries daily, gently but firmly challenging biases and broadening perspectives. She was a bridge, not just for Black students like me who finally felt seen, but for white students too who learned what it meant to be led by someone who looked different from them yet cared for them just the same. Looking back, now I realize she was more than a teacher. She was laying the foundation for the kind of leadership I would one day aspire to embody.

Her belief in me was tested one day when I made a choice I would never forget. The night before I stayed up late, exhausted from the demands of school and life. I had not finished my homework. Worse, I had forgotten to get my mother's signature on the assignment sheet. Panic set in the next morning. I knew my teacher's standards. I knew she expected the best from

me. She *didn't play*. But her high standards also came with an emphasis on connections with students, and positive relationships. But at that moment, fear clouded my judgment. I picked up my pen and carefully began forging my mother's signature. Letter by letter, I thought I was in the clear. That was, until I heard a sharp voice from behind me, saying, "*what are you doing, ma'am?!*". My heart sank. My hands shook. My palms became slick with sweat as I clutched the paper, knowing I had been caught. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. All I could do was hand over the paper and brace myself for what came next. I will never forget the look of disappointment in her eyes. She didn't yell. She didn't scold me. But her silence spoke volumes. It wasn't just about the signature. It was about integrity, accountability, and the belief she had in me to be better than at this moment. In that instant, I realized something profound. I had not only let her down, but I had also let myself down. That day changed me. I vowed never to let down another teacher, or myself, again. I carried that lesson with me, pushing myself to meet expectations established by the adults around me, to grow through my struggles, and to take ownership of my actions. It wasn't just about academics; it was about character.

Those same high expectations now define my leadership. I refuse to let my students fall below what they are capable of, just as my teacher refused to let me. I always want to convey a culture that *doesn't play*, but also makes students feel proud of their accomplishments paired with a strong sense of belonging.

On another occasion, Gina reflected on her own journey under my leadership. She had walked through the halls of the school with her head down for years, carrying more doubt than confidence, more fear than assurance. Coming from an alternative school placement, she had internalized the belief that she wasn't cut out for success in a traditional school setting. The thought of transitioning into high school was overwhelming, filled with uncertainty about fitting

in, keeping up, and being seen for more than her past. *“She made me feel proud of myself.”*

Those words hit home. I knew exactly what she meant, because I had once stood in her shoes. I had been the student who needed someone to hold the line for me, to remind me that I was more than not believing in myself, that I had the ability to rise above. Now, as a leader, I carry that responsibility to push, to challenge, and to ensure that no student walks away from my school feeling unseen or unworthy. Expectations are not barriers; they are bridges. And just as my sixth-grade teacher built one for me, I now build them for the students who walk through my doors every day. This includes giving advice, encouraging students to drive their own learning and to never give up and that goes for those who look like me, and those that don’t, such as:

Jameson, who walked to school and was always late due to having to help put his elementary sister and brother on the school bus because no one else was home to do it.

Aaliyah, who just returned from an acute care stay and needed constant supervision per her parent because she threatened suicide.

Jimmy, whose parents are regularly at school board meetings advocating for traditional values and speaking out against “woke curriculum”.

Sarah, whose mom entered my office and asked to speak with the principal, assuming it wasn’t me because the stereotypes she must’ve been fighting through in trying to picture a Black woman as the principal and leader of the school.

We work to build bridges for all of these community members – parents and their children under our care. And, we have to build relationships with high expectations, which can then become bridges.

Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative

Research Question 1: The narrative above reveals my lived experiences as a Black female principal engaged in cultural boundary crossing when working with white families. These experiences and the complex role of leading as a Black woman in a predominantly white educational setting gave me insight in the moments where high expectations, personal relationships, and bridge-building are necessary to break down any walls and form personal and authentic connections with the families. With Tina, a white parent, we moved from confrontation during our first encounter to mutual respect through consistent communication and accountability. This experience shows how leadership built on care, firmness, and relationship-building can transform perceptions and support student growth—both academically and personally and how high expectations through communication with families changes how students view their success in schools.

Research Question 2: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. The white students under black female leadership learned not only through instruction, but through the power of presence and expectation. Through the story of my sixth-grade teacher and how her high standards shaped my trajectory, it was discovered that my black female leadership in essence shows that cultural boundary crossing is not just about race—it's about human connection. When students like Gina start to believe in themselves, it becomes beautiful testimony on how to rewrite a personal narrative of success. These experiences gave a glimpse of what it means to engage in authentic relationships that shape the personal growth of students.

Research Question 3: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal.

Through interviews and interactions, such as those with Sarah's mom and Jimmy's politically conservative parents, there were times when I experienced moments of implicit bias and at times, I had to remain silent and practice patience. However consistent visibility, high expectations, and patient communication shifted those relationships. Over time, parents began to see not through the lens of race, but through the strength of leadership it created a culture that welcomed engagement and helped white parents become allies in the educational journey of their children.

Presenting Resources, Being Present, and Practicing Patience

Being the Black female leader of both an alternative school and a traditional high school one would expect the alternative setting to have differing expectations for their students. When I walked into the alternative school building as a new principal who was fresh out of an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom full of 8th grade students, I met the staff. I knew right away that the low expectations of our students were out of the question; there was already an existing culture of high expectations. There were four core teachers in the building who taught ELA, math, social studies, and science, and there were also paraeducators who followed the lead of the teaching staff. However, it wasn't just about establishing a culture of high expectations, it was about *being present and presenting students and families with resources* to help them address their struggles in a wholistic and caring manner.

With tears in her eyes, Sheila reflected on the first time her shy, young daughter stepped foot into the building as a sixth grader and applauded, "*the fact that the alternative school helped not only with academics but also with the mental health resources.*" She noted the impact of setting high expectations and *having support* in place for her child. Some of those supports included giving her a safe space for regulation when her child needed a designated quiet space where she could regroup when anxiety or stress became overwhelming. Another support put in

place for her daughter was having trusted adults who were key staff members, including mental health counselors and trusted teachers.

Expectations shape students, and when they know someone truly believes in them, they rise. Sheila mentioned that *"It made it feel like it was more of an accommodating and inclusive school."* This sentiment suggests that leadership styles do not merely affect students but also shape how families perceive their role in the school community, particularly when resources are made available to help them address their boundaries and build more bridges in partnership with the school. But it's not just about providing resources, it's also about *being present*.

As a child of a single mother, I intimately understand the struggles of working parents. My mother wanted to be at every event, every game, every meeting, but she couldn't because she had to work. I had siblings that I would be at home with through the night until she got off work the next morning. I can remember playing basketball as a senior in high school and she worked the night shift at Wal-Mart. She would come to my games in town and out of town no matter what. I could see the tiredness in her eyes, but she cared and wanted to be present. This time I was nominated for Royal Courts Queen. I can still hear the words she said to me ringing in my head, *"I will be there no matter what, I would never miss this for the world."* These words meant everything to me because I knew that she meant every word she said, and those words still ring true as they inform my philosophies as a Black female leader for all students who enter the school building every day. I will be there and be intentionally present, especially for our students who are seeking supports and need the presence of the school leader and staff members to cheer them on at these events. This experience shapes how I engage with parents and work to build bridges with families, many which don't look like my family.

I recall when Tina walked into my office when her son was in seventh grade. That day she seemed to be carrying more than just the weight of a long workweek—she carried the weight of uncertainty, exhaustion, and the desire for something better. Her usual warm, feisty spirit was dimmed by the burden of trying to juggle everything at once—her job, her home, and the academic success of her children. As she sat down, her voice cracked under the weight of it all. *“I just don’t know how much longer I can do this,”* she admitted. As she spoke, I saw my own mother in her. I saw the long nights, the sacrifice, the way a mother will endure almost anything to ensure her children have what they need. My mother had done the same, pushing through exhaustion, working jobs that didn’t always serve her well, and carrying the silent but heavy expectation that this was just what had to be done. But what happens when the weight becomes too much?

Leadership is not just about managing a school; it’s about building up the people in it. And at that moment, I knew what Tina needed was not just encouragement, but an opportunity. Not the typical type of opportunity, or resource, that we would put in front of a parent when they’re struggling. Not the kind of resource that has the number of social workers on the back of a pamphlet. Something more complete, more relevant to her worries and needs. I leaned forward and told her about a job opening in the district. A position that would challenge her, empower her, and most importantly, allow her the stability she needed to better support her children. She hesitated at first, unsure if she was ready, but I saw the shift in her eyes, the glimmer of hope fighting against the doubt.

A few weeks later, she walked back into my office, this time with tears of joy instead of frustration. She had not only found a job, but it was also the job in the district that I had told her about, and because of our relationship, the recommendation I made for her helped her land that

job. She had found herself again. And at that moment, I was reminded that leadership isn't just about the students; it's about supporting entire families. It's about ensuring that education is not just about what happens in the classroom, but about creating partnerships that uplift, empower, and sustain growth beyond the school walls.

Tina later explained, "*She has never pushed me away... She has always treated me as an equal, I feel.*" That is the kind of leadership I strive for, one that welcomes open dialogue, reassures families that their concerns are valid, and serves as a bridge to something greater and transcends cultural divides. Such as:

Peter, a white single dad who was struggling to help his son due to his own insecurities about school.

Tammy, a Hispanic mother who walked into my office looking for supports for her son because his father had a terminal illness.

Lisa, a white, newly divorced single mom who needed help navigating how to get her students to school on time because she had to do it all on her own.

But being present and presenting families and students with resources isn't quite enough sometimes. Through this work it has also become evident that *practicing patience* while boundary crossing, through parent and student engagement, is also part of my everyday leadership routines that seem to be producing positive results.

I recall one day I parked my car in front of the school building I knew that each day was a day to make connections with students. I walked along the sidewalk thinking about what today would hold for me. My secretary, who greeted me each morning, motioned for me to come her way and said I had a student waiting to see me. I could already hear the rhythmic hum of the school hallways and knew that today was going to be interesting. Graham, an outspoken eighth

grader whose usual confidence had recently dimmed, hurried past my door, hoodie up, eyes glued to the floor. Something inside me stirred. "*Grahm, can I walk with you for a second?*" I asked, stepping into the hallway. He hesitated but nodded. We walked together in silence, the distance between us filled with unspoken weight. I had seen the changes in him, slipping grades, withdrawal from discussions, and the way he avoided eye contact and barely engaged in class. Teachers had voiced concerns. Calls home had become frequent. Yet, at this moment, I knew he needed more than just discipline or intervention—he needed to be seen, and I needed to be present.

"*I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately,*" I finally said. "*Is everything okay?*" At first, he shrugged, his shoulders tight with resistance. Then, after a pause, he whispered, "*I don't know. It's just... everything feels too much right now.*" His words echoed something familiar—something I had once felt as a young Black girl navigating a world that often didn't pause to ask if I was okay. This was my moment, not just as a principal, but as a wisdom warrior, the kind of mentor I once had, the kind I had promised myself I would become. "*Let's figure out how we can make things easier for you,*" I said, meeting his eyes. "*Together.*" That promise turned into action. Teachers became his team and his support. Teachers met together to make sure support was in place and adjusted deadlines to give him space to regain his footing. But more than that, I made a commitment, along with his teachers, to check in with him personally, every week, to remind him that he was not alone. Weeks passed, and slowly I saw him return to himself. His voice found its way back into class discussions. His shoulders loosened. One afternoon, as he left my office after one of our check-ins, he paused at the door. "*You really do help me through everything,*" he said, his voice laced with gratitude and a tinge of disbelief that someone truly cared. From my experiences, this is what personal connection in leadership looks like. It's not

just about academics, policies, or discipline. It's about meeting students where they are, recognizing their struggles, and walking beside them as they navigate the path forward. It is about being the bridge - crossing boundaries, transcending barriers, and leading with care and practicing patience.

Gina also transcended barriers, forcing me and her mother to practice patience while being present, and providing her with resources. The first time I met Gina, she stood frozen outside the school entrance, gripping the straps of her backpack so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Her mother stood beside her, whispering reassurances, but I could see the fear in her eyes. She wasn't just nervous about school; she was terrified to even walk through the door. Gina had struggled with anxiety for years. The thought of being in a crowded hallway, of finding her place in a school full of unfamiliar faces, was overwhelming. After fear and anxiety disrupted her sixth-grade year returning to an in-person environment seemed nearly impossible for her. She had missed a full semester of school, attempting to learn from home, but it was clear that isolation wasn't the answer either. Her mother, desperate for a solution, had come to me with tears in her eyes. *"We don't know what else to do,"* she admitted. *"She won't even step inside."* I looked at Gina and smiled. *"That's okay. We'll take it one step at a time."* Patience.

For the first few days, I met her at the front door each morning. Some days we barely made it past the threshold. On other days, she managed a few steps down the hallway before retreating. I never forced her. Finally, a meeting was called to discuss a plan for Gina. Teachers and mental health staff met together to decide what was the best plan of action for her. The plan went through many what ifs and what could work. It was decided that overdoing it might make her retreat more, so the plan ended up being simple. It would benefit her to have an adult she trusted walking beside her. Teachers and mental health staff simply walked beside Gina,

reminding her that she wasn't alone on this journey. To ease her transition, I coordinated with her teachers to create a plan that allowed her to start in a quieter space before gradually integrating into the classroom. She was given a safe space to retreat to if her anxiety became overwhelming. Most importantly, she knew that every single day, I would be there, ready to walk her through those doors, until she could do it on her own. Slowly, Gina began to trust the space around her. She started sitting in classrooms for longer stretches of time, engaging in small conversations with her teachers, even making eye contact with classmates. Then, one morning, I arrived at the front entrance as I always did, but Gina was already inside ready to learn. She later told me, *"Over the weekend, something changed,"* and she just came in. On her own. I felt relief and satisfaction for our team, and the mother. It wasn't about forcing Gina to face her fears overnight; it was about walking beside her until she was ready to face them herself. Leadership, at its core, is about building bridges so that when the time comes, students feel strong enough to walk across it.

I found my greatest source of strength and inspiration in my mother, a woman who was relentless in her battle with illness and in her unwavering commitment to her children. She was not just a mother; she was a warrior, fighting through pain and exhaustion, refusing to let sickness define her or diminish the love she poured into us. No matter how difficult her days were, she always found a way to push forward, ensuring that we never saw weakness, only resilience. Even in the face of adversity, she remained steadfast, teaching me through her actions that true leadership is about perseverance, care, and showing up for others even when you are struggling. She embodied the kind of strength that didn't need to be announced; it was simply felt in the way she carried herself, in the sacrifices she made, and in the quiet moments where she reminded me, *"No matter how hard it gets, you don't give up."*

Her fight with illness shaped the very foundation of my leadership. Watching her refuse to surrender, even when her body was failing her, taught me the importance of showing up for my students, staff, and families with the same level of unwavering dedication, a type of presence, patience, and persistence modeled by her. She modeled what it meant to lead with love and purpose, even when the weight of the world felt unbearable. As a school leader, I channel my mother's resilience into every interaction. When I see a struggling student, I refuse to give up on them, because I know what it means to fight against something that tries to hold you back. When a parent comes to me feeling defeated, I remember my mother's strength and offer them hope. Her relentless battle, her ability to love and push through even in her hardest moments, became the blueprint for how I lead. She was more than my mother, she was my greatest teacher, another wisdom warrior. She instilled in me a belief that no challenge is too great when faced with determination, love, and an unbreakable spirit. Her legacy lives on in my leadership, in every student I lift up, and in every bridge I build for those who need someone to walk beside them in their own struggles. This is what personal connection and support in leadership looks like. It's not just about grades or school policies; it's about seeing students for who they are, understanding their struggles, instilling resilience, perseverance, and walking beside students and families as they navigate life's challenges. Simultaneously, it's about being present, presenting students and families with resources, and practicing patience as they work through their struggles.

Although there were several positive interactions that came out of being patient, there were times when my visible status as a Black woman in a leadership position created awkward cultural boundary crossing tensions, times when I was met with opposition but was able to overcome those barriers with patience. As an example, I remember walking into a site council

meeting, the low hum of conversation pausing as the door closed behind me. All eyes turned toward me, the only Black woman in the room, and the principal. I carried myself with confidence, prepared to lead the meeting, but I couldn't ignore the weight of one particular glare, coming from Tonya. Her expression wasn't openly hostile, but it was clear—curious, guarded, and skeptical. She nodded politely, but her eyes told another story, one of hesitation, maybe even doubt. As I moved through the agenda, speaking with clarity and offering solutions to community concerns, I noticed how Tonya would subtly glance over at the white assistant principal seated beside me, waiting for him to confirm or repeat what I had just said. It wasn't just that she had questions about her son's education pathway, it was that she seemed unwilling to receive those answers from me. I could feel the sting of being professionally dismissed in real time. Here I was, the leader of the building, but my positional authority was being bypassed, with body language from Tonya that was more focused on looking for affirmation, or trust, through the white male assistant sitting next to me. I remember it so clearly, because while I worked to maintain my composure it was rather distracting. Still, I didn't flinch. I knew these moments were bigger than me. They were rooted in deep-seated perceptions about race, gender, and power. As a Black female leader in a predominantly white school district, I understood that building bridges would sometimes feel like walking tightropes. So, I leaned in.

Even after the meeting, when she approached the assistant principal, again, I remained present. I continued to offer Tonya support. I sent her follow-up emails, extended invitations to be on school-based committees, and looped her into conversations about parent engagement initiatives. Every offer was met at first with polite disengagement, but I persisted—not out of pride, but out of purpose. Over time, something began to shift. Slowly, she started directing her questions to me. Our hallway conversations grew longer. She responded to my emails with

gratitude instead of silence. She began to see me—not just my title, not just my position—but *me* as a leader, a collaborator, and an advocate for her child. Eventually, our relationship blossomed, and new bridges were built. Now, she seeks me out for input, often sharing stories about her son’s progress and asking how she can support broader school initiatives. It wasn’t overnight, but it was honest work. And it affirmed what I’ve always believed, leadership rooted in care, patience, and consistency can cross even the most rigid cultural boundaries. This wasn’t just about winning someone over. It was about rewriting the narrative of who belongs in leadership, who is trusted with decision-making, and whose voice is valued in rooms where change begins. More so, it’s also about building new bridges and opportunities for crossing cultural boundaries I the process.

Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative

Research Question 1: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences as a Black female principal engaged in cultural boundary crossing when working with white families. My role as a Black female leader required navigating being a leader in a predominantly white educational space. In moments such as the site council meeting with Tonya, my authority was initially bypassed due to racial and gender bias. However, my patient presence, ongoing communication, and relationship building ultimately was the bridge and the shift in Tonya’s perception of my leadership. Over time, she began to engage with me as the leader, which illustrates how trust can be built across cultural boundaries through intentional relationship building and professional persistence. Similarly, my connection with white parents like Sheila and Tina revealed that my leadership extended beyond the school walls and included high expectations, advocacy, and lifting up entire families. There were moments of offering both academic support and life-altering opportunities (like job leads), practicing culturally responsive

care that bridges the community-school divides that tend to exist in many school buildings. This is boundary crossing at its most impactful, changing not just outcomes in education, but the lived experiences narratives from the community.

Research Question 2: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. Through students like Graham and Gina, I bring to the forefront the quiet, personal transformation that occurs when students experience leadership grounded in care and visibility. These students didn't just need academic support; they needed to feel like their leader seen them, supported them, and that their environment felt safe. With patience, consistency, and a commitment to being present, I, as the leader, discovered that it helped these students reclaim their voice and confidence. This thematic narrative of high expectations showed white students and families that Black female leadership is not just valid—it shows that white students, often unfamiliar with Black women in leadership, can learn new ways of engaging and growing when cultural boundaries are crossed with love, patience, and personal relationships.

Research Question 3: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. White parents such as Sheila, Lisa, and Peter entered your school community carrying various forms of stress, assumption, and sometimes unconscious bias. Meeting them and not being defensive but with care and support—offering personalized resources, listening deeply, and walking with them through their hardships. Tina's journey captures the nature of how a Black female principal's leadership can become a bridge—not just for student success, but also to empower families in their decision making as well. By treating families as partners in their students' education, I crossed boundaries that have once gone uncrossed. Even when my leadership felt overlooked, I

leaned into the feeling of discomfort with the action of practicing patience. Over time, this opened up more collaborative conversations, built relationships, and mutual respect with families.

“That Doesn’t Sound Crazy at All”: Supporting Big Decisions for “Lookin’ and Bookin’”

While establishing relationships are important, along with being present while providing resources and practicing patience, I have also found it is imperative to enact these same principles when supporting families and students while making big decisions. As *Tina* explained about my leadership: *"No matter how crazy the ideas are or concerns, she has made a bond with me and my son."*

As I reflect, I remember a crisp fall morning when *Tina* walked into my office, her face a mix of worry and exhaustion. Her son was a bright and unconventional thinker, a student whose mind was always racing with creative ideas, but who also struggled with social interactions and executive functioning due to his autism. *Tina* sighed as she sat down. *"I know this might sound crazy, but my son came home yesterday talking about adding an art class at the school."* She chuckled nervously. *"He thinks it could help students learn about artistic skills, but I know it's unrealistic. He just gets so passionate about things, and when people don't take him seriously, he shuts down. I don't want him to be disappointed when no one listens to him."* I leaned forward and smiled. *"That doesn't sound crazy at all. It sounds like a brilliant idea."* I could see the tension in her shoulders ease. Tears welled in her eyes. *Tina* said, *"I've just... I've had so many teachers and principals brush him off. They say he's 'too much' or that his ideas are unrealistic."* I reassured her that her son *"isn't too much. He's just waiting for the right people to take him seriously."* As the art class continued, *Tina* began giving me updates on her son. She

would say, *"He gained confidence, built friendships, and felt a deep sense of belonging in school."* His mother later told me, *"For the first time, he feels like he's being taken seriously."*

Black female leadership in an alternative school setting showed me just how imperative it was that students' voices were heard, and this was a chance to do just that. As the building leader, I made it a priority to create space for those voices, not just to be acknowledged but to drive change. One of the most powerful outcomes of this leadership approach was the introduction of an art elective, directly inspired by student input. leadership played a critical role in ensuring this shift wasn't just symbolic. I facilitated a collaborative process where teachers met with students early in the school year to learn their passions, interests, and personal goals. These conversations led to the development of elective classes that aligned with student identities and fostered engagement. It was about more than adding a class; it was about building a culture where students felt empowered to shape their learning experience. As a Black female leader, I understood the importance of affirmation and agency in education. By elevating student voice, we were crossing boundaries, shifting power dynamics, and redefining what it meant to belong in school. leadership meant listening, advocating, and making space for transformation.

This is what *connections with families while supporting their big decisions* look like. It's about listening to parents, embracing their children's uniqueness, and *finding ways to turn 'crazy ideas' into real opportunities*. It's also about making a bond with students and families so they know they are *seen, heard, and valued, not dismissed*. And when Tina said, *"No matter how crazy the ideas or concerns, she has made a bond with my son,"* I knew that leadership isn't just about policies and procedures, but staying attentive and open to what might be perceived as "crazy ideas" and supporting them in their decision making.

Sheila and I had a similar interaction when mulling over a big decision. Sheila was a mother who carried both pride and worry in equal measure. Her daughter had spent her middle school years in the alternative school, a place that had provided her with the structure, care, and encouragement she needed. The small, nurturing environment had allowed her daughter to find her voice, regain confidence, and work through the anxiety that had once kept her from even stepping foot into a school building. But as her freshman year at the traditional high school approached, uncertainty loomed. I remember the day she walked into my office, the weight of the decision pressing down on her. She sighed heavily before saying, *“I need help making this decision.”* Her daughter had grown tremendously, but was she ready for a bigger, less personalized environment? Would she be able to handle the academic and social pressures of high school? Would she continue to thrive, or would the transition undo the progress she had made? I listened carefully, understanding that this was more than just a school choice, it was about trust, security, and the fear of losing the stability that had been built over the years. I reminded her of how far her daughter had come. She was no longer the girl who was too afraid to walk through the school doors. She had taken steps, both big and small, to reclaim her confidence, and those steps had led her to this moment. Still, the first day of high school was tough. Sheila later recalled, *“The first day was rough. But then, the second day on... We had rough days, but yeah, she’d come and talk ... and go and talk to the counselor for clarity.”* Her daughter knew she wasn’t alone. She had built relationships—not just with me, but with other staff who had become her anchors. She knew where to go when the anxiety crept back in, and she had learned that asking for help was a sign of strength, not weakness. Over time, her daughter settled in. She found her place. *“Things changed, and she took the first steps and just*

came in,” Sheila reflected, pride swelling in her voice. That was the turning point—the moment when fear gave way to confidence, and uncertainty transformed into belief.

As an educational leader, I knew this transition wasn’t just about a student moving from one school to another. It was about trust—Sheila’s trust in me, in the staff, in the process, and most importantly, in her daughter. She had to believe that the foundation we had built at the alternative school was strong enough to carry her child forward. By the time her daughter had settled into high school, Sheila saw the full impact of the journey. *“We’ve had rough days, but she always knew she could come and talk,”* she said. That was the goal all along—not to make the transition perfect, but to make sure that no matter what, her daughter always felt supported, seen, and empowered to take her next steps forward. This is the power of leadership through connection; it extends beyond the school walls, leaving a lasting impact on students and families alike. It reminds me of the lasting impact my grandmother had on me.

My grandmother was a strong woman and my first teacher, and she had a long-lasting influence on my teaching and leadership philosophies. She raised eight children alone after my grandfather died. There are many fond memories, but the one that influenced me most as leader is the memories of Sunday school at church. I remember walking into the Sunday school door, and she would greet her class with a bright smile and have creative sayings like, *“Sit still in Sunday school because God is up there ‘Lookin and Bookin!’”* I knew that meant we were not at church to play around but we had a mission of learning about our faith in God and all that he had done for us. Her influence on my life and leadership style is so deep down within me that I wanted to follow her lead and be on a mission to not play with the education of our students because God is up there, *“Lookin and Bookin!”* My grandmother’s influence taught me to never give up, even when times get tough, and that lesson has shaped my leadership philosophy:

True leaders don't give up on anyone.

They genuinely love,

and they put in the work to make sure everyone around them is successful.

Grahm captured the essence of my grandmothers' teachings within my leadership style.

"I couldn't believe she actually tried looking from the view of students...instead of the professional principal view." This statement stood out to me because it affirms my passion as a leader to intentionally transcend authority and instead embrace connection, understanding, and trust. Grahm noted that my leadership style was different from previous school leaders, and that difference positively impacted their education and their perception of what a principal can or should be.

I vividly remember the day this shift became evident. A student, who had never been one to seek the spotlight, approached me hesitantly. His body language carried a mix of nervousness and determination as he shuffled up to me in the hallway and asked, *"Could we have a talent show at school?"* At first, I was taken aback, not by the request itself, but by the fact that this particular student was the one asking. He was not someone who typically spoke up. He kept to himself, rarely participated in extracurricular activities, and had struggled with self-confidence for much of his time in school. Yet here he was, advocating for something he believed in. I hesitated before responding, not because I doubted the idea, but because I wanted to fully understand why it mattered to him. I asked, *"Why a talent show? What would that mean for you?"* His face lit up with excitement. *"I just think a lot of kids here have talents nobody knows about. Some of them don't even think they're good at anything, but they are. If we had a talent show, maybe they'd get a chance to believe in themselves."* In that moment, I saw the power of his vision. This was not just about entertainment, it was about students seeing themselves in a

new light, about creating a space where their talents could be celebrated and about fostering a sense of community that bridged social and cultural divides. I took his request seriously. That night, I reflected on my own school experiences, remembering how important it had been to feel seen and validated in a system that often-overlooked students like me. I recalled my own Wisdom Warrior, the Black paraeducator who had encouraged me to embrace my gifts and push beyond the barriers that others had set before me.

I returned the next day with an answer. *"Let's do it. But I need your help. If we're going to make this happen, I want you to take the lead on organizing it with my support."* His eyes widened in surprise. He had expected a yes or no—not an invitation to lead. But it wasn't just about granting permission; it was about empowering students to take ownership of their ideas, to develop confidence, and to bridge gaps between themselves and their peers. The talent show became more than just a school event. It became a symbol of what leadership could look like when it valued the voices of students. Students who had once felt unseen stepped onto the stage with pride. White students, Black students, mixed students, teachers even—all came together in a way that defied the unspoken social divisions that often played out in the school environment and in the tumultuous political environment we find ourselves in.

After the show, Graham found me in the hallway. He grinned, a newfound confidence radiating from him. *"That was amazing. I never thought I'd be someone who helped make something happen. You actually listened to me. He, in fact, was Lookin and Bookin!"* This moment reinforced what I had always believed: leadership, when done right, transcends authority and cultural divides. It is about seeing students for who they are, recognizing their potential, and creating opportunities for them to step into their own power. By valuing student voices and meeting them where they are, I was not just leading, I was building bridges across social, racial,

and cultural lines. This is what leadership feels like for me when trying to build bridges. It is not confined to rules, policies, or traditions. It is about the courage to listen, the willingness to uplift, and the commitment to ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, knows that they belong. My very own student reminded me of the importance of communication and giving students a voice and uplifting their voice for something they want or need. Tears began to well up in my eyes because the very student who gave me a great deal of trouble at the beginning was now *"Lookin and Bookin!"* He *looked* at my leadership style and influence and was now using this to *book* a date for the talent show! What?!! This was amazing and I couldn't wait to get to school to tell him that the talent show was going to happen, and we would start the sign-ups as soon as possible.

Likewise, Sheila expressed how she felt under my leadership. *"She makes an impact. She goes above and beyond."* Leadership is about more than authority; it is about seeing beyond policies and procedures and into the hearts of the students and families we serve. It is about standing in the gap, ensuring that no one feels left behind. My grandmother instilled in me the understanding that leadership comes with great responsibility, often reminding me with one of her favorite sayings, "God is up there lookin' and bookin'!" In her wisdom, she meant that everything we do, how we treat others, how we show up in service—matters and will be accounted for.

Sheila walked into my office once again, her eyes filled with concern and hesitation. This time, the issue was different but no less significant. It was a dreaded girl drama. High school social circles can be complicated, and the tensions between teenage girls can create emotional roadblocks that feel insurmountable. She had seen how far her daughter had come, the confidence she had gained, and the strides she had taken since transitioning to the traditional

high school. Now, she worried that this new challenge—the shifting tides of friendships, rumors, and misunderstandings—would undo all of her progress. *“I don’t want this to set her back,”* she said, her voice laced with both frustration and fear. *“She’s worked so hard to get here.”* I understood. As a leader, my role isn’t just to manage academics, it’s to navigate the unspoken barriers that can hold students back from success. Social conflict, especially among young women, is one of those barriers. It has the power to shake confidence, to push students into isolation, and, if not handled properly, to create divisions that are hard to mend.

I thought back to my own experiences as a young girl, the ways I had learned to push through conflict, and the lessons my grandmother had taught me about resilience. Leadership, she had always said, is about holding high standards while walking alongside those you serve. That meant being approachable, firm, and compassionate all at once, tough, but loving. I reassured Sheila. *“Your daughter has built strength in ways she doesn’t even realize yet. This is just another moment to show her how to use it.”* But I also acknowledged her concerns. Bridging the divide, this time not culturally but between adolescent conflict and emotional growth, required intentional leadership. I wasn’t going to let this situation unravel the progress her daughter had made. We came up with a plan—one that didn’t just react to the immediate drama but instead empowered her daughter to navigate it in a way that would build resilience. I facilitated restorative conversations between her daughter and the other students involved, ensuring that emotions were heard, misunderstandings were addressed, and solutions were created together. I worked with teachers and counselors to provide her with safe spaces when needed but also encouraged her to stand firm in her growth, to advocate for herself, and to remember that conflict does not define her. Over time, the drama subsided, and Sheila saw something shift in her daughter. The fear of stepping backward was replaced by something stronger with the realization

that she could face obstacles and still move forward. That was a bridge—the understanding that Sheila came to realize that her daughter was not alone, that leadership is not just about fixing problems but about guiding students through them, helping them see their own strength on the other side. In that moment, I wasn't just an administrator resolving girl drama. I was a bridge-builder, even outside of the black and white issue and ensuring that one more student learned that challenges, whether academic, social, or emotional, do not have to be roadblocks. They can be steppingstones.

Reflecting on Gina's transition to high school, stepping into the school building felt like stepping into an unknown territory. Their journey had been shaped by anxiety and self-doubt, emotions that often made even the smallest transitions feel overwhelming. The alternative school had been a place of comfort, a space where support was intimate, expectations were tailored, and familiar faces brought reassurance. But the leap to high school was something else entirely. It was a transition that required not just academic preparedness, but emotional resilience.

I remember the first day Gina walked in, shoulders hunched, uncertainty written across their face. The weight of this new environment was heavy, and she carried the unspoken fear of not belonging. I could see it in the way they avoided eye contact, the way her steps hesitated at the threshold of the building, as if contemplating turning around. But leadership is about recognizing those moments, stepping in when the hesitation feels too great to bear alone. So, I walked beside them. Just like the time at the alternative school when a similar situation caused me to walk alongside another student. *"Let's take it one step at a time."*

What began as small, reluctant steps soon turned into steady strides. Gina later reflected, *"I didn't think I was ever going to leave there."* She was expressing disbelief at the progress that had been made. Her words resonated deeply with me because I knew that leadership isn't just

about enforcing policies or guiding academics; it's about building bridges where uncertainty once stood. It's about personal connections, patience, high expectations, and offering resources that help students cross over from doubt to confidence, from fear to belonging. Gina knew she wasn't walking this journey alone. I reminded her of her strength, of the resilience she had built, of the voice she had found at the alternative school and would continue to carry into high school. It was about creating a culture where students didn't just survive but thrived. When asked about the impact of my leadership, Gina shared, *"I appreciate her working with me so closely."* That simple statement held the weight of the connecting and supporting. It was not just about academic guidance but about providing a sense of security and connection—about leading in a way that made students feel seen. These personal connections oftentimes take patience when boundary crossing is necessary, again, all while navigating some tense racial dynamics. Take Trista for example, a white mother hoping to transfer her mixed-race son into our school after some negative racial experiences deriving from his mixed-race ethnicity.

It was late fall when I received the call from Trista. Her voice at the other end of the line was clipped and anxious. *"I've already talked to the other high school, and I'm just... I don't like the direction they're going. I need to know what else can be done for my son,"* she said, her tone heavy with frustration and expectation. I could hear in her voice that she wasn't just asking for information, she was looking for reassurance, for validation that her concerns were justified. As the principal of an alternative school, and as a Black female Leader in a predominantly white district, I've learned to listen and be patient - not just to the words, but to what is left unsaid. *"I'd be happy to meet with you, Trista,"* I said. *"Let's talk through some options and see what supports might be best for your son."* Later that week, she arrived at the school with a determined stride and a furrowed brow. As I welcomed her into my office, she barely made eye

contact, instead of glancing around, as if expecting someone else would take the lead. She sat stiffly in the chair across from me, arms folded. *“I just don’t feel like what you’re suggesting is going to work,”* she said after I presented a resource plan for her son, which included a weekly counselor check-in, and electives tailored to his interests. *“I understand your concerns,”* I replied calmly. *“But based on his academic record, social-emotional needs, and your goals for him, this plan has the structure and support he needs to grow.”* But instead of engaging further, she turned, literally and figuratively, to the white assistant principal seated nearby. “What do you think?” she asked him, pointedly. I sat in that moment, quiet but resolute. I have been here before. Being overlooked was not new to me. Being questioned, not because of the quality of my leadership, but because of the color of my skin and the assumptions that came with it, was something I had learned to navigate with grace and fortitude. Leadership for me is not just about authority; it’s about patience, care, and staying in the work even when others refuse to see you. So, I didn’t push back. I didn’t get defensive. I knew that the plan I had proposed was not just good, it was *right*. I continued to send Trista updates. I followed up with emails. I invited her to touch base after her son began the program. I kept the door open.

Weeks passed by. Slowly, her tone changed. Her emails became less frantic. Her questions came with more curiosity and less resistance. Eventually, she began to direct her inquiries to me. One day, she even stopped by just to say thank you. *“You were right,”* she said, standing in my office doorway. *“That plan you gave us—it’s working. He’s actually starting to like school again. He’s focused. He’s... hopeful.”* In that moment, I didn’t need an apology. I didn’t need her to acknowledge the subtle bias she had walked in with. Her son’s progress—that was the story. That was the reason I stayed committed to the work, even when I was overlooked. I had high expectations not only for her son, but for her, as a parent, to meet me in partnership. I

had modeled critical care leadership - care without judgment, high expectations with grace, resources that work, and patience rooted in belief. What started as resistance ended in trust. And that trust, built slowly and intentionally, became the bridge that helped her son thrive.

Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative

Research Question 1: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences as a Black female principal engaged in cultural boundary crossing when working with white families. Black female leadership in both alternative and traditional school settings required me to navigate cultural and racial dynamics that often placed my authority in question. In cases like Trista and the site council meetings, my leadership was initially questioned—not for its value, but because of the assumptions that can come with being a Black woman in a position of power. These moments underscore the cultural boundary crossing inherent in this work. Yet, through persistence, consistent communication, and unwavering care, the importance of transforming resistance into trust helped rewrite the narrative of who belongs in leadership. My presence wasn't just symbolic, it reshaped how white families understood leadership, care, and collaboration in schools.

Research Question 2: The narrative reveals the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. Students like Grahm and the talent show organizer experienced firsthand what it means to be seen and validated by a leader who listens and empowers. What emerged was all about leadership that centers student voice and belief in their own potential. Support from leadership allowed students to be able to cross boundaries of self-doubt, engage in school in ways they hadn't before, and step into leadership roles. Their transformation was not only academic or behavioral, but it was

also deeply personal, and students began to understand who they were in their educational journeys. Culturally responsive leadership creates space for white students to see leadership beyond race, to feel included, empowered, and respected.

Research Question 3: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. Through powerful stories like Tina's, Sheila's, and Trista's, my black female leadership was consistently tested by the uncertainties and expectations—some shaped by unconscious bias. Yet, through interviews and personal experience the response was always the same: show up, listen closely, support thoughtfully, and follow through with care. Whether helping a student with autism gain confidence through an art class that he proposed, guiding a young woman through anxiety and girl drama, or supporting a mother with an important decision, it is important to say that each one of these instances was met with patience and purpose. Over time, these parents didn't just see you as a school leader—they saw a trusted partner, an advocate for their child, and a cultural bridge.

School Culture: "It Doesn't Matter if you're Black, White, Mixed - She will Listen to You"

Building a school culture that fosters safety, inclusiveness, and a sense of belonging has been at the core of my leadership. I've strived to make my leadership a bridge, a connection between different cultural experiences, perspectives, and histories. This philosophy was deeply influenced by my first principal, a man who started as a janitor and worked his way up to the head of the school he once cleaned. He understood the people, the town, and most importantly, the students, not from a position of authority, but from one of understanding. His leadership was rooted in relationships. He knew that fostering a sense of belonging required more than just policies, it required connection. He would host back-to-school gatherings at his house,

welcoming staff, students, and families into a space that felt warm and familiar. Potlucks weren't just meals; they were a symbol of shared experiences, where everyone, regardless of background, was invited to the table. It was here, in these small but significant moments, that he built bridges between educators and the community. Graham made me proud when they said, *"It makes the school feel like family."*

In my opinion, I learned about school culture from the best. When I was a first-year teacher, I watched how he built trust with students, parents, and staff simply by knowing them, knowing their backgrounds, their struggles, and their strengths. He knew their names, their stories, and where they came from. Parents respected him because he was "one of us." He had walked the same streets, attended the same schools, and faced the same challenges as many of the students in our community. That sense of familiarity and shared experience was what made students feel safe and seen. That's what I strive to be for my students, a bridge between them and their success, between their past experiences and their future opportunities. In my own leadership, I have worked to bridge the gap between cultural misunderstandings, past school traumas, and a student's potential for success. As I interviewed Gina, she reflected on the school's culture, describing the impact of that bridge. *"I feel like it's a safe space for everyone."* Safety in schools extends beyond physical safety; it is emotional safety, the ability to walk into a building and feel welcomed, valued, and supported. It is a leadership practice that reaches across racial, social, and academic divides to ensure that no student feels alone. Graham echoed this idea when he said, *"When it comes to her, it does not matter if you're Black, white, mixed... She will listen to you."*

As a Black female leader in a predominantly white school, my leadership has become a bridge across historical barriers of race, and culture in education. I have witnessed students shift

their perspectives—not because I told them to, but because I walked with them, listened to them, and saw them. A parent, Tina, reflected on the impact of this bridge in her own experience, stating: *"She cares, finds opportunities, and always goes above and beyond."*

I always hope and pray that my leadership does not stop at school walls, but extends into homes, into family conversations, and into the confidence that parents have in their child's education. The culture I strive to build in my schools are ones that extend beyond the classroom, beyond discipline, and beyond academics. It is about making sure students and families know that they have a bridge to success, no matter what obstacles they have faced. Tina shared a story that highlights this bridge.

Tina sat in my office, her hands clasped together, with worry written all over her face. Her son was on the verge of not graduating, and she feared that every door was closing in on him. As a mother, she had done everything she could—late nights helping with homework, meetings with teachers, constant encouragement—but now, it felt like time was running out. I could see the weight of it all pressing down on her, the uncertainty of what the future would hold for her son if he didn't walk across that stage. But I knew one thing for sure. Giving up was not an option. Not for her son, and not for her. Together, we combed through every possible path, searching for an alternative that would keep him on track. After weeks of searching, we found the perfect solution, a program that would allow him to not only earn his diploma but also transition directly into trade school, giving him a head start on a career he could be proud of. When I shared the news, Tina's eyes filled with tears, not with sadness, but with relief. She exhaled deeply, as if she had been holding her breath for months. As I mentioned previously, Tina reflected,

"She has never pushed me away... She has always treated me as an equal" This moment wasn't just about finding an academic solution; it was about building a bridge. A bridge of trust, of perseverance, and of belief that when we work together, we can create opportunities where there once were only obstacles. It was about showing Tina, and every parent, that they are never alone in this journey. Because true leadership isn't just about guiding students; it's about standing with families, side by side, until we find a way forward.

My personal experiences of cultural boundary crossing as a Black female principal in a predominantly white school community have shaped my understanding of why inclusion matters and why a leadership bridge is necessary. There was a time when I, too, felt unseen and unheard. I vividly recall walking into my speech class as a freshman in high school, one of the only Black students in a room full of upperclassmen. I sat quietly, unsure of whether I truly belonged in that space. But then, my teacher did something that changed everything: She saw me. She recognized my potential and didn't let me shrink into the background. When it was my turn to give my persuasive speech on "Spirit Pills," she didn't just let me stand there—she celebrated me. She told the class that my speech was the best and encouraged the upperclassmen to take a few notes from me. I had been seen. I had been heard. And in that moment, I learned what it meant for a teacher or a leader to truly affirm a student's existence and value. That feeling of validation is what I strive to provide for every Graham family who walks through the school doors. My leadership is about making sure that students and families do not have to question whether they belong, because they will know that they do.

That is also the foundation of my approach to Black female leadership, ensuring that students and parents alike feel supported, valued, and respected in a way that transcends cultural or racial divides. Education is not just about what happens inside the school, it's about opening

doors to opportunities that extend far beyond it. Leadership in education is often discussed in terms of authority and decision-making, but in reality, leadership is about relationships, trust, and access. The role of a Black female principal in a predominantly white school is not just about overseeing academics; it is about building connections that might not have existed before. It is about bridging the gap between students who have been historically overlooked and their potential for success, bridging the gap between parents who feel disconnected from the school system and their role as engaged advocates for their children, and bridging the gap between racial and cultural divides by leading with care, accountability, and inclusivity.

Gina captured this idea when she said: *"She gave me lots of encouragement."* That is the impact of leadership that bridges divide, it transforms uncertainty into confidence, doubt into belief, and barriers into opportunities. Because when we create a culture where every student feels seen, heard, and empowered, we don't just build a better school, we build a better future. Leadership bridges are not just about moving forward; they are about ensuring that no one is left behind. School culture can be transformed and that is evident in the reflection below.

When I first walked through the building doors, up the winding stairs to the office, I stood before the door thinking, *"here I go"*. The atmosphere felt different when I walked into the office. I could feel it, the quiet undercurrent of disconnect. The building was clean, the teachers were dedicated, and students were learning. But something was missing. There was formality in the air, a distance that existed between the school and the families it served. It wasn't that the previous administration had done anything wrong; in fact, under the white principal who served before me, the school had run smoothly and efficiently. But it was clear that the leadership style, while structured and focused on order, hadn't been grounded in the same principles I valued -

personal connections, relational trust, and the unwavering belief that families, every single one, deserved to be invited in, seen, and heard.

There was a common perception among staff and leadership at the time that certain families “just were not going to show up. These students are old enough and most are just not involved.” But I knew better. I was raised in a community where families cared deeply—even if they didn’t always have the resources or confidence to walk into a school building where they didn’t feel welcome. I saw those same signs here, and I knew the shift wouldn’t come from a single invitation. It would take consistency, patience, and a different kind of leadership. Not very many people showed up at the first event but what happened around that circle set the tone for a new kind of culture. Families from different backgrounds, white, black, mixed, foster, shared their concerns, asked questions, and for the first time in a long time, some of them said they felt like they had a seat at the table. One concerned, white mother who was a foster parent told me, *“This is the first time someone’s actually asked me what I think. That stuck with me.”*

Turning school culture around wasn’t about condemning what came before me. It was about recognizing that leadership without relationships can only go so far. That critical care leadership is what the school had lacked, and it wasn’t order—it was warmth. Not accountability but personal connection. And slowly, as families began to come to events again. Students began to reflect that same energy, opening up and rising to the high expectations we had for them, because they knew they weren’t in it alone.

Synthesizing the Research Questions with the Narrative

Research Question 1: The narrative above reveals the intentional effort made to foster inclusivity and trust in a predominantly white school. Within this narrative theme what emerges

from the interviews is that the leadership bridges the gaps that extend beyond academics. From my personal leadership experiences, I describe specific moments like the mother in the site council meeting who initially looked past my authority, or the foster parent who shared, “*This is the first time someone’s actually asked me what I think*”. This is a cultural boundary crossing in action. Consistency, compassion, and presence were all building blocks of authentic partnerships with white families who once felt disconnected from the school system. The findings affirm how students and parents now see school leadership, reshaping assumptions through connection and care.

Research Question 2: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white students as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. Students, like Grahm and Gina, show how the black female leadership that is rooted in equity, empathy, and encouragement transforms the school culture. Grahm’s statement, “*It makes the school feel like family,*” and “*When it comes to her, it doesn’t matter if you’re Black, white, mixed—she will listen to you*” demonstrates how the students’ experience a culture of inclusion, trust regardless of race. Through my leadership experiences, offering white students a chance to engage across cultural lines gave a pathway to building personal relationships founded in trust. These experiences challenge traditional perceptions of authority, especially when that authority is a Black woman. Students begin to redefine who can be a leader, how leadership can look, and what it means to be truly heard and supported.

Research Question 3: The narrative above reveals the lived experiences of white parents as they engage in cultural boundary crossing when working with a Black female principal. White parents, like Tina and Sheila, experienced black female leadership that invited them in, valued their concerns, and built trust over time. My experience as the leader bridged generational and

cultural divides by treating parents as equals in the educational process. Tina's story about her son being on the verge of not graduating, and our collaborative efforts to find a solution, are examples of culturally responsive partnership. When she says, "*She has never pushed me away... She has always treated me as an equal,*" she speaks to the shift that boundary crossing creates, mutual respect and trust. Intentionality and affirmation for parents who may not initially feel welcome or heard in school spaces, transform how white parents see themselves and their children within the school's culture.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter highlight the transformative power of leadership that is rooted in connection, advocacy, and cultural boundary crossing. In review, these themes represent the main findings, and I've woven them throughout four narratives found throughout this chapter. As a Black female leader in a predominantly white school, my experiences, both personal and professional, have shaped my leadership approach, ensuring that students, parents, and staff feel seen, heard, and valued. The themes explored in this chapter include high expectations, personal connections and relationships, being present, providing resources, practicing patience, supporting big decisions, and school culture and are interwoven into the daily realities of students and families. These themes reinforce the idea that educational leadership is not just about ensuring academic success, but also about creating spaces where students and families feel included, empowered, and supported. Furthermore, through autoethnographic reflection I have been able to connect my lived experiences to my leadership philosophy. My grandmother's unwavering resilience, my sixth-grade teacher's high expectations, and the *Wisdom Warrior* who guided me in my youth have all contributed to the way I lead today, with firmness, love, and an unyielding belief in the potential of every student.

As I continue to navigate cultural boundary crossing as a Black female principal, these experiences serve as both a guide and a responsibility. They remind me that leadership is not about standing above but about standing with. It is about breaking barriers, building bridges, reshaping expectations, and ensuring that every student, regardless of background, has the opportunity to shine. Students and families respond not only to authority, but to authenticity. The parents I worked with didn't need perfection, they needed presence. They needed a leader who listened with patience, made time for difficult conversations, and stayed committed even when trust had to be earned slowly. I learned that high expectations mean little without the relationships to support them. Families needed to know they weren't navigating the system alone. Students needed to feel believed in, not just through words but through consistent support, follow-up, and access to meaningful resources. Supporting major decisions, whether it was transitioning from alternative to traditional school, navigating school-based challenges or choosing a graduation pathway required more than policy; it required partnership. These experiences have reinforced that critical care leadership is not a theory, it is a daily commitment to connection, patience, and people-first leadership that builds bridges across difference and toward shared success.

In this chapter, the themes represent the main findings, and I've woven them throughout four narratives found throughout this chapter. I channel the voices of my student and parent participants, illuminating leadership experiences with family engagement which refused to operate within the confines of race, bridging the gap between cultural divides, and demonstrating how effective leadership occurs when human connection and relation is prioritized above all else. The next chapter will delve deeper into the implications of these findings, focusing on how key leadership elements, such as setting high expectations, cultivating personal connections, building

strong relationships, being consistently present, offering targeted resources, practicing patience, supporting families through major decisions, and fostering a healthy school culture, contribute to meaningful student and family outcomes. These themes highlight the transformative power of critical care leadership practices that prioritize patience, personal connections, trust, and collaboration. The discussion will also explore how these strategies can inform future leadership approaches to ensure students and families feel seen, supported, and equipped for success across diverse school contexts.

Chapter 5 - The Song of My Journey: Moving Towards Critical Care Leadership

My leadership journey has always been about more than managing a school; it's been about healing, reconciling, and rebuilding the community. In our small midwestern town, Division Street once stood as a symbol of racial and social separation, a physical reminder of historical divides. But through the persistent efforts of "Midwest United", a grassroots group I helped form alongside community leaders, Division Street was renamed Unity Street. The change was more than symbolic; it was a declaration of what we believe is possible when people come together with a shared purpose.

This type of transformational work is at the heart of my findings and what I frame in this chapter as critical care leadership. It's a leadership that sets high expectations for all students while cultivating personal connections, building strong relationships, and being consistently present in the lives of students and families. It means offering targeted resources, practicing patience, supporting families through major decisions, and fostering a healthy school culture where everyone feels seen and valued. Whether walking hallways, listening to a parent in distress, or reimagining systems through equity-minded practices, I lead with the belief that critical care is not a soft skill. It is the foundation of meaningful change.

In my family, we do not just speak about where we have been, we sing about it. Our voices come together in harmony, singing not just as individuals, but as a legacy of survival, faith, and gratitude.

"We thank you, Lord, we thank you for our journey, you brought us from a long, long way."

"We thank you, Lord, we thank you for our journey, you brought us from a long, long way."

These words are more than lyrics; they are testimony. Every challenge I faced, every moment where I questioned my place in leadership, every boundary I have had to cross, I know I

did not do it alone. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me, and I walk forward knowing that the work I do is part of a greater journey, the culmination of the lived experiences of myself, my students, and parents. It is an exploration of what it means to be a Black female leader in a predominantly white school, a role that requires me to constantly navigate cultural boundary crossing, build trust in spaces where I am an anomaly, and fight for the success of every child that walks through my doors.

For every Black girl sitting in a classroom feeling unseen, for every non-Black student who needs an advocate, for every historically marginalized leader stepping into a space where they do not “fit the mold”, this work is for us, too.

"We thank you, Lord, we thank you for our journey, you brought us from a long, long way."

We are building something new. We are breaking down walls, and building bridges, and we are not alone. And now, as a leader, I see my students. I see the ones who struggle. I see the ones who need someone to hold them accountable with love. I see the ones whose parents want to be engaged but don't always know how, just like my mother, a single mom who worked hard but couldn't always make it to school events. Amen!

In this chapter, I synthesize the findings from Chapter 4 and revisit key conceptual frameworks explored in the literature review. As a reminder, I built this conceptual framework with multiple theories intersecting and overlapping with one another—critical care theory (Noddings, 2013), boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), and Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 2015). This chapter affirms and extends these frameworks and findings by exploring how care-based leadership creates *third spaces* (Khalifa, 2018; Yahya & Wood, 2016) where mutual respect, voice, and belonging are nurtured for both students and families. Specifically, in this chapter I introduce a working model for critical care leadership that emphasizes creating a

culture of critical care, building bridges and boundary crossing, and creating a third space as a Black female leader.

Moving Towards a Working Model for Critical Care Leadership

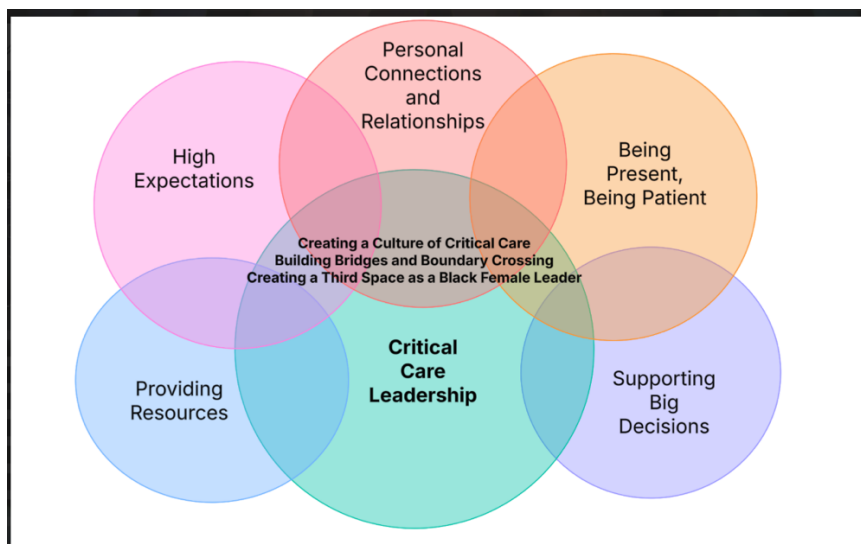
As I engaged in this study through autoethnographic reflection and interview analysis, I found that my data and leadership experience revealed connections between the theories driving my conceptual frameworks. Specifically, I started to find clarity around what Khalifa (2018) terms a “community-responsive space” or also a “third space” (p. 100), where school leaders not only support but co-create culturally sustaining environments. In this space, what I’m also considering a space influenced by critical care leadership, one finds leadership practices that emphasize: high expectations, providing resources, practicing patience, supporting big decisions, and most of all, an emphasis on personal connections and relationships. This creation of a third space, a term used to describe the hybrid, transformational zone where leadership, care, and cultural navigation intersect (see Khalifa, 2018), is created through *critical care leadership*. This third space, I find a culture of critical care (Noddings, 2011, 2013) that I created as a Black female leader, starts to also become a bridge building exercise for boundary crossing (Akkerman & Baker, 2011) between home and school. It is in this space that students, families, and educators are invited to engage with one another authentically and equitably.

Here, I revisit the literature from my conceptual framework which used three overlapping theories, Figure 5.1 illustrates the *critical care leadership* working model, a visual representation of how core leadership practices as represented in Figure 4.1 in the previous chapter intersect to create a *culture of critical care* (Noddings, 2013), *building bridges and boundary crossing* (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), and *creating a third space as a black female leader* (Collins,

2000). In this working model, I have merged and woven some of those themes together when considering how these themes form the beginning of a type of critical care leadership. Additionally, since many of the themes derived from the findings are already present in educational leadership literature, moving forward this conceptualization needs ongoing synthesis with the literature for further refinement. Therefore, as I outline this *working model*, I do so in conversation with the relevant literature not represented in my original literature review (Chapter two). This is followed by a discussion around implications for future research and practice.

Figure 5.1

Working Model of Critical Care Leadership



Originally, my conceptual framework was rooted in critical care theory (Noddings, 1992, 2011, 2013), boundary crossing theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), and Black feminist thought and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Edwards, 2016). These theories helped me understand the complex dynamics of care and cultural interaction that shaped my school leadership in a predominantly white midwestern town. However, as I engaged in conversations and interviews more deeply with parents, students, and staff, particularly white students and families, I found

myself moving toward a practical leadership approach that not only acknowledges critical care, boundary crossing, and intersectionality but also enacts care in culturally responsive ways.

This notion of critical care leadership, rooted in these findings and relevant intersecting theories, also finds synergy with other leadership literature. For example, the culturally responsive school leadership framework presented by Khalifa (2018) also played a critical role in reshaping how I think about school culture and inclusive decision-making when building bridges to create meaningful, trusting relationships between school leaders, students, families, and communities. Khalifa's (2018) work blends well with boundary crossing and builds on this idea by describing the process of navigating and connecting cultures, families, and schools.

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) also conceptualize boundary crossing as a learning opportunity that occurs when individuals interact across previously disconnected spaces—like Black school leaders working with white families. These moments can be challenging but the findings offer possibilities for leadership skills that emphasize mutual understanding and growth. Equally important to this shift was Epstein's (2001) model of overlapping spheres of influence, which calls for meaningful partnerships between families, schools, and communities. The findings suggest this to be most effective when viewed through the lens of care and connection.

Furthermore, the *National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships* (2008) also offer a practical framework to support family engagement, especially in diverse and high-needs settings. These standards emphasize collaboration, advocacy, and shared responsibility for student success.

By blending these ideas—critical care, boundary crossing, intersectionality, culturally responsive and collaborative leadership, and meaningful partnerships between families, schools, and communities is ultimately how this working model of critical care leadership took shape. It

centers the following three components working at the intersection of the theoretical frameworks informing this research, as well as the findings: *Creating a culture of critical care, building bridges and boundary crossing*, and *creating a third space as a Black female leader*. First let us explore an overview of critical care leadership.

Towards Critical Care Leadership

At the center of the model is critical care leadership, which builds upon Noddings' (2003) ethic of care. For Noddings, care is not just a feeling, but a practiced commitment to engaging with others in ways that are attentive, responsive, and relational. She explains that "caring is a way of being in relation" (Noddings, 2003, p. 5), one that demands a receptivity to the expressed needs of others and a willingness to respond in meaningful ways. Within leadership, this requires principals and educators to show up with presence, engage authentically, and create environments where students, staff, and families feel seen, heard, and supported.

Each section in the model—being present and practicing patience, high expectations, supporting big decisions, providing resources, and personal connections and relationships reflects this ethic in action. Noddings (2005) argued that "the cared for must recognize the care" for it to be complete, making the ongoing presence of the leader a non-negotiable (p. 15). This aligns with the practice of being present and practicing patience, not simply showing up physically, but actively listening, holding space for growth, and understanding that trust and transformation take time. Likewise, high expectations, under critical care leadership, are not punitive, but caring in nature, expecting the best from others because you believe deeply in their capacity (Noddings, 2011). Leadership rooted in care means holding students and families accountable with compassion, not control. The sections of the model, supporting big decisions and providing resources, mirror Noddings' insistence that caring requires action and

responsiveness to particular needs. To truly care, leaders must not only listen, but also remove barriers, support choices, and resource the possibilities. Finally, personal connections and relationships reflect the cornerstone of Noddings' work of trust, empathy, and care. This working model illustrates leadership practice that weaves itself through every decision and interaction. These principles lay the foundation for creating a school culture where equity, belonging, and trust can thrive.

Critical care leadership aligns with existing literature, as well. Khalifa's (2018) culturally responsive school leadership provides a critical foundation for understanding how school leaders can disrupt systems while building relational trust. One of the most significant parallels between Khalifa's model and critical care leadership is commitment to families and reflections of experiences. As Khalifa (2018) writes, "school leaders must engage in self-reflection and critique to identify their own biases and positionality" (p. 36), a practice deeply embedded in leadership reflections and interactions with families like Tina and Sheila. Critical care leadership also resonates with his emphasis on creating "community-responsive spaces" and "third spaces" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 49), where marginalized voices are not only heard but centered. These spaces enable boundary crossing by building partnerships across differences. Just as Khalifa (2018) encourages leaders to "challenge dominant cultural norms in schools" (p. 78), this model positions Black female leadership as a bridge—disrupting traditional norms and offering new cultural scripts for relational, equity-centered practice.

The findings of this study also reveal that cultural boundary crossing through a third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) built through critical care leadership is an essential component of effective school leadership. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) define cultural boundary crossing as the intentional movement between different cultural spaces, requiring adaptability, relational

trust, and mutual respect. As a Black female leader in a predominantly white school, I have had to bridge racial, cultural, and socio-economic divides, not only for students but also for parents who were navigating their own anxieties about school leadership. Furthermore, Khalifa (2018) emphasizes that cultural boundary crossing is not about assimilation, it is about creating a third space where multiple cultures coexist and are validated.

Additionally, Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres of influence offers another important lens through which to view critical care leadership. Her model promotes integration between schools, families, and communities, insisting that effective leadership "recognizes the shared responsibilities and mutual influence of each sphere" (Epstein, 2001, p. 7). In this working model of critical care leadership, the personal connection and emotional safety built with families illustrate this fusion vividly. Moving beyond typical involvement strategies to create genuine "partnership activities" (Epstein, 2001, p. 85) where parents feel like co-constructors of their child's experience. Tina's ability to trust suggestions, and her later celebration of our bond, is an example of what Epstein (2001) calls "parental empowerment through sustained school relationships" (p. 102). This work adds to Epstein's theory of equity-conscious care, where parents are not merely recipients of information but co-creators of culturally conscious solutions for their children. The emphasis on building long-term trust is a direct enactment of Epstein's vision of integrated, responsive leadership.

Furthermore, the *National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships* (2008) align deeply with the working model of critical care leadership, especially focused on high expectations and personal connections and relationships. In particular, Standard 1: Welcoming All Families into the School Community, supports the practice of relational bridge-building across race and culture. As the standards state, leaders must "build a respectful, inclusive school

climate where all families feel they belong” (National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships, 2008, p. 9). You bring this to life by refusing to push families away, instead inviting them into conversations, supporting big decisions, sharing resources, even in tense moments, such as with Trista or Tonya. Furthermore, Standard 2: Communicating Effectively calls for honest, two-way communication that is “linked to learning” (National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships, 2008, p. 11). This working model surpasses compliance, showing how communication becomes care, and it affirms each family’s value. Lastly, supporting big decisions like high school transitions connects directly to Standard 6: Collaborating with the Community, which encourages schools to provide “resources and services to support student achievement and family well-being” (National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships, 2008, p. 14).

Apart of the building blocks of critical care leadership, in the following sections I describe how the following three overlapping conceptual frameworks informing this research unfold in the working model of critical care leadership: 1) is creating a culture of critical care, 2) building bridges and boundary crossing, and 3) creating a third space as a black female leader. Additionally, I offer recommendations for research and practice under each one.

Creating a Culture of Critical Care

Critical care leadership involves creating a culture of critical care. This culture of critical care is also built through inclusive, family engagement. Building on my previous Noddings’ (2003, 2005, 2013) connections described under critical care leadership, it involves creating a culture of care grounded in high expectations, relational trust, and responsive leadership practices. The authors also insists that care must be practiced with continuity and fidelity, not as

a one-time gesture but as an ongoing ethical commitment (Noddings, 2005). This emphasis directly aligns with *being present and practicing patience*, two practices that emerged in the data. In a school culture rooted in care, leaders do not retreat when families are in crisis or when students push against rules—they lean in and respond with what Noddings (2003) calls motivational displacement, the willingness to temporarily set aside one’s own agenda to fully meet the needs of others. Finally, Noddings’ (2005) ethic of care calls for schools to treat education as a moral practice where “the primary aim is to produce caring people” (p. 174). When leaders *support big decisions* and *provide resources*, they shift the culture from compliance to co-construction. When paired with *high expectations*, care-based leadership creates a third space—a bridge between structure and flexibility, authority and empathy.

Other leadership and family engagement literature is also relevant here. Epstein’s (2011) framework for school, family, and community partnerships encourages school leaders to move beyond basic communication toward authentic collaboration. In my working model of critical care leadership, Epstein’s (2011) partnership work intersects with the lived practice of Black female leadership, which holds care and connection as the basis for trust. These relationships, between principal and parent, school and home, become bridges across cultural divides. As seen in narratives from white parents like Tina and Sheila, their trust in the school community emerged not from formal policies, but from feeling seen, respected, and included in meaningful ways. Creating a culture of care, therefore, expands Epstein’s work by layering it with equity-conscious practice, where parents are not simply recipients of information but co-creators of solutions and advocates for their children (2011). Mayeroff (1971) expands this perspective by defining caring as “*a process of helping another person grow in his or her own right*” (p. 1), a sentiment that underlies the leadership relationship-building needs outlined in the findings. True

care does not impose its own interests but is centered on the needs of the individual being cared for. Findings suggest it is about ensuring that each student and parent, regardless of background or circumstances, has the support they need to thrive. Noddings (2013) also argues that the experience of caring can help individuals learn to be caring, reinforcing reciprocal relationships between educators and students. This suggests that our school culture's efforts to build these caring relationships may have long-term communal benefits, allowing for more bridge building, cultural responsiveness, and healthier communal relationships. Ultimately, this study affirms that critical care leadership not only supports academic achievement but also builds a third space where personal growth, community connection, and mutual respect are cultivated. Educators who lead with care do not diminish academic rigor; rather, they deepen students' capacity to persist, succeed, and thrive.

Ultimately, creating a culture of critical care is sustained by leadership that refuses to separate policy from presence. Leaders build capacity not through positional authority but through consistent engagement, advocacy, and trust-building relationships. Khalifa (2018) contends that culturally responsive school leaders must “reflect on their own biases, respond to community voices, and reshape schools as inclusive environments where marginalized populations feel seen and heard” (p. 72). This aligns with the principle of being present and being patient in the model where leaders must remain available and attentive. Khalifa (2018) also introduces the idea of a “community-responsive space,” or “third space,” (p. 100) where traditional school structures are reshaped by community values and mutual accountability. These third spaces become essential for *supporting big decisions* and *personal connections* by elevating family voices as equal contributors to student success. Similarly, the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships (2008) emphasize that schools should build relationships grounded

in trust, shared responsibility, and mutual respect. The standards encourage practices where families are welcomed as full partners, particularly through *providing resources* and fostering *high expectations* for all students. These connections are not one-time events but require sustained, embedded leadership practices that prioritize family engagement in decision-making processes. This literature resonates with the culture described in my findings, where families like Tina and Sheila were not only supported, but empowered to co-create solutions with school leaders. Critical care leadership, then, is not only about seeing students and families, but also about building a culture that refuses to operate without them. This requires a school culture that centers on relationships, responsiveness, and responsibility.

Overall, the impact of *critical care leadership* seems to happen in three layers: 1) students, 2) teachers, and 3) community members. Regarding students, when students feel cared for, they perform better academically and socially. Studies have shown that having caring adults in their lives increases student success and engagement (Murphy & Holste, 2016; Murphy & Torres, 2014). This is because, as Roffey (2006) argues, "the capacity to care can be learned through the experience of caring and being cared for" (p. 13). In other words, students who experience care from educators and school leaders are more likely to develop their own sense of care, empathy, and responsibility. This concept is reinforced in my own students' experiences as they expressed, "she made me feel proud of myself. I didn't think I was ever going to leave there." This comment demonstrates how leadership infused with care helped them reach a milestone they once thought impossible. Noddings (2013) also states that care is most effective in relationships that are:

- Enduring and personally deep: Meaningful relationships between students, teachers, and leaders extend beyond the school years.

- Open and honest: Students and families feel safe voicing their concerns without fear of judgment.
- Characterized by trust: Without trust, care cannot be fully realized. Students and staff need to believe that leadership has their best interests at heart.

The second impact of critical care leadership is on teachers and staff. If leadership does not actively care for the educators within a school, how can they be expected to extend that care to students? Teaching is an emotionally demanding profession, and teachers need just as much support as students to remain invested in their work. While this research did not focus on teachers, there are reflective layers of this work that must be acknowledged. As one student described, “your leadership style helps get more students' work done... kids try harder,” recognizing that leadership sets the tone for both students and staff. When school leaders create an environment where teachers *also* feel seen and supported, the entire culture shifts toward one of collective care.

The third impact is the way critical care leadership strengthens the school community as a whole. It fosters deep, meaningful relationships that transcend traditional roles in education. This reflects what John Maxwell quoted from the book *The Leading Edge: A Teacher's Heart* (Pecina, 2016), “students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care” (p. 85). The perception of care is just as important as the intention; students and staff must feel that they are genuinely valued, not simply supported for the sake of compliance or performance. This idea was evident when Tina shared her experience of working with me to find a graduation pathway for her son, as she explained how, “she has never pushed me away... she has always treated me as an equal.” This mutual respect and investment in family success is what bridges the divide between leadership and community, ensuring that schools are not just places of instruction

but spaces of belonging. Noddings (2005) contends that caring begets caring, meaning that a school culture and community engagement built on care encourages students and teachers alike to cultivate their own capacities for empathy, understanding, and meaningful engagement. Caring should not be a side effect of leadership; it should be its driving force, or a multiplier. Findings reinforce that educational leaders must recognize that their role extends beyond discipline, instruction, or administration; it is about fostering relationships that make success possible for every student with caring being at the forefront.

Building Bridges and Boundary Crossing

Building bridges and boundary crossings is also an essential component in this notion of critical care leadership. This building block draws directly from Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) boundary crossing theory, which describes how individuals navigate across cultural, institutional, or professional boundaries. As a Black female leader in a predominantly white school community, boundary crossing is not just professional—it's deeply personal and cultural. The critical care leadership working model acknowledges that these crossings offer opportunities for learning within communities. *Building bridges* refers to creating meaningful, trusting relationships between school leaders, students, families, and communities, especially across lines of culture and race. It involves fostering inclusive environments where all voices are valued. Also, relevant here, Khalifa (2018) emphasizes inclusive and critical engagement with marginalized communities, reinforcing the importance of leadership that is both responsive and boundary-pushing.

Revisiting my conceptual framework, I also have a focus on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Black female leadership (Edwards, 2016). These parts of the conceptual framework validate how navigating white-dominant systems as a Black female leader constitutes daily acts

of resistance, resilience, and bridge-building. Throughout this research, the concept of cultural boundary crossing was a central focus in understanding how leadership can serve as a bridge between diverse communities. While boundary crossing can refer to any instance where a defined line or limit is crossed, cultural boundary crossing specifically involves navigating and engaging with different cultural spaces, requiring individuals to move between distinct norms, practices, and worldviews (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). In education, this process is essential for fostering inclusive environments that validate all students and families, regardless of their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Leadership that prioritizes cultural boundary crossing also functions as a form of cultural mediation—ensuring that different cultural perspectives within a school environment are not seen as barriers, but as *opportunities for enrichment* and connection. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2001) define a cultural mediator as an individual who acts as a bridge between the school environment and the child's family, enhancing mutual understanding, fostering relationships, and ensuring that families are active participants in the educational process. An example of this mediation in this study came when Tina shared her concerns about her son's uncertain academic future. He was at risk of not graduating, and she feared that he had run out of options. Together, in a third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) we searched for resources and solutions during big decisions, ultimately finding a program that would allow him to graduate while also transitioning into trade school. She later reflected how I “never pushed [her] away” and I always treated [her] as an equal.” This sentiment highlights the reciprocal nature of cultural boundary crossing and suggests that this third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) needs to have established relationships and trust to work. It is not simply about bringing students and families into the dominant school culture; it is also about recognizing and validating their perspectives and their decision-making.

By involving families in the process, I was not just leading, I was fostering an environment where parents felt their voices mattered and I was building bridges for boundary crossing.

This level of engagement is also crucial, as Khalifa (2016) emphasize that successful cultural boundary crossing requires leadership that actively promotes inclusive dialogue and community engagement. Schools that fail to engage with families and build bridges risk creating environments where students feel disconnected and unsupported. As our communities continue to grow more diverse, the need for leaders who can serve as cultural mediators within safe and responsive third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) environments will only become more critical. The effectiveness of cultural boundary crossing initiatives depends largely on the willingness of school leaders to engage in ongoing learning about the cultures they serve (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). At the same time, based on the results of this study there is a core need for creating a third space with intentional relationship building built through critical care with patience and persistence that also matters immensely.

As our communities continue to grow more diverse, the need for leaders who can serve as cultural mediators will only become more critical. The effectiveness of cultural boundary crossing initiatives depends largely on the willingness of school leaders to engage in ongoing learning about the cultures they serve (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Creating a Third Space as a Black Female Leader

Creating a third space as a Black female leader is also an important component of critical care leadership. The notion of a third space represents a space where new forms of understanding, identity, and collaboration emerge. This space is culturally pluralistic, affirming both dominant and marginalized perspectives, and aligns with Black feminist thought (Collins,

2000; Edwards, 2016) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Third spaces are where personal growth, community connection, and mutual respect are cultivated.

As a Black female principal leading in a predominantly white school, I must bridge cultural divides daily, ensuring that students, families, and staff feel both seen and valued. My leadership has required me to step into a third space where my own cultural identity and lived experiences are not the norm, yet I have leveraged these very differences to create relationships rooted in trust and mutual respect. Cultural boundary crossing is not just about adaptation; it is about creating interactions that empower individuals to bring their full cultural selves into new environments (Khalifa, 2016). Gina affirmed this when she said, "when it comes to her, it does not matter if you're Black, white, mixed... she will listen to you." This acknowledgment reinforces the idea that leadership based on cultural inclusivity *with* critical care fosters an environment where students feel more comfortable navigating their own cultural boundaries between home and school. It is not about erasing differences, but about validating them, ensuring that students do not feel they must leave their identities at the door to succeed in an academic setting (Paris, 2012). Educators and students alike can engage in what Yahya and Wood (2016) describe as creating a third space—an educational setting that bridges the boundaries between students' home cultures and school literacy practices. This concept is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of students and families who do not traditionally see themselves reflected in leadership or curriculum.

Some of the characteristics I found to be present in the third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) that I tried to create with the participants in this study include:

- Practicing Patience
- Setting high expectations

- Cultivating personal connections
- Building strong relationships
- Being consistently present
- Offering targeted resources
- Supporting families through major decisions
- Fostering a healthy school culture

As an example, recall the troubles Sheila reflected on during difficult transitions to our alternative school, and our high school. Her daughter had to navigate these changes which posed new social and academic challenges. Without a bridge, or third space, provided by critical care leadership to guide her across that transition, the shift could have been overwhelming. My role as a leader was to ensure that the school environment and the foundational relationships themselves became bridges, not just through policies, but through relationships that fostered trust. This experience aligns with Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) assertion that boundary crossing can be a powerful learning opportunity, as it encourages individuals to engage with new perspectives and challenge their assumptions. Furthermore, it shows the dynamic layers of boundary crossing present beyond the Black-white dynamic between the family and I, when also considering how the change in school settings also represents boundary crossing. Relationships, trust, and patience created a safe third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) through these transitions.

In educational leadership, *positional power* refers to the formal authority granted by a role or title. Yet, for Black female leaders—particularly in predominantly white school communities—this authority is not always acknowledged in practice, even when it is present on paper. This became clear in multiple interactions I experienced, where my leadership was

initially questioned or bypassed, revealing deeper issues of implicit bias and perceptions of authority.

I am recollecting on how this unfolded during a site council meeting with site council member, Tonya, who had been advocating for her son, but despite my repeated offers of support, resources, and even a seat at the decision-making table, she continued to seek guidance from my white assistant principal instead. Her actions spoke volumes, not just about preference, but about whose leadership was seen as legitimate. Even in that situation I found that being patient and persistent helped to change things around. I kept inviting her in. I shared resources. I encouraged her voice. Over time, our relationship shifted, and she began to trust me as a leader and advocate for her son.

A similar story unfolded with Trista; a white mother who called my office frustrated about the educational support being offered to her son at another high school. Despite my role and expertise, she bypassed my recommendations and turned to my white colleague for validation. Ironically, the resource I offered, an academic pathway tailored to her son's needs, turned out to be the very solution that helped him succeed. But her initial dismissal of my leadership reminded me that positional power alone is not always enough; trust must be cultivated through patience, personal connections, offering resources, and relationship-building. These stories are not outliers—they are patterns that show how critical care leadership works in those third spaces (Yahya & Wood, 2016) that begin to bridge gaps in trust and perception. They reinforce the need for educational leaders, especially those navigating racial and cultural boundaries, to pair positional authority with relational authority. It is not enough to hold the title of principal; you must also cross the boundary by building relationships that allow your leadership to be seen, felt, and respected.

Creating a third space also embodies Epstein's (2001) call for family-school-community partnerships, especially when such partnerships center marginalized families and acknowledge systemic inequalities. Similarly, the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships, (2008) encourages schools to welcome all families and create inclusive environments, which supports the relational nature of this space. Furthermore, Khalifa (2018) reinforces this concept by arguing that culturally responsive leadership must "reposition schools as community-responsive institutions" (p. 103) where racial and cultural knowledge is not only included but central to school practices. This sense of belonging is further nurtured through the intentional creation of a third space, a cultural and relational bridge between home and school environments.

Critical care leadership helps construct this third space by honoring students' backgrounds, values, and lived experiences. Black female leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping student success, particularly when they are effectively cross-cultural boundaries and apply critical care principles when creating third space (Yahya & Wood, 2016) environments built with critical care leadership. Students benefit significantly from leadership that centers care, advocacy, and high expectations (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).). While studies have demonstrated that Black students often excel under Black leadership, a critical question emerges: *What about white students under Black leadership?* This remains an underexplored area of research.

With the emergence of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981), greater attention has been given to the leadership of Black women in education. Traditional leadership models, which historically normalize whiteness and emphasize masculinity and charisma, often contradict the leadership styles of Black women, whose approaches are deeply rooted in care, relational leadership, and advocacy. The invisibility of Black women in educational leadership is not accidental—it is a result of systemic barriers

that often marginalize Black women's contributions and diminish their voices in leadership spaces (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1991; Maher & Tetreault, 1993). Yet, despite these challenges, Black female leaders are actively transforming schools by engaging families and communities in ways that have previously been overlooked. White leaders have been historically overrepresented, leaving a gap in diverse perspectives and approaches.

As one participant, Tina, reflected: "she has always treated me as an equal, I feel." The term *equal* is interesting here, because it also suggests that regardless of my color in a predominantly white environment, there was an intersectional form of *positional power* that still may have been factored into her perceptions of societal status. Which, maybe also suggests, that our Black-white dynamics may have been minimized once true relationships were established. This prompts me to reflect about the possibility of when Black females lead schools: relationships become bridges that cross cultural boundaries, creating spaces where all families—regardless of race—feel valued and heard. Furthermore, we shared an understanding of the challenges presented by motherhood, and my lived experiences as a Black female leader open up a unique perspective as a form of expertise (Collins, 2000) from the women I learned from – but there were similar sentiments and experiences from white mothers. This helped to serve as a cultural bridge and personal connection even as I know that there are still distinct nuances and characteristics that are different found amongst my Black female leadership learning experiences. Miles Nash & Peters (2020) argue that Black women leaders excel at boundary crossing, which allows them to build relationships across racial, cultural, and socio-economic lines. Put another way, maybe our lived experiences as code switching leaders allow us to be more prepared for building third spaces for critical care leadership (Yahya & Wood, 2016). As Grahm explained, "I feel like it's a safe space for everyone. Because there's so many people to

help with so much different stuff." This sense of safety is not accidental. It is the result of intentional, care-centered leadership that prioritizes inclusivity and representation. It is also a direct challenge to traditional leadership norms, which often fail to acknowledge the lived experiences of Black women and the communities they serve.

Despite systemic barriers, Black women also continue to lead and create spaces where all students can thrive. Their leadership is not just about academic success, but about transforming school culture, making sure that every student, regardless of background, feels valued, seen, and heard. As Tina explained, "she cares, finds opportunities, and always goes above and beyond. This above-and-beyond leadership is precisely what makes Black female leaders essential in today's educational landscape – code switching and bridge building leaders capable of creating third spaces (Yahya & Wood, 2016) with critical care leadership. Schools need leaders who not only set high expectations but also build the relationships necessary to ensure that students and families can meet and exceed those expectations. The road to leadership is never easy, and for Black women, it is often ten times harder. But Black female leaders bring a unique, necessary perspective to educational spaces—one that is deeply rooted in care, advocacy, and community. Their ability to bridge cultural divides, challenge systemic inequities, and transform school environments makes them indispensable in today's schools.

As Randolph (2009) writes, "leadership always has had to attend to the context in which Black people lived outside of the schoolhouse doors" (p. 20). It my hope that the field of educational leadership to begin to fully recognize, support, and elevate Black women's voices in leadership—because when Black female leaders thrive, students, families, and communities thrive too.

Considerations for Future Research and Practice

Broadly speaking, this working model for moving towards the notion of critical care leadership has many implications for future research and practice. Specifically, this working model invites future researchers and practitioners to:

- Reimagine critical care leadership as a framework building synergy across multiple theories and frameworks already found in the literature.
- Examine the role of autoethnography and narratives that reflect the lived experiences of Black female principals and putting more energy toward educational leadership contexts in which people of color are leading predominantly white schools, instead of the other way around.
- Recognize and continue to deepen our understanding of Black female leaders as cultural boundary crossers, wisdom warriors, and bridge builders between schools and communities through critical care leadership.

In the remainder of this section, I offer additional suggestions for future research and practice for school leaders, policy makers, and researchers.

Considerations for Leadership Preparation Programs, Schools Districts and Policymakers

The practical implication here is that school districts must reimagine leadership development programs to emphasize cultural competency and boundary-crossing skills. This includes:

- Embedding critical care leadership as a core framework that emphasizes patience, personal connections, being consistently present, offering targeted resources, practicing patience, supporting families through major decisions, and fostering a healthy school culture.

- Structuring internships and field experiences around *boundary-crossing opportunities*, where emerging leaders work in culturally and economically diverse schools to build inclusive practices.
- Developing mentorship networks that pair aspiring leaders with diverse, experienced mentors—especially Black female leaders.

These intentional steps will allow schools to become true spaces of inclusion beacons of success within communities. As a Black female leader, I have often found myself navigating two worlds—one where my leadership is seen as different from other leaders, and another where my presence is essential for students and families who have never seen someone like me in this role. This sentiment was reflected in my own journey into leadership. I was never meant to be here—not in the sense that I wasn’t capable, but in the sense that systems were not designed for leaders who look like me. Lomotey (2019) confirms this, stating that Black female leaders are often “significantly and that their leadership is frequently “overlooked, despite its transformative impact” (p. 336).

Additionally, school districts and policymakers might also consider the following:

- Equip leaders with tools to reflect on their practice, including positionality statements and self-assessment tools to evaluate how their identity and experiences influence their leadership.
- Establish transparent leadership pipelines that intentionally identify, mentor, and support Black female educators and other underrepresented groups for advancement into administrative and principal roles.

- Embed critical care leadership principles into leadership standards and licensure frameworks, emphasizing care, cultural awareness, relationship building, and equity as non-negotiable components of effective school leadership.
- Fund and support boundary-crossing internships where aspiring leaders engage in working in third spaces with diverse communities.
- Create pathways for community-nominated leaders, particularly from underrepresented cultural groups, to enter leadership programs through alternative certification or district-grown leadership initiatives.
- Mandate professional development on intersectionality and boundary crossing.

By doing so, we not only uplift Black female leaders but also transform schools into places where all students—regardless of race—thrive under leadership that is rooted in care, inclusion, and justice.

This study also underscores the urgent need for systemic change in how school leadership is conceptualized, developed, and supported. As the racial demographics of students shift, leadership pipelines must become more inclusive and reflective of the communities they serve (Khalifa, 2016). Key policy implications include:

- Expanding leadership development programs to incorporate critical care theory and cultural boundary crossing as core competencies.
- Redesigning school accountability models to emphasize relational leadership and culturally responsive practices, rather than rigid data-driven approaches that neglect student well-being.

- Developing stronger partnerships between universities, school districts, and communities to create pipeline programs that actively recruit, support, and sustain Black female leaders.

This study has shown that Black female leaders are not only effective but essential in transforming school environments. However, without structural support, their leadership will continue to be an exception rather than the norm.

Considerations for Future Research

Findings also revealed that Black female leaders, when given space to lead authentically, transcend racial and cultural divides to foster trust, inclusion, and academic success. This reinforces the need for future research on how critical care leadership can be intentionally embedded in leadership preparation programs. Some key questions for future exploration include:

How do relational leadership models impact student outcomes in schools with diverse racial and socio-economic demographics?

What role does caring leadership play in mitigating student mental health struggles, particularly among students with trauma or anxiety?

How do school policies reflect the principles of critical care theory and critical care leadership?

How does research on school culture and climate reflect the principles of critical care theory and critical care leadership?

Are there new and innovative ways to bring research on boundary crossing, critical care, and third space into educational leadership and family engagement research?

This study affirms that students who feel emotionally supported by leadership develop higher levels of confidence, academic success, and school engagement. Future studies should explore quantitative measures of care-based leadership outcomes, particularly in comparison to more traditional hierarchical or disciplinary leadership models. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) define cultural boundary crossing as the intentional movement across social, racial, and cultural lines to foster inclusivity and collaboration. This study revealed that Black female leaders serve as critical cultural mediators; they create a “third space” (Yahya & Wood, 2016) a cultural and relational bridge between home and school environments. critical care leadership helps construct this third space by honoring students' backgrounds, values, and lived experiences. In this space, students, families, and educators can meet in mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration. This is particularly important in schools where racial divisions are deeply embedded in community history and educational norms. However, future research must address the broader implications of cultural boundary crossing in school leadership, including:

How do Black female leaders actively bridge cultural gaps between students, families, and staff?

What are the barriers preventing white educational leaders from engaging in cultural boundary crossing effectively?

How do leadership preparation programs equip (or fail to equip) aspiring school leaders with the skills necessary for cultural responsiveness?

Sheila reflected on how leadership shaped her ability to advocate for her daughter’s needs: “We’ve had rough days, but [we] always knew [we] could come and talk.” This highlights the role of leadership in empowering parents to cross boundaries and engage more deeply in their child’s education. Future research should examine how school leaders can foster boundary-

crossing mindsets among families and communities, ensuring that engagement is not just transactional but transformative. Furthermore, this study suggests that cultural boundary crossing is often an unrecognized yet essential leadership skill, one that is undervalued in traditional leadership preparation programs. Research could also further investigate:

The role of professional development in equipping school leaders with boundary-crossing strategies.

How racial identity influences a leader's ability to bridge cultural gaps.

Whether students in schools led by culturally responsive principals demonstrate higher levels of empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and civic engagement.

When critical care leadership is present, how does that translate to student success and student impact?

By exploring these dimensions, scholars and policymakers can develop evidence-based strategies to prepare school leaders for increasingly diverse educational landscapes.

The journey of Black female leadership equals critical care leadership in education. It is one of breaking barriers, building bridges, and ensuring that no student—regardless of background—feels unseen. Black female leaders are navigators of change, stewards of inclusion, and champions for students who need someone to believe in them. Their work is not just about leading schools—it is about transforming lives.

"I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me."

The call to action is clear: Schools could benefit by embracing critical care leadership, and future research could continue amplifying these stories, and explore how communities are willing to invest in leadership that crosses cultural boundaries to create educational spaces where

every student can thrive. The work of the leader is not easy, but it is necessary. The bridges built today will carry generations forward.

We Rise, We Sing

Final Autoethnographic Reflections: Guiding the Journey - The Bonds

This study is not just about Black female leadership; it is about the power of leadership that bridges divides, centers care and fosters inclusion. It challenges schools to redefine success, not by test scores alone, but by the relationships that sustain students and families through their educational journey. As I reflect on my own journey, I am reminded that Black female leadership is not just necessary; it is revolutionary, and it is time for schools, districts, and communities to recognize that.

Relationships are the foundation of effective leadership. The findings of this study reveal that both students and parents recognize the bonds formed with their principal as instrumental in their educational journey. Leadership is not just about discipline, structure, and policy, it is about connection. Tina expressed this sentiment clearly, stating, "No matter how crazy the ideas or concerns, she has made a bond with him." This speaks to the power of relational leadership that becomes the bridge over the cultural divide. When students and families know they are truly seen and heard, they engage more deeply in the school community. As I reflect on this, I remember my wisdom warrior, a Black paraeducator who saw me when I needed it most as a student. She was more than an educator; she was an anchor, a steady presence who made me feel valued, even in moments of doubt. Today, I strive to be that anchor for my students. I know firsthand that students perform better in environments where they feel seen, valued, and believed in. This study affirms that Black female leaders often bridge the gap between authority and mentorship, offering a model of leadership that balances high expectations with deep care. By fostering

genuine relationships with students, parents, and staff, they create schools where students not only succeed academically but also develop the confidence to navigate life's challenges. Caring and relational leadership is not just a strategy, it is a commitment to ensuring that no student walks alone on their journey.

Creating an inclusive and culturally responsive school climate is a fundamental aspect of leadership. Students thrive in environments where they feel a sense of belonging, safety, and value. It has been revealed that Black female leaders play a critical role in fostering cultural inclusion, challenging bias, and ensuring that all students are seen and supported. Gina reflected on this, stating, "I feel like it's a safe space for everyone." This simple yet profound statement highlights the impact of leadership that prioritizes equity, representation, and a deep understanding of students' lived experiences.

As I consider this, I think back to my first principal, a man who started as a janitor and worked his way up to become a school leader. He knew the community because he had lived it. He understood the families, the history, and the struggles that shaped the students walking through our doors. His leadership was not about authority alone; it was about connection, care, and ensuring that every student, regardless of background, felt like they belonged.

Black female leaders often bridge the gap between communities, advocating for school cultures that reflect the needs, identities, and aspirations of all students. Their leadership is not just about policy, it is about presence. By ensuring that schools are safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive spaces, they create environments where students feel empowered to learn, grow, and dream beyond the boundaries placed upon them.

Students perform better when leaders hold them accountable while also guiding them with care. leadership is not just about setting expectations; it is about walking alongside students,

ensuring they rise to meet those expectations with confidence. Black female leaders often balance high standards with deep personal investment, making sure that students do not settle for less than they can achieve. One student reflected on this impact, sharing, "it made me feel proud of myself. I didn't think I was ever going to leave there." This sentiment underscores the transformative power of leadership that sees students beyond their circumstances and pushes them toward success.

As I consider this, I think back to my sixth-grade teacher, a Black woman who refused to let me fall below expectations, even when I tried to. I vividly remember the day I attempted to forge my mother's signature on a homework sheet I had failed to complete. She caught me, and the look of disappointment in her eyes was something I never forgot. She didn't yell. She didn't shame me. Instead, she reminded me that I was capable of more. That moment shaped how I lead today. I hold my students to high expectations not to punish them, but because I see their potential, even when they don't yet see it in themselves. This research reinforces Black female leaders challenge students to exceed expectations, not just academically but personally. They create a culture of accountability, resilience, and pride, ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, understands that they can achieve greatness. Family engagement is the final piece of the puzzle of leadership that brings home to school together for the success of students.

Engaging families is a crucial component of school leadership, yet it often requires navigating complex relationships, particularly when Black female principals lead predominantly white schools. Leadership is not just about ensuring parental involvement—it is about creating meaningful and inclusive engagement where all parents feel valued and heard. One parent in this study shared, "she has never pushed me away... She has always treated me as an equal, I feel." This statement highlights the significance of relational leadership and the necessity of ensuring

that parents, regardless of race or background, feel respected as partners in their child's education. I understand this struggle deeply. As the daughter of a single mother, I witnessed firsthand the challenges of wanting to be engaged but not always having the time, resources, or access to do so. My mother cared deeply about my education, but between working and managing life's responsibilities, she couldn't always be present at every school event or meeting. I lead with this awareness and empathy, ensuring that no parent feels excluded because of their circumstances.

Black female principals create opportunities for parent engagement that are inclusive, respectful, and affirming of all families. They break down barriers, build trust, and establish school environments where parents, regardless of background, feel like they belong. When families feel welcomed and valued, students thrive. This study confirms that Black female leadership is essential to creating inclusive, high-achieving schools. Black female principals engage in cultural boundary crossing daily, ensuring that students, families, and school communities are supported in meaningful ways.

Through critical care theory, boundary crossing, and Black feminist thought, this research affirms that Black women in leadership bring an invaluable perspective—one rooted in resilience, cultural awareness, and a commitment to student success. As educational systems continue to shift, more research, advocacy, and policy changes are needed to sustain and support Black female leadership in schools. The voices of these leaders, and those they impact, must remain at the forefront of conversations about equity and excellence in education.

This research does not serve as an ending, but rather a beginning. A foundation for future conversations, actions, and transformations and bridge building in leadership.

Black female leaders play a critical role in fostering inclusive school environments through bridge-building and critical care leadership. Whether through care-centered leadership, cultural boundary crossing, or advocacy rooted in Black feminist thought, these leaders transform school culture, empower students, and engage families in meaningful ways. The success of Black female leaders in predominantly white schools is a testament to the power of culturally responsive, relational, and equity-driven leadership. However, their experiences also highlight the gaps in leadership preparation programs, which often fail to address the realities of leading diverse schools. By incorporating the intersecting theories in this research into leadership training programs, future educational leaders will be better equipped to create inclusive, high-achieving school environments. leadership training must move beyond traditional, hierarchical models to embrace equity, relational leadership, and cross-cultural understanding.

As I reflect on my own journey in leadership, I recognize that I am not just an individual walking this path—I am a continuation of a story, a carrier of a legacy, and a contributor to the collective memory of Black female leadership. Halbwachs' (1992) concept of collective memory reminds us that our past is not simply a collection of individual experiences but rather a shared history shaped by social groups, reinforced through stories, traditions, and lived experiences.

"We thank you, Lord, we thank you for our journey, you brought us from a long, long way."

When my family sings this song, we are not just expressing gratitude for our own lives, we are remembering the struggles, victories, and perseverance of those who came before us. Just as families pass down traditions through oral histories, Black female leaders pass down their wisdom, strategies, and resilience through their work. The bridges we build today will carry the leaders of tomorrow.

Conclusion: He Bought Me this Far

The findings in this research reach far beyond the experiences of one Black female leader, one school, or one group of students and parents. The findings underscore the necessity of critical care leadership that prioritizes personal connections, patience, supporting families through big decisions, and investing in a thriving school culture. Future researchers must take up the charge of redefining educational leadership, moving beyond Eurocentric models of authority to embrace a leadership framework that is relational and intersectional. As Collins (2000) argues, Black women's perspectives, often excluded from traditional leadership discourse, are essential to shaping conversations about equity, justice, and care in education. This study is just the beginning. The bridge has just started.

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