# Black leadership in education governance: A critical autoethnographic study of school board service

by

Jurdene Arlette Coleman

B.S., Kent State University, 2009
M.S., Kansas State University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Leadership Communication

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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# Abstract

There is limited scholarship on school boards and even less on the identity and experiences of those who serve on these citizen governance bodies. Through autoethnographic narrative inquiry, this study examines my experiences as a Black school board member in a predominately white school district in Kansas during the racial unrest of the early 2020s. In conceptualizing school boards as organizations, I illustrate the socio-material influence of systemic racism on school board process and practice in the form of white supremacist organizational values. Specifically, I examine how these values impacted my ability to represent my community as school board president. This study uses critical autoethnography to challenge the longstanding norms of school boards by amplifying my own concealed story and creating pathways to more just and inclusive spaces for Black school board members. Through this study, it became clear that my school board was not built to support the involvement of Black school board members as seen in my need to maintain a double consciousness as both a Black woman and the school board president, each with its own set of competing values. In response to the pervasiveness of white supremacist organizational values, I turn to the foundational practice of leadership-as-practice theory, expanding on the practice of stabilizing and developing critical approaches to the practice of stabilizing which provide concrete steps for increasing Black school board member participation and engagement in public school boards. The study concludes with a discussion of the challenges of using autoethnography to study this topic as well as ideas for future research to understand more about the perspectives and experiences of other Black school board members.

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Approved by:

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# Acknowledgements

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# Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the Black women who dared to be greater than their circumstances intended.

# Preface

For those of my readers who are unfamiliar with autoethnography and narrative storytelling, this Preface serves as an introduction to the unique and intentional writing style of this dissertation. In the first three chapters, you will notice use of two styles of text including italics and right adjusted text. These are dispersed throughout the opening chapters and are used to bring emphasis to personal story and other people's stories (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Any text in italics is written in a narrative storytelling voice. These are my own interpretations of past events based on rewatching video recordings. Text that is right adjusted includes words community members, specifically community members whose comments were racist and/or rooted in white supremacy. These direct quotes are used to ensure I both show, and tell you about major concepts. You will also notice that these quotes are right adjusted and indented in such a way so as they take up less space on the page. This was an intentional edit that shows you, the reader, that I am giving less attention and space in my writing to racism and white supremacy. The final writing style choice show up in Chapter 4 which opens with another guide for reading the results as they again lean heavily into narrative storytelling to emphasize themes. There I note that while it was always my goal while writing to share the past memories without altering them, it was nearly impossible to avoid reflecting on those memories and videos. Therefore, Chapter 4 abandons the use of italics noting that the upcoming narratives are a mixture of summarizing what I saw in video recordings and my own reflections on the footage. Each of the chapter has a narrative opening written in sanserif text which serves an example of the theme, followed by a theoretical analysis of the theme in serif text, then closing with a sequence of asterisks (***) denoting a move to the next theme.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## The Room Where It Happened

*When you enter the school board meeting room, you see four or so rows of small grey chairs with a short aisle down the center. They look as uncomfortable as they are and don't really encourage visitors to stay for very long. These visitor chairs face the large U-shaped arrangement of board member tables. The tables are expansive, brown, and heavy, almost too large for the space, putting considerable distance between observers of the meeting and the board members themselves. There are highbacked chairs for each board member, the superintendents, and the clerk, as well as two chairs for speakers. Speaker chairs are centered in front of the board with their backs to the crowd. Each seat has a microphone and name placard associated with it, and all these are arranged well before the board meeting starts.*

*In addition to tables and chairs, the district marketing manager, who monitors live feeds for the biweekly meeting, sits in the rear of the room. Their role of ensuring microphones are turned on when people are talking and monitoring the technology equipment for any malfunctions is vital in maintaining the "open" in open meetings. State statutes require school boards to have meetings that are open and available to the public. Prior to the pandemic, that meant publishing our minutes and meeting time online. However, after living in a virtual world for one and a half years, we now broadcast our meetings live on YouTube. This shift increases accessibility for the community, and it also increases opportunities for scrutiny, which we are never short of.*

*This meeting takes place three years into my service on the board and five months into my tenure as board president. I am the only Black member of the board and the youngest board member by about ten years. Not only am I the only Black board member, but I am also often the*

*only Person of Color in the room among the administrative team members and frequently of the visitors. I am often the only non-white person in the educational center on board meeting nights. Being the only POC in this space weighs heavily into how often I spoke up on issues of race and what words I chose to say. I'm representing every Black student and parent when I speak, and I never forgot that at the table.*

***

From 2018 to 2022, I held a seat on my local school board during what would become the most infamous time in the history of public education since the 1954 landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education. In March 2020, my local school board called an emergency meeting, and we voted to close schools for the remainder of the month due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in our community; later that month, we closed schools for the rest of the school year. That same month, Breonna Taylor was murdered in her home in a botched police raid. In May 2020, we watched as George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin over a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. The world was crumbling around us, and with everyone on lockdown in the comfort of their homes, we all watched these senseless deaths of unarmed Black people unfold—alongside the growing number of Black Americans being killed by the COVID-19 virus—on the nightly news month after month. Our inability to acknowledge the loss of Black lives and the fear of Black families was deafening at the board table and served as a symptom of a larger problem within our district—the inability to have honest conversations about race.

As the only Black board member and the board president in 2021, I served with these events consuming my mind and body. A 2018 study found that repeated exposure to the killing of unarmed Black people by police has adverse effects on Black viewers for up to two months

following each exposure (Bor et al., 2018). I would find myself bristling during discussions about *low-income* (read: non-white) students because I knew they, too, were living in a world where men and women who looked like their fathers, aunts, and cousins were being gunned down by police, and yet we expected them to show up to school and perform well.

Despite the silence within the board on these culturally significant events, I was pleasantly surprised when administrators communicated their own need for training on culturally responsive teaching and learning. Staff members were telling us that they recognized they did not know how to talk to their students about what was happening in the world or how to connect with families of vastly different life experiences than theirs, and they wanted to learn. The administration responded with a request to purchase a curriculum that would include personalized learning opportunities for staff. The curriculum was rooted in culturally responsive teaching and learning, or CRTL, which all teaching staff could voluntarily complete, and it would increase the cultural humility of our teachers and give them tools to connect across difference in their classrooms (Will & Najarro, 2022).. Our role as the board was to review the proposal and decide whether to invest in the training, and we did just that. The purchase amount required two separate votes by the board. The first passed 5–2 in favor of the purchase. Two weeks later, we would vote again. In that time, conservative members of our community began a campaign to conflate culturally responsive teaching and learning with Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

***

*There are so many visitors tonight that we have standing room only. People are spilling out into the hall and lobby. Many are sitting on the floor or pushed against the walls of the room. Four weeks ago, the board made a preliminary vote to purchase culturally responsive teaching*

*and learning professional development for teachers, something the staff voted on and said they needed and wanted. Since then, community members have started a local campaign against Critical Race Theory (CRT) right here in our boardroom. They have emailed, called, and written letters quoting national anti-CRT rhetoric:*

"Critical Race Theory is a threat to our public education system."

"You just want to indoctrinate our children with racist ideas."

"Teaching white children they are inherently racist."

*Two weeks after the initial vote, we spent hours listening to these community members make claims that the school board was "pushing a liberal agenda" by teaching Black children they were "inherently oppressed" and white children they were "inherently racist." Because of the rhetoric and the fear of retaliation from the community, the second vote did not pass.*

*Despite the vote failing, the anti-CRT crowd continued to show up to meetings. On this day, about a month after the curriculum discussion began, the pro-CRTL crowd has joined. They are clearly at odds in the audience, both segments of people stacked together, wearing masks (or not), holding signs that say, "NO CRT" or "DO BETTER – YES TO CRTL." The tension is high in the room, and I can feel my own anxiety and insecurities elevating with each second as we get closer to starting the meeting and public comment. The board clerk hands me a stack of about ten public comment forms, and I take a deep breath and then knock the gavel a few times to indicate the start of the meeting.*

***

Writing this text was a labor of love and liberation for me. It is the culmination of years of intentional examination of my public service leadership on the school board, the result of which is this critical, autoethnographic look at the materiality of leadership that upheld the space

for the eruption that was this local battle in the larger U.S. culture war to happen right here in my community. For me, the path to learning and growing is littered with question marks: Why did this happen? What about this school board, this community, let this happen? What could be changed so this doesn't happen again? If it doesn't change, would I want to serve this community again? These questions pushed me to understand more about the origin of the division in my community which led me to the cultural phenomenon of identity politics in the U.S. society.

## Culture Wars and Identity Politics

During my time as board president, racism in the form of public comment was often padded with misrepresentations of iconic Civil Rights leaders' words. The most frequently misquoted was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of my constituents would begin their remarks with some reference to the peaceful nature of Dr. King, followed by quoting the iconic line from his *I Have a Dream* speech: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" (King, 1963). These symbolic words were repeatedly hijacked to misrepresent an idea of passivity when it came to issues of race and injustice. When I think back to those school board meetings where we listened to hours of public comment, I lose count of how many times Dr. King's words were used as weapons against equity and inclusion.

> Others and I are not opposed to DEI or cultural training however we do not want training based on stereotyping, grievance and despair, leading to group learned helplessness but instead want training based on humanizing, gratitude and optimism leading to confident and productive individuals…training based on Martin

> Luther King's teaching of judging people by the content of their character not the color of their skin sounds perfect.
>
> An anti-CRT community member

The implication in these words was that by giving our educators tools to talk about and teach cultural humility, the board of education would be reinforcing and encouraging stereotyping, prejudice, and learned helplessness. Never mentioned were King's words from just a few minutes earlier in the same speech: "We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of unspeakable horrors of police brutality…we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (King, 1963).

Despite this consistent misrepresentation of Dr. King's words by members of my community, a 2023 NBC News poll found that over half of the U.S. population disagreed with the notion that people are judged by the content of their character rather than their skin color in the United States (Todd et al., 2023). The difference in perspective was further divided along racial lines, with 53% of white individuals believing that Americans are not judged by their race versus just 20% of Black people agreeing with that sentiment (Todd et al., 2023).

That same national poll revealed that the U.S. is in the midst of a major culture war (Todd et al., 2023). The ideological divide in U.S. society was first given the title "culture war" by James Davison Hunter (1991), who, in response to the 1990s fights over abortion, gay rights, and religion in public schools, wrote a book with the same title. In a 2021 interview with Politico, Hunter explained that while the culture war he wrote about in the 1990s was primarily focused on the secularization of mainstream society, this most recent culture war has grown into a class-culture conflict where the motivation of conservatives is fear of extinction (Stanton, 2021). Whereas politics was historically a vehicle for compromise and finding common ground,

culture wars have taken over American politics, and now politics is fueled by these culture wars (Stanton, 2021). These cultural groups span the spectrum of values. From the LGBTQ community to Christian nationalists, culture wars have become the primary focus in today's political world.

Hunter believes that today's culture wars are really about the ways in which our politics have become "reflections of our deeper cultural dispositions…that go beyond our ability to reason about them" (Stanton, 2021, para. 12). Political differences have become more about disagreeing with the social context of *who I am as a person* instead of *what I believe about our social contract as U.S. Americans*. A prominent example is seen with the so-called rights of evangelical Christian nationalists to force the rest of U.S. citizens to forego birth control or access to abortion care because these are in direct conflict with their own religious beliefs (Kim, 2023).

According to Hunter, the critical issue within today's culture wars is race and ultimately the meaning of race in America (Stanton, 2021). This focus on race today ultimately fuels the current state of politics in America.

> It's crucial that our kids are taught that no one is lesser for any reason whatsoever and so skin color is obviously included in that… If by the terminology used [in the curriculum], we mean that we're going to teach our kids that we all have the same worth and value and that we should all love each other in that way and be empathetic, then I'm all for it. That's a great thing obviously. But if we mean...that someone from a certain skin color is inherently an oppressor or is inherently oppressed, then it is no good. If that's the

> case, then we'll be teaching our kids to have a victim mentality or to actually be racist only in a different way.
>
> An anti-CRT community member

At the fringes of this culture war on race are extremist conservative values, which are at the root of the push against the idea of the role of public institutions—in the case of this study, the public school system—in our daily lives. Extremist conservativism stands firmly in anti-multiculturalism with an emphasis on preserving the heritage, identity and future of European people in the United States. They oppose diversity and globalism, citing the race and nationality are at the root of all problems in the United States, specifically the lawless and ignorance of minorities (Goldwag, 2011).

In my case, these extremist values served as the foundation for parents to overrule curricular choices that had been vetted and selected by the school district. These extremist values have come to be known as Alt-Right (short for Alternative Right), whose core beliefs center on the preservation of white identity (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.) and merged with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) campaign slogan that rose to popularity during former President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The Alt-Right became synonymous with racism, as white families made overtly racist public statements at public protests and in school board meetings as they believed the freedom to express their beliefs was more important than the impact of those beliefs on their community. The Alt-Right's approach to using former President Donald Trump's behavior as justification to openly force racist, misogynistic, evangelical ideologies on people in their communities is rooted in white supremacy (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). To understand the impact of white supremacy on public school board governance, we must first define white supremacy.

## White Supremacy and Whiteness

Various sources define white supremacy as an expansive ideology rather than person-to-person instances of discrimination or prejudice. The National Education Association (NEA) defines white supremacy culture as "a form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that whites should politically, economically and socially dominate non-whites" (NEA Center for Social Justice, 2020). According to Delgado and Stefancic (1997), white supremacy is associated with the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of white people. Legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley (1997) defined white supremacy in terms of the systemic impact of whiteness:

> By white supremacy I do not mean to elude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and nonwhite subordination are daily reenacted across their broad array of institutions and social settings. (p. 592)

Each of these definitions speaks to the structural impact of a belief system that situates white people as inherently superior to non-white people and recognizes that this ideology, whether subconsciously or consciously, has impacted policies, social interactions, and resource distribution across the United States for centuries.

The related concept of whiteness is described as an oppressive system that normalizes privileging white people and marginalizing non-white people (Earick, 2018). According to Withers (2017), whiteness is accomplished through culture or material practices that uphold

white racial superiority and is sustained through the non-material culture (e.g. values, norms, beliefs) that maintains whiteness as the preferred racial identity in western society. Whiteness and, ultimately, white supremacy played major roles in the experiences I analyzed in this study.

> [I] worked for several years with all kinds of people and it never occurred to me that anybody would do anything that would degrade them and I still feel that way.
>
> An anti-CRT white man

> Many of these terms that sound reasonable – social justice, antiracism – are dangerous actually.
>
> An anti-CRT white man

In conceptualizing whiteness and white supremacy as systemic, organizational problems, I turned my attention to the existence of physical structures and symbolic practices that reinforce—often covertly—the position of superiority for white people across all major institutions in U.S. society. At the organizational level, these spaces, practices, and norms interact with human players to reinforce privileging the white experience. This interaction between people, spaces, and places has been studied by scholars in the leadership field and is known as sociomateriality.

## Sociomateriality

> Dwelling on what hurts keeps you trapped in the past, prolonging your pain and preventing you from moving forward in your life. The more emersed we are becoming at rehearsing the offense, both the oppressor and oppressed, expressing our revenge, the more we allow that offense to dominate or lives... In usurping God's role in

judging our offenders, we become like the very people we judge.

Trying to fix racism with negative concepts, it won't work.

An anti-CRT white woman

Fenwick (2014) broke down sociomateriality into two concepts: (a) the *material*, which refers to all the "things" in our lives, whether organic or inorganic, technological, or natural (such as forms, checklists, machines, databases, furniture, and passwords); and (b) the *social* which refers to symbols and meanings, desires and fears, and cultural discourse. Combined, sociomateriality is the result of the interactions between humans and the inanimate that shape and are shaped by each other (Fenwick et al., 2011). Material elements are subject to human intentions, forms, and direction and are understood as elements that represent human purposes (Fenwick et al., 2011).

Physical space can both enable or produce certain behaviors while restricting others multitude of reactions and outcomes (Ropo et al., 2013). In the case of school boards, the material space including the chairs and tables become restrictive barriers between board members and visitors. The presence of microphones give way to largely uninterrupted commentary as community members engage in public comment, influencing how the members interact with people from the community. The space constitutes a school board meeting, but without the presence of the school board, it is simply a room. Because places and spaces produce and restrict actions, the materiality of these places have the power to lead people (Ropo et al., 2013).

The architecture and managerial approach to place and space link the physical environment with understanding the symbolic meaning of physical spaces to social interactions. This is a difference between focusing on how a space was planned to function and how that

space actually affects people, relationships, processes, workflow, and use (Ropo et al., 2013). This study drew from research on place and space within leadership studies, exploring the power of material place and social space to shape people's actions, interpretations, and judgments.

Alongside white supremacy culture, these concepts of the material place and social space were key in the framing of this study. As I have started to demonstrate through this chapter, I will use narrative storytelling and autoethnographic accounts of my experiences serving on a school board in a predominately white community, I sought to understand the impact of white supremacy and whiteness on school board governance. Specifically, I was interested in understanding how the sociomateriality of white supremacy culture affects board members of color and our ability to govern effectively amid the most significant culture war in the 21st century.

## Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences of white supremacist culture on my time as a Black school board member on a public school board using an autoethnographic approach to storytelling and a sociomateriality leadership framework. The research questions under investigation were:

1. How does white supremacy culture influence the sociomateriality of my local school board?
2. How did the sociomateriality associated with white supremacy culture impact me as a Black school board member in my predominately white community?

# Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature related to key concepts under study. First, I briefly discuss the structure and function of school boards and the development of public school governance in the United States. Next, I look at how Black Americans have experienced a subpar version of the U. S. public education system from the 1800s to today. Then, I turn our attention back to school boards, conceptualizing them as organizations within organizations, connecting the communication studies' cultural approach to organizations and materiality. The chapter concludes with an overview of the history of whiteness and white supremacy, with an emphasis on white supremacist organizational values.

## History of Public School Governance and Race

There are over 13,000 public school districts across the United States whose primary function is to ensure quality education for the nation's 55.2 million students (Center for Education Reform, 2019). In Kansas, with the exception of one district, school boards are a body of seven publicly elected citizens charged with the governance of their local public school district. School boards are nonpartisan by design. Interested candidates run independent of their party affiliation for seats elected every two years on a staggered basis so that the entire board is never re-elected at once. Elected members serve four-year terms. In the spring of 2017, against the national backdrop of the 2016 election of President Donald Trump and the Year of the Woman, I ran a campaign for school board in my local district. That November, I was elected alongside two other women to serve my community for four years.

The school board is collectively responsible for (a) the creation of a vision for the school district, (b) adopting policies that support the vision, (c) hiring and evaluating a superintendent who is the chief executive officer of the district, (d) approving an annual budget, and (d)

maintaining positive community relations. Decisions are made through majority rule, with each board member having a single vote. This dynamic reflects the importance of the nonpartisan design of school board elections. The goal is not to be apolitical but rather to remove a conflict point—in this case, party affiliation—that could keep a school board from doing its job (Ford, 2021). All of these laws, rules and practices have been in existence since what seems like the dawn of time, but what is the history of public education governance?

The nation's first government body that functioned as a school board was created in 1647 by the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (NSBA History, n.d.). By 1826, the State of Massachusetts enacted a law requiring each town to elect its own school committee. This law was the official beginning of the modern-day school board, which later became commonplace across the United States (NSBA History, n.d.).

## Black American Participation in Public Education

While white Americans were routinizing the public education system, Black Americans were still seen as property and forbidden to read and write. During the mid-1800s, the number of enslaved Black Americans was estimated at approximately four million (Raines, 2023). Having been classified as property, they were barred from formal education according to the U.S. Constitution. As a result, the educational needs of Black American children were not given consideration when public school governance came into existence in the United States. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in 1863 by President Lincoln and ratified by Congress in 1865, along with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, codified the abolishment of slavery in the United States (Library of Congress, n.d.) but did not guarantee the participation of Black Americans in U.S. systems, such as education, health, and law.

Some 30 years following the Emancipation Proclamation, the Supreme Court ruled in the 1896 case, Plessy v. Ferguson, that Black Americans and white Americans should not share public facilities and services—including schools—resulting in what became known as Jim Crow Laws. These laws upheld legalized segregation from the 1860s to the 1960s (Library of Congress, n.d.). During that time, white Americans held all power to determine the structure, function, direction, and narrative of society, which included the public education system as we know it.

Despite segregation of the physical spaces, Black and white public schools were governed by the same all-white school boards, which controlled resource allocation for all schools within their district. The deeply entrenched ideals of white superiority were realized in how Black and white schools were funded. Higher levels of funding were allocated to white schools, which gave them access to better books, better facilities, and more teachers. Meanwhile, Black schools were given hand-me-down books or no books at all, dilapidated facilities, and fewer educators, resulting in much larger class sizes than white schools. Often, Black schools were overcrowded, and Black children were discouraged from attending school during the sharecropping season when they were expected to work for white farmers.

In addition to subpar environments, there were limits on what Black children could be taught in school. To deter Black children from learning that governments were meant to work for the people and that rights were bestowed on *all* U.S. citizens, ideas like freedom and equality were banned, as was learning about the nation's founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution (Brooker, n.d.). This inequity served as the breeding ground for the ideology of white racial superiority to become foundational to the public education system.

When the landmark Supreme Court decision, Brown v. Board of Education (1954), ruled that racial segregation in education was unconstitutional, school boards had to respond to the rapid integration of their districts. Unfortunately, the integration of schools across the United States did not erase generations of belief in white superiority ingrained in the culture of U.S. public education. Despite the many advancements in racial equity in education since Jim Crow, Black students continue to experience lower graduation rates and higher out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates than their white counterparts (Office for Civil Rights, 2023). These patterns highlight signs of the cumulative influence of white supremacy culture during the formation of public school governance.

While the number of Black and Brown students continues to grow to nearly 50%, the number of Black and Brown school board members has remained a shockingly low 14% (National Association of School Boards, 2018). The lack of diversity within the pool of school board members means that a large majority of school districts across the United States—even majority-minority school districts—have been governed by majority-white school boards for decades. We will examine the history of whiteness and white supremacy culture more in-depth later in this chapter, but the overwhelming number of white school board members reflects the white supremacist values embedded in the culture of schools since the beginning of the U.S. education system. Conceptualizing school boards as organizations in this study, I used concepts like organizational culture to understand how white supremacy influences school board governance.

## School Boards as Organizations

School boards have been studied primarily in the context of their relationship to various aspects of the school district, including school board performance and student achievement

(Dawson & Quinn, 2004, as cited in Heisler & Hanlin, 2018) and the superintendent-board relationship (Mountford, 2004; Usdan, 2010). Some scholars have used qualitative inquiry to identify what qualifies as *good* (read: effective) and *bad* (read: ineffective) culture regarding school boards (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2016; Eadie, 2009; Heisler & Hanlin, 2019). School board culture is seen as *good* when there is cohesion that furthers the board's goals. On the other hand, school board culture is deemed *bad* when disengagement and/or conflict among members prohibits progress toward the board's goals (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2016).

Despite research on the importance of a good school board culture, scholars have largely overlooked the process through which a school board's culture came to be, the social influences impacting school boards, and how those influences are enacted and supported within the school board. According to Usdan (2010), "school boards can be ignored or bypassed in reform efforts, or they can become a crucial element in leading and sustaining positive change" (p. 8). This study acknowledged the significance of school boards by centering these governing bodies and the impact of systemic racism and white supremacy on the current functionality of school boards.

Although school boards are responsible for the management of the organization (i.e., their local school district), the school board is more than its management and policy responsibilities. School boards in and of themselves can be conceptualized as organizations using Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) definition of an organization as an information processing system. Therefore by conceptualizing a school board as an organization, I can use use concepts of materiality to understand how white supremacist values are supported and engrained within school boards starting from the cultural approach to organizations.

## Cultural Approach to Organizations

In the 1980s, organizational scholars started using qualitative methods to examine organizational culture. Most notably, Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) drew on the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz to apply an ethnographic lens to organizations. These researchers focused their work on understanding the processes that created, maintained, and transformed organizations and how those changes came about, citing this as a gap in previous organizational culture literature. Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) concluded that these processes constituted an organization's culture and wanted to focus on understanding (a) how an organization functions and (b) how an organization talks about how it functions.

Early organizational culture literature, similar to that of school board literature, was conceptional in nature. Research focused on the structural features of culture without sufficient consideration given to how those features manifested themselves in the everyday interactions of the organizational members (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). Because of this, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) argued that, when studying organizational culture, it is important to focus on understanding how "organizational life is accomplished communicatively" (p.122). This communicative property of organizations led to their theory of organizational culture as performance.

**Organizational Culture as Performance.** In the development of their approach, Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) drew on the performance qualities of organizations through the work of Erving Goffman and Victor Turner. Erving Goffman (as cited in Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) described an organization's performance in terms of theatricality and play-acting, explaining that "some performances are overdone and all

performances may be suspected as displays of role distancing and presentations of organizationally required masks [that enable such roles to be played]" (p.129). Here, Goffman (1959) used acting as a metaphor to describe how members of an organization play out their roles in relation to others in search of a reaction/response, something one can observe someone doing.

The second understanding of organizational performance was derived from the work of Turner (1980). He noted that the etymology of the word performance—stemming from the French *parfournir*, which means to thoroughly bring to completion—implied that an organization's performance is about the process of *bringing to completion* or into existence, an organization's structural form. Turner (1980) saw organizations through the lens of creating a reality of the organization together through social interaction and societal conditions.

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) merged these two interpretations of performances in the development of their approach, labeling it the *organizational culture approach* to ensure that the level of inquiry encompassed everything that constitutes organizational life (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). More specifically, this approach looks at how organizational life is accomplished through communication. They drew from Geertz's stance on culture to inform their approach to studying organizations:

> If culture consists of webs of meaning that people have spun together, and if spun webs imply the act of spinning, then we need to concern ourselves not only with the structures of cultural webs, but with the process of their spinning as well (Geertz, 1973, as cited by Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983, p. 129).

To examine an organization's communicative properties underlying its culture, Packanowsky and Trujillo (1983) directed researchers to questions of (a) what key communication activities

are happening, (b) how these unfold as sense-making is accomplished, and (c) what sense organizational members have of their experiences.

This notion of focusing on what is being done to understand organizational culture closely relates to leadership-as-practice (L-A-P), a leadership theory focused on the *doing* of leadership rather than on the traits of individual *leaders* (Raelin, 2016). In the next section, I explore L-A-P and the concept of sociomateriality to draw a connection between organizational communication theory and the leadership framework used to support this study.

## Leadership-As-Practice and Sociomateriality

L-A-P defines practice as "a coordinative effort among participants who choose to achieve a distinctive outcome," which shifts the focus to how leadership emerges through the mundane, day-to-day happenings of an organization (Raelin, 2016, p. 3). Sergi (2016) explained that this shift toward a more process-oriented approach to leadership leads to two questions scholars can address:

a. If leadership is not solely about individual leaders, then what contributes to this phenomenon?
b. If leadership is the result of collective action, who and what helps in producing these results?

The answers to these questions frame an understanding of leadership as unfolding across time and as an interactional joint performance between human and non-human actors (Sergi, 2016). In other words, something *becomes* because people give it meaning. The individuals, objects, and structures (material) that co-produce and enact leadership "are not passive mediators or neutral channels for leadership but are consequential" to the production of leadership (Oborn et al., 2013, p. 6). As Raelin (2016) put it, the material has the capacity to signify the existence of

leadership. These interactions produce what is known as the social materiality or sociomateriality of leadership (Raelin, 2020).

The focus on the interactive complexities that constitute leadership lends itself to conceptualizing leadership as a relational, embodied phenomenon. Ropo et al. (2013) characterized leadership as socially constructed, created through interactions *between* people rather than unidirectional from a leader to a follower. Taken a step further, leadership is constituted within the interactions between people *and* between people and the material.

Materiality, and later sociomateriality, has its roots in organizational research at the intersection of technology, work, and organizations. Organizational management scholars have described materiality as the constitutive entanglement of the social and the material in everyday organizational life (Orlikowski, 2007) According to Orlikowski (2007), the social and material aspects of organizations do not have fixed inherent meanings but rather should be considered inseparably bound parts of reality that are fused together. More recently, sociomateriality has been expanded through conversations about place and space.

In their work on materiality, Ropo et al. (2013) examined how places and spaces construct and perform leadership. The term *place* refers to the objective physical qualities (e.g., an office, corridor, or stairs) and their material qualities (e.g., shape, color, mass, etc.). The term *space* refers to the subjective, experienced place. Space has no clear boundaries and is a product of our imagination and experiences. The subjective space can be revealed in stories, images, and somatic experiences (Ropo et al., 2013). Ropo et al. (2013) concluded that people make subjective judgments of physical places based on their own embodied experiences. Material places lead people through embodied experiences (e.g., feelings, memories, etc.), and these experiences form and shape their interactions with the place, producing and enabling some

actions and behaviors while limiting others (Ropo et al., 2013). School board literature has not yet begun to explore the impact of place and space. However, given the rigidity around both the place and space of school boards and school board meetings, this concept within the sociomateriality literature was useful in this study to further explore school board culture.

In the context of leadership, materiality refers to the place and space qualities that affect the understanding, creation, and maintaining of leadership as a social construction. Ropo et al. (2013) explicitly used the phrasing "materiality *in* leadership" (emphasis in original) to recognize the relational aspect of the leadership phenomenon rather than attribute leadership to any particular individual leader-centric traits. In this study, I aimed to understand the relationship between place and space of the school board and those who inhabit it, with special attention to how the place and space of today's school boards uphold white supremacy in my community.

## The Evolution of Whiteness

A major assumption of this study was that whiteness is embedded in the very fabric of all U.S. institutions, including school boards. Hacker (1992) declared that:

> [The United States of] America is inherently a 'white' country: in character, in structure, in culture. Needless to say, [B]lack Americans create lives of their own. Yet as a people, they face boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority. America's version of apartheid, while lacking overt legal sanction, comes closest to the system even now… reformed in the land of its invention. (p. 4)

Whiteness is being both hyper-visible and invisible (Linder, 2018). It is a set of practices that serve to maintain the privileges associated with it. Whiteness is an oppressive system that normalizes privileging white people and marginalizing non-white people (Earick, 2018).

Whiteness has been most notably reconceptualized as a racial discourse by Cabrera (2009), comprised of three central ideas: (a) an unwillingness to name the contours of systemic racism, (b) the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or minority group, and (c) the minimization of the U.S. history of racism. Because U.S. systems and institutions privilege white people, they are not socialized to consider how that privilege impacts the experiences of People of Color in those same institutions.

In her book, *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson (2020) explained that the idea of whiteness is specific to U.S. American colonization, and it was created during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to draw distinctions between enslaved people and European colonizers (Wilkerson, 2020). Whiteness is almost always invisible to the white U.S. Americans of today, which feeds the ideology of whiteness as the *default* (Linder, 2018). Whiteness is seen in everyday microaggressions toward People of Color, including verbal, non-verbal, and environmental slights and insults, whether intentional or not, that communicate a hostile environment. Whiteness is a dominant culture that is considered standard in the United States.

Unpacking whiteness as a social construct cannot be done without acknowledging the social and political significance of race in the United States, because race is a social fact in which whiteness plays a critical role (Guess, 2006). Whiteness as a social construct is supported by what Guess (2006) described as "racism by consequence" (p. 651). Racism by consequence operates at a macro level of society, representing a gradual shift away from a conscious, personalized ideology of the inferiority of non-white individuals toward social practices that depersonalize non-white individuals through institutionalization (Guess, 2006). By contrast, "racism by intent" focuses more on individual prejudices and discriminatory acts and has

informed these institutional practices upholding ideologies of white superiority over other non-white ethnic groups (Guess, 2006, p. 651).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) described whiteness as embodied racial power. Even if individuals are unconscious of it, whiteness is the visible shield of the dominant racial group, and, therefore, all those who are identified as "white" by society receive systemic privileges solely based on *wearing* their whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). As a societal norm, whiteness is taken for granted and seen as *the ordinary* to such an extent that it goes unnoticed much of the time.

The first examination of whiteness is attributed to Black American theorists, who wrote about their understanding of and experience with whiteness as outsiders to the construct (Painter, 2010). In 1829, Black journalist David Walker wrote about the historical pillaging and destruction associated with whiteness in contrast to the strength and ingenuity of the notably Black people of Egypt, Africa, who represented the beginning of civilization. He noted murder as a central theme of whiteness, describing how, through murder, whiteness was maintained throughout history. Parker (2018) further discussed the works of other Black scholars who wrote about whiteness, including W. E. B. Du Bois' (1920) *Darkwater* and Toni Morrison's (1992) *Playing in the Dark*. In his narrative work, Du Bois (1920) argued that violence was fundamental to whiteness, which was the only explanation for the devastation that had been caused in the world. Morrison (1992) highlighted how whiteness led to racism as a natural order with race so deeply ingrained in the social structure of U.S. society.

This intangible yet ever-looming idea of whiteness lurked in the board room during my four-year term on the school board. It wasn't until I started to develop this narrative that I could even articulate it as such. Yet, how exactly does whiteness show itself in a public school board meeting? Recall that we are characterizing school boards as organizations. With that in mind,

let's explore organizational values rooted in white supremacy to understand how something intangible, like whiteness, can have such a significant impact on the *doing* of school governance.

## White Supremacist Organizational Values

In their workbook, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001) identified a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in our organizations. As with all aspects of culture, some of these concepts are easily identified within an organization while others require more focus on the in-between moments and interactions. Table 2.1 summarizes the twelve characteristics.

**Table 2.1** Characteristics of White Supremacy Organizational Culture

| | Characteristic | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Limiting Emotional Capacity of those in Power | Perfectionism | Making a mistake means *being* a mistake |
| | Quantity Over Quality | Only that which can be measured is valuable |
| | Individualism | Value individual success and competitive nature |
| | Fear of Open Conflict | Those in power avoid conflict and discomfort |
| | Objectivity | Decisions are made logically and void of emotion |
| | Only One Right Way | Organization is not open to change or innovation |
| Limiting Behavior within the Organization | Power Hoarding | Power is limited within the organization |
| | Paternalism | Decision making happens at the top of the organization "secretly" |
| | Defensiveness | Criticism of those in power is a threat to the organization |
| | Sense of Urgency | Decisions, no matter how complex, need to be made quickly |
| | Either/or Thinking | Something is either right or wrong, good or bad |
| | Right to Comfort | Those in power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort |

These characteristics of organizations rooted in white supremacy culture fall into two larger categories – those that focus on behavior and those that focus on emotions. The first six

characteristics are centered on limiting the emotional capacity of those in power, in the case of this study, white school board members. These characteristics discourage acknowledging emotion among those in power. In a school board this looks like condemning the visible display of emotions by fellow board members or maintaining limited, surface level conversation on complex topics, such as student achievement, so as to lessen opportunities for emotional responses.

The second six characteristics are centered on those that limit the behavior of those within the organization. These characteristics encompass behaviors that limit how decisions are made in an organization as well as those that impose limits on the organization's openness to change. In organizations that demonstrate these characteristics, decision-making happens only at the top of the organization with little to no insight into how decisions are made given to others. In the school board, this often manifested as the board president and vice president working closely with the superintendent with no input from other board members.

In this study, I highlight how several of these characteristics surfaced in one way or another during my time on the school board. Many of these characteristics were present before my time on the board and many have continued to linger on since I left.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored the early history of school boards and school board governance. I dissected the historical context of Black Americans in public school, highlighting the disparity in quality of education due to early white supremacist values from all-white school boards governing in a post-Jim Crow United States. Next, I reframed school boards as organizations within organizations, applying organizational cultural theory to contextualize how white supremacy influences school board culture. Then we turned to leadership theory, L-A-P, to

consider how Black school board members experience school board culture, specifically from a sociomateriality lens. Finally, the chapter concluded with a history of the concept of whiteness and white supremacist organizational values.

The next chapter will describe how I use autoethnography to explore the research questions at hand. It begins with an overview of qualitative inquiry, followed by a deeper dive into autoethnography. I introduce my theoretical framework and discuss data collection and analysis through autoethnography. The chapter concludes by reviewing how to evaluate qualitative research using Tracy's (2010) eight big tent criteria for determining the quality of qualitative research.

# Chapter 3 - Methods

## Emergence of Autoethnography

Despite its use today in research focused on amplifying diverse voices in social science research, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) noted that qualitative research began with the influences of white supremacy, illustrated by ethnographic studies attempting to understand the "exotic, often darker-skinned other" (p. 4). The authors highlight that there would be no colonial history without the investigative mentality that turned these *others* into the object of colonialism's gaze. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) summed this up succinctly when they wrote, "From the very beginning, qualitative research was implicated in a racist project" (p. 43).

Since then, qualitative inquiry has turned a corner, shifting to becoming the vehicle for silenced voices to be amplified, with a newfound concern for how qualitative inquiry could contribute to the contemporary discourse on race, gender, class, freedom, and community (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). This current time in qualitative scholarship can be described as one that "cries out for emancipatory visions… and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle [against] and resist oppression" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43).

From the ashes of this emancipatory shift, autoethnography emerged in the 1970s as researchers were starting to give accounts of their own cultural experiences (Adams et al., 2022). By the 1980s, qualitative researchers were writing about the importance of personal narrative, the limitations of traditional research practices, and the influence of researchers on the research process and product (Adams et al., 2022). By the 1990s, autoethnography was the preferred method for using personal experience to examine cultural experiences in the field of communication studies (Adams et al., 2022). Autoethnography is an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to

the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Autoethnography seeks to "systematically analyze the researcher's personal experience in connection to a larger social context" (Kim, 2016, p. 123). This genre of qualitative inquiry emphasizes critical self-study and self-analysis on the part of the researcher (Hughes et al., 2012). The goal of autoethnography is not self-indulgent writing but rather problematizing social and cultural norms as they relate to the researcher's personal experiences (Kim, 2016). Autoethnography is a unique research methodology that holds the researcher as the subject of study, answering the question, "What am I learning by examining my own identities, power, privileges and penalties within a cultural context?" (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 7).

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) highlighted the significance of the current postmodernist climate that celebrates multiple ways of knowing and telling. In the 20th century, the relationship between scientific writing and literary writing became more complex, reducing the rigid line between the two and creating this blurred genre of qualitative inquiry. The intended audience of qualitative inquiry was shifting away from the ivory tower of higher education to the people whose stories are under investigation. As the audience shifted, so did the voice of scholarly artifacts. Scholars moved away from the removed and supposedly neutral third-person writing and began to embrace first-person, which encouraged writers to be present and accountable to the reader. This work demonstrates that shift throughout. As a reader, you should have noticed the movement between the third-person, neutral, and removed (i.e., the "traditional" academic) voice and the first-person, vulnerable, and open (i.e., the autoethnographer) voice.

## Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography offers a way of giving voice and legitimacy to personal experience to advance sociological understanding. This study used an approach to autoethnography that

Boylorn and Orbe (2014) referred to as critical autoethnography to challenge institutionalized norms in school boards. Critical autoethnography prioritizes minoritized experiences for the dual purpose of amplifying concealed stories and influencing justice for the storytellers. Boylorn and Orbe (2013) described critical autoethnography as a "powerful method for working with topics of diversity and identity" and that it is "predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed 'Other' and to experience it viscerally" (p. 15).

Holman Jones (2016) explained that for qualitative researchers employing narrative techniques like critical autoethnography, theory and story are intertwined. The *critical* in critical autoethnography is a reminder that theory is not a finite body of information to be learned but instead, it is an iterative process in which the researcher is constantly looking back and forth between theory and story to make sense of their lived experience. The task of autoethnographers is to craft compelling, engaging narratives that pull readers into the story of self, using theory to serve as a language for thinking through their stories.

Holman Jones (2016) outlined three commitments of critical autoethnography that every autoethnographer should consider: (a) theory and story work together in a dance of collaborative engagement, (b) critical autoethnography involves both a material and ethical praxis, and (c) doing critical autoethnography engages us in the process of *becoming* and shows us a way of embodying change. In consideration of these commitments, my research used critical autoethnography to engage and understand my experience while serving as the Black school board president of an otherwise all-white school board in my community. I analyzed my experiences through the lens of a leadership theory, Leadership-As-Practice(L-A-P), and the tenets of white supremacist organizational culture using the art of the narrative methodology, autoethnography.

In the next section, I describe how these elements guided each aspect of data collection, exploration, and analysis throughout the research process.

## Data Collection & Analysis

I liken the task of describing how this autoethnography came to life to the manner in which Bob Ross teaches his viewers to paint. He doesn't provide an exact formula for creating his artwork, but he walks you vaguely through every step he takes, explaining his tools and sharing why he does each stroke as the painting is unfolding right in front of you. This is what it feels like to walk you, as a reader, through the creation of this autoethnography: I don't have a formula or list of standard operating procedures to share, but I will give you an understanding of the big, broad strokes that brought this work together and let the story unfold on the pages that follow.

Autoethnography, as both process and product, is more of a philosophy than a well-defined method, allowing for creative freedom in the process of writing an autoethnographic work (Ellis et al., 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As a method, autoethnographers write about past experiences and epiphanies, or remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted a person's life, as well as life-changing events (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis et al., 2010). Then, retrospectively and selectively, they analyze those experiences with respect to broader cultural and social issues (Ellis et al., 2010). Analysis in autoethnography involves a constant comparison between personal experience and current theoretical frameworks. Later in this chapter, I illustrate the cyclical, nonlinear process of experience, reflection, comparison, and contrast throughout the research process that made up my theoretical framework.

## Autoethnographic Storytelling as Resistance

Scholars use stories, or narratives, as a phenomenon to understand multidimensional meanings of society, culture, and life (Leavy, 2009). Dyson and Genishi (1994) wrote, "we all have a basic need for story" (p. 2). But what is a story? Kim (2016) describes a story as a "detailed organization of narrative events arranged in a structure based on time although not necessarily in chronological order" (p. 8). Dyson and Genishi (1994) defined stories as a process of "organizing our experiences into tales of important happenings" (p. 2). What they both describe is this innate need we have as human beings to organize our experiences and narrate them based on what we deem as the most significant events.

Stories are interwoven throughout this work because, as a Black woman, stories have been an integral part of my life. Every event in my life, both significant and mundane, is held together with collective storytelling among family members. We share meals and laugh and cry as we take turns sharing stories of our family's history. Sometimes, our stories keep a family member we miss alive, like when we tell stories of the delicious food my grandmother would prepare when we were younger. Other times, our stories remind us of times less stressful than current life, like the story of how, as a young child, I put my little sister in a cooking roaster in our kitchen and presented her to my parents with glee. And sometimes, the stories are just to make us all laugh until our sides hurt, like when we tell the story about spilling an entire large drink on the table at a local restaurant moments after sitting down. Stories help me make sense of the joys and sorrows of everyday life. The challenge presented by creating an autoethnographic research study is to clearly create the bridge between the story I want to tell and the theoretical underpinnings that support (or deconstruct) the events I experienced.

I chose autoethnography because of how it lends itself to telling my story through the lens of white supremacy. Methodologies that dismiss or decenter racism insufficiently tell the stories of those they claim to empower, and, in response, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) encouraged a perspective of resistance through storytelling: the counter-story. Counter-story is a method of telling the untold stories of those on the margins of society. Counter-story is a "tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). In their writing, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) introduced three types of counter-stories: other people's stories, composite stories, and personal stories.

Other people's stories are typically a third-person biographical analysis of the impact of racism on the lives of marginalized individuals. These stories are not those of the writer, nor are they even necessarily a group to which the writer belongs. However, they still offer an analysis of the experiences of a person with a marginalized identity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Composite stories are created when the marginalized experiences of several individuals are compiled to create composite characters and situations. These stories may offer biographical and autobiographical analysis of institutionalized subordination, though the individual character sources are not revealed (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

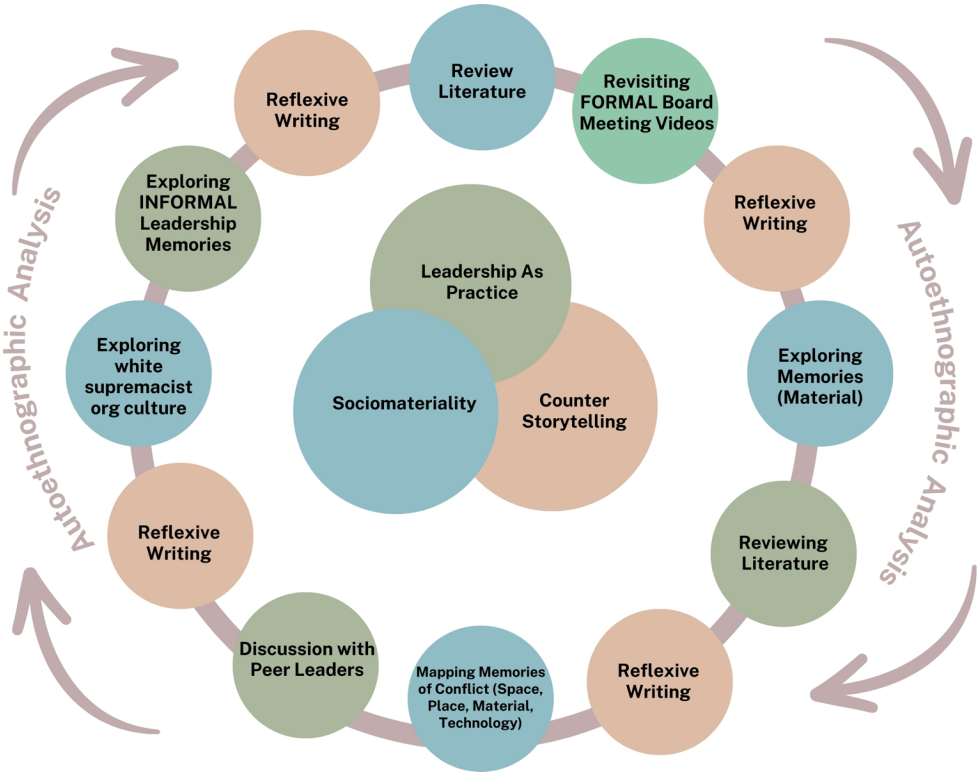
Personal stories focus on an individual's experiences with various forms of racism that are autobiographical in nature and situated against a broader sociopolitical critique (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Personal stories, like other types of stories, expose injustice and offer truths through the writer's own experiences (Martinez, 2020). This study involved the creation of a personal counter-story in the form of autoethnography centered around my experiences with white supremacist organizational culture as the only Black school board member in a predominately white school district.

Chapter 2 introduced the major theoretical components of this study—white supremacist organizational culture and school board governance—and this chapter described the process of developing an autoethnography. In the next section, I discuss the integration of these components through the theoretical framework that guided this study.

## Theoretical Framework

Autoethnography is both method and methodology. It describes the process of writing as well as the final product. Thus, I introduce the theoretical framework underpinning this study in a way that similarly demonstrates the process of writing, which involved reviewing and reworking this study. Below is a visualization of the theoretical framework (Fig. 3.1) followed by a written interpretation of the graphic.

**Figure 3.1** Theoretical Framework




The initial research phase began with personal reflection on my experiences while on the school board to identify critical moments that stood out as both a mental and physical memory of

a time when I experienced competing personal and professional values. Once I chose those critical moments, I spent time online reviewing archived recordings of school board meetings (Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, May 2021; June 2021). These videos provided me with a starting point for the first of many iterations of reflexive writing. After viewing the footage from several meetings and transcribing critical interactions, I sat with these memories and allowed myself to attune to my own feelings and reactions, which I later organized in my reflexive journal writing.

The experience of writing and analysis was both liberating and incapacitating. Publicly I told my constituents that the reason I stepped away from the school board was to finish this dissertation and that was partly true. The other part was the emotional struggles I endured living and reliving what happened to me Throughout my analysis process, there were many times where I set out to start reviewing data and I could only make it through two or three minutes of a video recording before I was feeling overwhelmed with going back to the day of this event. I recall the physical response of feeling my chest get tight and my mouth go dry, along with having negative thoughts about myself and what I did in those moments. Many times when I had set aside hours to work on this dissertation, I would find myself only able to take in a one or two public comments before I had to step away from my computer. It wasn't until I was granted permission by my chair to simply write whatever was coming up until I could write past it that I started to make progress.

This process led me to draw a through-thread between school board place and space, white supremacist organizational culture, and the practice of leadership. Next, I used a sociomateriality lens to map these conflict memories, focusing on place and space, to break down various aspects of behaviors, norms, and rules that, in these critical moments, aligned with

white supremacist organizational values. These reflections and insights were then shared with other Black school board leaders throughout Kansas. I recruited four Black school board members from across the state via an email solicitation and personal connections. I shared my preliminary thoughts on this project and some of my experiences, then listened to their stories of their own experiences with whiteness and white supremacy during their board service. This process served as a kind of member checking and provided a space for support and validation of my experiences. The more I examined white supremacist organizational culture as a framework for understanding my experience on the school board, the more I could connect the formal and informal aspects of leadership practices to these white supremacist organizational cultural values. These new insights encouraged me to revisit those initial recordings of board meetings to see where the informal and formal leadership practices may have impacted how interactions unfolded.

This diagram has no beginning or end because this process was ongoing and iterative. By drawing upon personal experiences, I explored the sociomaterial complexities of school boards reflective of white supremacist organizational culture and the impact of these on my ability to practice leadership in a space where my own values as a Black woman were challenged by the values and norms of the school board. To accomplish this, I used the art of autoethnography to deconstruct the threads of the meetings in which my school district's community unraveled over whether critical race theory was being taught in our district.

## Evaluating Qualitative Inquiry

As more scholars have explored issues of gender, class, and race and embraced more reflexive writing focused on the researcher's impact on fieldwork itself, they quickly recognized that conventional ways of evaluating qualitative work simply no longer made sense (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2017). This new era of qualitative research has embraced the inclusion of those under investigation to assist in framing their own stories and shifted the focus to research that addressed real-life problems. As a result, it has made necessary the development of new evaluative and ethical guidelines.

While there are many in the field of qualitative inquiry who argue against universal criteria against which to judge qualitative work, Tracy (2010) suggested that having set criteria enhances the validity of the field in a world that continues to privilege positivist, quantitative methodologies. To address this, Tracy (2010) proposed eight criteria for qualitative inquiry that are considered universal hallmarks of high-quality qualitative methods across paradigms. Tracy's (2010) criteria for good qualitative work draw from her interests in "interpretive, critical, and post-structural research" (p. 839). The result is a broad "big tent" structure for determining standards of qualitative research that recognize commonality across the field while allowing for specific goals and practices of individual paradigms and methodologies. The eight criteria are: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. In this section, I briefly examine Tracy's (2010) big tent criteria and how my study strived to attain these standards.

## Worthy Topic

When approaching qualitative inquiry, the researcher must consider whether she has a worthy topic. Tracy (2010) defined this criterion as "research that is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). In other words, tell a story worth reading. She warns against conducting studies that are merely opportunistic or convenient but otherwise without larger significance or personal meaning, as these will likely be conducted in a shallow

manner. Worthy studies, according to Tracy (2010), are interesting and point out surprises—they cover "issues that shake readers from their common-sense assumptions and practices" (p. 841).

The story of school board governance is largely told from an outsider's perspective in the literature. Often, the voice is a researcher who interviews board members and observes meetings. My work is written from the voice of someone who sat behind the table and made difficult decisions week after week. In addition, leadership research has evolved from an entity perspective to one that focuses on practical and intangible elements. School boards have not been examined from a leadership lens to date. Finally, the complexity of layering found in this — integrating L-A-P, place and space, and counter-story—is a fine-toothed comb that has not been applied to the area until now. This study unearthed the complexity of what it means to be Black in the United States in today's political and racial climate and serve in local government.

## Rich Rigor

Tracy (2010) described richness in rigor as research "marked by a rich complexity of abundance" (p. 841). In other words, richness is generated through the utilization of a variety of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples. Tracy (2010) noted that rigor conveniently provides face validity, which is concerned with whether a study appears, on its face, to be reasonable and appropriate. In terms of data analysis, rigor may be achieved by providing the reader with an understanding of the "process by which the raw data are transformed and organized into the research report" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

In order to create this reflexive critical autoethnography, I pulled from several data sources. First, my own embodied memories of my experiences at the board table informed which parts of my experience were shared here. Those memories that were most salient were often related to issues around race and whiteness and when I felt pulled in two directions—serving as

the facilitator (board president) during moments that devalued my human experience as a Black woman in my community. Second, I had the luxury of open access to YouTube recordings of every board meeting, and this data was used to corroborate and sometimes correct my own memories. The theoretical layering of L-A-P, white supremacist organizational cultural values, and sociomateriality provided a complex web of analysis through which I examined my experiences on the school board.

## Sincerity

Tracy (2010) described the third criterion as:

> An end goal that can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing… Sincerity means that the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research. (p. 841)

Self-reflexivity, a hallmark of qualitative inquiry, requires the researcher to authentically situate herself within the entire research process and consider how her existence within the study impacts everything from participant recruitment to data collection and analysis to data re-presentation. Autoethnography, by definition, is about vulnerability and in-depth self-reflection. The researcher examines her inner process in the chosen context and invites the reader into her complex understanding of the world. Not only sharing your own story but then slicing it open for the world to see as you analyze the inner fibers of who you are and how and why you performed a certain way is as sincere as a researcher can be with their audience.

Throughout this study, I was navigating the intersection of multiple subjectivities: my identity as a Black woman, as a school board member in a predominately white school district, and as a researcher. The nature of autoethnography, as a genre of narrative inquiry, required me

to be intensely aware of how these roles, or subjectivities, interacted with the process and outcome of my work. Although Kim (2016) cautioned against what is known as "backyard research" or conducting a study in a setting that is part of your daily life, she noted that, "in the current postmodern age, understanding multiple voices, multiple subjectivities, and particularities of the local community where we live, is paramount in generating new knowledge, and so backyard research is legitimate and valid" (p. 247).

I also consider this style of first-person writing as a display of vulnerability and honesty, as well as my willingness to be close to you, the reader (Wyatt, 2006). This idea of voice as vulnerability is something that I played with in this writing. As I noted earlier in this chapter, you will notice a dance between first- and third-person writing. This was deliberate. In times when I shared my experience or analysis of my experiences, I spoke in the first person. This is how I owned my thoughts, actions, and desires in my writing. When I shifted to a more conventionally *academic* tone, using words that bring legitimacy to experiences, I shifted to the third person. Another reason for that swaying back and forth was that the academic standards within higher education require a level of academic tone when completing a dissertation. In order for this very personal yet very powerful piece of writing to get out into the world, I had to, at times, choose to write in the required tone.

## Credibility

According to Tracy (2010), "credibility refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" that is achieved through thick description, crystallization, multivocality, and partiality (pp. 842-843). Thick description refers to the in-depth illustration of cultural meanings in great detail, almost showing the reader the meaning of a given phenomenon. Crystallization encourages researchers to gather multiple types of data and employ various

methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks. The end goal is to offer a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial understanding of the issue.

I used my own story to *show* rather than *tell* the story of my board service, intentionally weaving narrative throughout my writing to add to that thick description of the theoretical concepts I have introduced. Every layer of this work was enveloped in a story to immerse the reader in my context. I used words to allow the reader to sit with me at the board table.

## Resonance

Resonance refers to the researcher's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect the reader. It can be achieved through evocative writing, aesthetic merit, or transferability. Tracy (2010) warned that not every qualitative study must achieve resonance in the same way, but all high-quality qualitative writings must have some impact. Using first-person writing and narrative analysis, I sought to draw the reader into my experiences throughout the research process. As an autoethnography, this study was necessarily narrow in focus yet was written in such a way to provide the reader with a deep understanding of my experiences. Again, the vulnerability required of an autoethnographer, when done well, should draw you in as a reader. My use of thick description regarding my innermost thoughts was done to allow you to connect emotionally with the story I tell.

## Significant Contribution

Researchers must ask themselves, "does the study extend knowledge, improve practice, generate ongoing research, empower or liberate?" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Tracy (2010) noted that a study can have several different avenues to significance, be it theoretical, heuristic, or practical. Theoretical significance refers to extending scholarly knowledge on a given topic, going beyond what is known to provide a unique understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. A

study that does not unearth new phenomena can also curate curiosity, which Tracy (2010) described as heuristic significance. Research that starts a conversation for the scholarly world to continue is heuristically significant. Practical significance refers to the utility, or usefulness, of research. The use could be empowerment, liberation, or consciousness building around a contemporary problem.

This work contributed a unique lens to the L-A-P field, combining it with a critical framework to unpack how leadership practices rooted in white supremacist organizational values are harmful to those from minoritized backgrounds as they serve on public school boards. This study was one of the first examinations of how white supremacy has impacted the governance of public school districts and how white supremacy inhibits people from minoritized backgrounds from excelling on school boards. I hope this new understanding of school boards will start a conversation with state and national school board associations regarding how to better support school board members who come from diverse backgrounds. This is significant because, as we know, the only way to dismantle white supremacy is to break down its systems and build new ones. The findings of this study provide concrete pathways toward public education governance for white school board leaders. Finally, as I noted earlier, school boards have not been examined from a lens of leadership theory. This study drew new connections between the activity of leadership and school boards as organizations or institutions that practice leadership. This contribution to the school board literature has the potential to make a major impact on how states recruit and retain diverse school board members and perhaps could encourage those organizations that support school boards to consider how they might address the impact and influence of white supremacy on how school boards function.

## Ethics

> Just as multiple paths lead to credibility, resonance, and other markers of qualitative quality, a variety of practices attend to ethics in qualitative research, including procedural, situational, relational and exiting ethics. (Tracy, 2010, p. 847)

Tracy (2010) used four types of ethics to evaluate the ethical implications of qualitative research: procedural, situational, relational, and exiting. Procedural ethics refer to ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions, or governing bodies, such as the Institutional Review Board. These are generally focused on keeping participants safe from foreseeable harm, keeping procedures accurate, and avoiding fabrication (Tracy, 2010). Situational ethics are focused on the unpredictable moments that come up in the middle of the research process. They often revolve around the question, do the means justify the ends? Relational ethics require researchers to be mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others. Relationally ethical researchers engage in reciprocity with participants and do not co-opt others for a good story. Exiting ethics consider ethical dilemmas beyond the data collection phase and into the analysis and re-presentation phases. Researchers must consider how they can best present the research to avoid unintended or unjust consequences.

I was not studying myself in a vacuum, but rather in the context of a school board, in my community, with real-life administrators and staff who were having real challenges and who all experienced these major events alongside me. One source of my data was recordings of the school board meetings that are available online as open-source material. While I did not name individuals directly, anyone with access to the internet has the ability to view a past meeting and ascertain who was involved in a particular interaction. Additionally, when the public interacts with the school board, they are aware that we are, as required by law, live-streaming our

meetings, so they assume a certain level of risk of loss of anonymity when they choose to interact. As I considered how I would represent my experiences, I was mindful of the potential for my desire to authentically and honestly share and analyze my experiences to be in contrast with my desire to maintain positive relationships with those who were involved in these experiences. They may see this work and be disappointed, even hurt, by how their actions (or lack of action) were interpreted.

## Meaningful Coherence

According to Tracy (2010), meaningfully coherent studies have the following characteristics:

> (a) achieve their stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings. (p. 848)

Tracy (2010) described the importance of the interconnectedness of a study, from research questions to data collection to analysis and re-presentation, noting that all the choices made throughout a study should reflect the connecting thread that is the researcher's paradigm and worldview. In pursuit of meaningful coherence, I developed a theoretical framework that outlined my research process. The four major components of the framework were sociomateriality, L-A-P, counter-story, and autoethnography. This visual image of my work represents the interconnectedness between all the elements and the iterative, ongoing process of autoethnography.

## Chapter Summary

This next chapter brings you along on the journey of self-examination I embarked on to arrive at this completed work. Interrogating myself and my own experiences was a process of going inward and surfacing my own embodied memories and moments, then placing them on a rotating pedestal under bright light and slowly walking around that pedestal with a magnifying glass in one hand and a tape recorder in another, dissecting what I saw, giving voice to those embodied memories and moments. I was both familiar and unfamiliar with this object of interest. It was recognizable because it was me; I remembered being there and saying this or that. Yet, at the same time, it was also foreign because I've never looked at myself from this vantage point. The purpose of this type of narrative analysis is to help you, as the reader, understand why and how things happened in the ways they did and why and how the key players involved acted the way they did (Kim, 2016).

# Chapter 4 - Findings

## Reading This Chapter

In this chapter, you will experience my process of leaning in and untangling the *what* and *why* of my own experiences without smudging or changing what was there. As I was writing this chapter, I endeavored to both show and tell, as qualitative inquiry demands, without changing the substance of what was. As you join me on this journey, any text you see in sanserif font represents the original memory. It is impossible to not interpret here so you may notice some reflection within those sections. I've accepted that as part of my process. Following each event is analysis, a blending of embodied interpretations grounded in critical theory. These begin with a heading and are written in Times New Roman. Each section is separated by a sequence of asterisks (***) which denote a starting point for a new set of events and interpretations. Let's return to the room where it happened.

***

The meeting space is standing room only, with dozens of people filling the doorway, spilling into chairs in the hallway, and lining the side walls of the board meeting room. Some are wearing face masks because Covid-19 is still a public health crisis, some are not, almost a direct correlation to their position on the issue of culturally responsive teaching. Community members holding signs that read "compassion", and "separate church and state" gather mostly on one side of the room waiting to have their voices heard for the first time since this whole ordeal began six weeks ago. This is a stark difference from our guests at the last few meetings who held signs that read "no CRT" and "don't indoctrinate our children".

## Maintain the Status Quo

Week after week, whiteness has reared its ugly head in our meeting space. Angry, mostly white, community members have monopolized the public comment portion of our meetings to proclaim to not only the board but our live online audience that "white people are under attack" and that they will stop at nothing to maintain the status quo, where their white children learn about the "greatness" of our founding fathers and learn nothing more about my people than their arrival on the U.S. coasts as property. These white parents who truly believe that racism is "a thing of the past" cannot fathom how teachers could make Black children feel seen without making their own children invisible. Despite the growing body of work that demonstrates that the use of culturally responsive teaching is good for all students, these community members aim to stifle the work of the board, fighting for their white children's visibility and our Black children's invisibility to remain intact. There were few moments like this during my board service where the alignment between my identity as a Black woman and school board member was present. In our initial vote to support bringing culturally responsive teaching and learning training to our staff, we as a board seemed to be on the same page with administration—this will be good for all kids. Where we faltered was assuming that everyone in the room understood the true meaning of what this training was and why we needed culturally responsive teaching practices in our community. That story remained untold. In its place, the story that emerged was one that included a bolstering of "diversity and inclusion" with a cost that included the erasure of whiteness.

White supremacy ideology tells white people they are not required to consider any alternative to their own reality that might cause a negative emotion. In fact, white supremacy culture tells them that, regardless of historical injustices enacted by white people against Black

people, those events (a) are in the past, (b) have no bearing on today, and (c) should never be part of 21st century conversation and learning. The most widely used argument against efforts of equity and justice is time. Comments like "why can't you leave the past in the past" or "we weren't alive then" litter arguments from white Americans attempting to distance themselves from the atrocities of white supremacy and racism. White supremacy denies the systemic impact of historical racism on the challenges faced by Black people today. For some of our white community members, culturally responsive teaching meant that whiteness was under attack.

Despite how I feel in this moment, I am the board president, and I oversee this meeting. I am required to make space for ALL who want to speak. Whether I know their words to be harmful or just simply lies, I must put aside my identity as a Black woman and put on the mask of the Board president, making space for all to be heard. These two identities, Black woman and board president, are at odds tonight. They are both fighting to be in the foreground, because the matter at hand is precious to them both. They both desire to protect—one protecting the students and families who will hear these callous words and be forever on guard in their community; the other protecting the rights of the public to have their voices heard by the people they elected to represent them. As the evening continues, I wax and wane between these two identities.

***

I hit the gavel a few times and call the meeting to order. The crowd comes to a forced hush. Anxiety is high in the room. Even with the increased crowd presence, we stay on track with the agenda as normal. Following the roll call, the board stands for the Pledge of Allegiance. The flag sits behind the board members and like parting the seas, members stand and move to the outer edges of the room, giving the flag a wide berth as it clings to the pole in the middle of the room. Those who are seated also stand, and we all say the Pledge of Allegiance in the common U.S. sing-song pattern.

## Double Consciousness

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) described the concept of double consciousness as "a sense of looking at yourself through the eyes of others" (p. 8). He further explains that Black people forever feel their two-ness as "an American and a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 8). On this day and many others during my time on the school board, I could feel the pull of the two parts of my identity—school board president and Black woman; American and Negro.

As a Black parent of Black children who attended this district's schools, I knew firsthand of the injustices that other Black and Brown families spoke about. I knew that we had teachers on staff who held certain negative—sometimes outright racist—beliefs about our children and about us as parents. I knew that we had one elective course in our high school curriculum that served as the introduction to the history of non-white peoples, and I knew that this course began with a discussion on poverty. I knew this because my kids took it. I knew that, at this board table, we never had an open discussion about the performance of Black students in our schools, but we did talk about "students from low socio-economic status families," which was often code word for "minority." I knew that when our schools reported annually on how they attended to diversity and inclusion, they could often only point to Student of the Month or another all-school activity they did that included all students rather than highlighting or focusing on diverse histories or inclusive lessons. I often had to ignore these facts and join in praising minimal efforts to support and acknowledge Students of Color, setting aside the part of me that longed to shout from behind the board table, "This isn't enough! We need you to see our children as they truly are, not as you wish them to be".

As the school board president, the need for order and homeostasis was always at the forefront. I was responsible for the events of this meeting. There was no room for conflict, dissent or veering off the path of the agenda. My responsibility here was to ensure we progressed through the agenda in an *orderly* fashion. At this point, I was six months into my tenure as school board president, and we spent two of those six months navigating public comment around this issue of culturally responsive teaching and learning professional development. As the board president, my role was simply to facilitate discussion both among the board and with community members during public comment.

In this moment, despite looking out to see a standing-room-only crowd holding signs about equity, justice, and white fragility, the school board meeting still carries on, business as usual. We see it as a badge of honor to hold fast to the agenda despite any indication of tension or discomfort. It doesn't matter that there is a culture war staring us in the face. We will press on.

***

The audience plays along with us. Everyone returns to their seats in chairs or on the floor. We've all made a silent agreement that we will follow the agenda. Up first, student recognitions. Several students get recognized for academic and athletic achievements. Our past board president is acknowledged for her leadership during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although they are all here for what feels like a fight for their community, the crowd stays mostly quiet for the first part of the agenda. When students get recognized, they clap, tucking their "NO CRTL" and "YES TO CRTL" signs under their arms for the moment. After 20 minutes or so, we come to public comment. I shuffle the stack of comment requests together, there's about 10. This is our third consecutive board meeting with extended public comments, so I choose not to review the rules and instead say, "you all know these rules." Then, I read the first name, and the person makes their way to the microphone.

## The Tensions with White Supremacy

Notwithstanding the tension, the crowd participates in the ritual of the agenda, giving a false sense of *order* and *civility* that will soon slip away from us all. Above all else, our purpose as the school board is public education governance. Our collective desire to have a positive influence on the educational environment and outcomes for our community is the reason the seven of us subject ourselves to this public scrutiny, even if we have seven different ways of getting to that conclusion. The external force that drives us toward order leans heavily into predictability and comfort. The goal is to silence or even ignore any distractions that might pull us away from this goal. However, this goes unspoken, at least explicitly. Our action of continuing to carry out the agenda as written, despite the literal protest in front of us, gives the audience a hint that we will not overindulge this issue. Yet, without saying that outright, it feels more like we are just biding time until the pressure cooker explodes. White supremacy values tell us to keep emotions out of organizational decision-making—in this case, board governance—by not hyper-focusing on the proverbial elephant in the room.

Despite this external drive to push away the stress of it all, the mental load of the ritual of public comment has become almost unbearable after weeks of enduring it. I'm exhausted from being the only Black person in the room, suffering jab after jab of misrepresented history and denial of the injustices experienced by our students and families at the hand of racism. Racism in *today's* classrooms, not just the black and white photos of the 1950s segregated classrooms.

Looking back, I am reminded of the photo of Elizabeth Eckford, the 15-year-old Black high school student, walking into Little Rock Central High School in 1957 while white students screamed at her, attempting to intimidate her as she tries to enter *their* school. In that photo, Elizabeth—looking as though she's fighting back tears—clenches her books and makes her way

to the school, gaze fixed on what I can only assume is the front door. This is how we cope with white supremacy, blocking out all the noise, all the hate, all the threats. I silently wonder if my fellow board members feel any of this. It's safe to say, I'll never know. I find a place on the far side of the room to affix my gaze. My mind must go somewhere else. That's the only way I've made it through these public comments the last month. Like Elizabeth, I'm holding my breath and marching forward.

***

I squeeze my gavel, bracing myself for what's to come. I don't know from these comment forms if a person is speaking for or against CRTL. With every name I call, I clench my gavel a little tighter, keying into the words of the speaker, while I try to discern in the first 10 seconds whether I'll have to go inward to save myself from the sting of their words. One after another, community members come forward to claim their 3 minutes. The comments sway back and forth between pro and against CRTL, and as each person's timer goes off, their side of the crowd cheers in support.

> CRT is not teaching students about real history or economics or justice. CRT is not some kind of super sophisticated or sensitive nuanced approach to education. At its core it's simply embracing a set of claims about race, discrimination, biases, and systems and then insulating those claims from critical examination by slandering the people who question them.
>
> A Cuban mother

> Critical race theory is patriotic as well but in a different sense. It reminds us of those American ideals of freedom and equality that we do not always live up to. It reminds us how we can and must do better. It reminds us how we can strive towards the "more perfect union" that would truly make America great. And I know this about critical race theory because I've actually read it.

A white male community member

> What are we teaching our children? We are teaching little Black children they are victims, little white children that they should be ashamed of their whiteness and white privilege. In both cases our children lose, both the oppressed and the oppressor. If we choose to hold on to the offense...what happens? We become bitter.

A white male community member

> CRT is not any and every diversity and inclusion training but a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society rooted in law. My guess is other speakers tonight aren't protesting critical race theory, they're protesting structural racism because there's a sense that it's not real and frankly out of fear about rethinking how one has up to this point viewed the world.

A white male university professor

## It's Not Black or White

White supremacy ideology sells its supporters this either/or view of justice and equity that says that white people will go without something if Black people get access to more of something. There is no room for the middle, the nuance of what justice and equity truly mean—"in both cases our children lose." Conversely the true meaning of equity and justice is that people get what they need to run their race, removing any obstacles for all those affected. White supremacy culture falsely says there is only one way to deal with the injustices of the past—to forget they happened and focus on the here and now. The challenge with this is that the here and now is a reflection of the past, and as the age old saying goes, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

The absolute nature of white supremacy ideology makes a topic such as this difficult to examine. The reality is there is so much grey in the issues of equity and justice, and the grey is what leads the dissenters to experience discomfort. The inability to tell white parents exactly what their student would be experiencing in a culturally responsive classroom evoked fear and mistrust because they understand culturally responsiveness as "white erasing".

## Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes with a look at the final events of this meeting and a reflection on the tension between my two identities as board president and a Black woman in relation to the leadership practices. Within this narrative, you will feel the pull I experienced to respond in a certain way because of my role as the school board president. I share my innermost thoughts that highlight the push and pull I experienced in this role conflict. *Do I exercise my authority here as board president to regain control of the space? Do I soak in the full comments of someone who is finally giving voice to what I have been thinking for weeks?* You'll feel the moment where I try to choose Black woman as my primary identity but then quickly realize that decision would not suffice in this situation and I must instead give myself over to school board president and bring order back into the space, despite my feelings.

> The final speaker, an Asian American mother of a child in our district and local community leader, comes forward. Her comments are a hard-hitting critique of the person she's deemed responsible for this situation, a silver haired white man who spread misinformation around critical race theory in the community using his role as leader of the local Republican Party.
>
> The woman is emboldened by the crowd, frequently turning to them for support as she continues her attacks on the man. With every sentence, I cringe with discomfort; my chest tightens, my hands are sweaty, I'm taking slow breaths to stay focused. On the one hand, I agree wholeheartedly with her message—he started this, and he has been

here week after week blasting us for considering the purchase of this curriculum, supporting his criticism with the false narrative that culturally response teaching is, in fact, critical race theory in disguise. I'm silently thinking, “you go girl.”

The voices of my fellow board members interrupt this inner dialogue. They're asking me to stop her public comments. I jolt back to the room and pick up my laminated note that outlines what can and cannot happen during this time. I reread the facts. It says she cannot criticize our employees. The social justice warrior is fighting to stay on the surface—the people need to hear this!

By now, the part of the crowd that opposes her is disgruntled and dissatisfied with my response. They start to aggressively argue with people on the opposing side behind the speaker. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but I see big gestures. Angry faces. At this point, I can feel my heart racing, and I attempt to redirect the speaker to continue despite the rising tension. The gentleman she is addressing is visibly angry, and he yells, “you’re just going to let her do that?” several times at me. [Social justice warrior still at attention] The speaker continues and says, “you gotta understand the crazy train behind me...” and gestures to side of the room with the folks who oppose her. This comment sends the opposing crowd into outrage, and what started as mumbled comments escalates to yelling within seconds. I can feel civility slipping through my fingers like trying to hold water in my bare hands. The crowd starts to yell at the speaker, and this officially snaps me back into my board president body. I must regain authority over this space. I slam the gavel and yell into microphone, “Okay, alright, so here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to close the session. We're going to ask everybody to leave. Thank you all for coming tonight, we will not have any visitors in our meeting this evening.” And just like that, I'm board president again.

Most people stand and get their things to leave almost immediately, some stay in their seats, seemingly frozen at the idea that they could be ejected from a public meeting. In their defense, it’s never been done in this space before. The gentleman who was the subject of the speaker’s comments starts to address me, “Because of your lies...” and I

cut him off. “Mr. Brown, I am asking everyone who is not the press to leave the meeting. I will not make an exception for you.” I continue to talk over him, repeating my words in a calm but authoritative tone, giving him no opportunity to plead a case for staying. Eventually, he too stands and leaves the meeting.

Now firmly seated in this identity, my follow board members are stunned and start to inundate me with questions: “my question is, can we legally do that?” “This is a public meeting.” “We’re subject to KOMA (Kansas Open Meetings Act).” Together, we scramble to figure out what rules I broke and how to navigate the rest of the night.

***

## The Tensions

The purpose of this study was to unpack my experiences as a Black school board member in a predominately white community by investigating the sociomaterial influences of white supremacist culture on public school boards. I use this specific incident during my board service to highlight tensions between my identities as both a Black woman and a school board president. Holding both these identities simultaneously was a point of conflict from the beginning of my term as president of the school board. Values clashed at every turn between these two parts of me, and ultimately, I realize now that service on a school board was not designed with me as a Black woman in mind. It was not designed to enable my Black woman identity to succeed, and it definitely was not designed for her to serve as the school board president in a predominately white district.

**White Supremacist Values.** Several of the values of white supremacist organizations identified in Chapter 2 were present throughout the time I served on the school board. The push for maintaining a façade of perfectionism and the sense of urgency to address issues without giving them sufficient thought and discussion constantly put unnecessary pressure on board members to *fix* problems. When we initially received negative feedback from the community

about the idea of culturally responsive professional development, these values hindered our ability to have an open dialogue as a board. Instead, following protocol, we made an initial vote, which opened the door for the national rhetoric on critical race theory to be centered at our meetings. These decision-making procedures, put in place by laws and longtime practices of past public servants, were not conducive to dialogue about complex topics like culturally responsive teaching. The complexity of the issue—juxtaposed with national rhetoric on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as critical race theory—all converged to create this perfect storm of events. Our district was not the only one impacted. In 2021, public school boards across the United States were having debates with their constituents through public comment on what the general population misguidedly labeled critical race theory. In January 2021, at the same time as the start of my tenure as school board president, 44 states attempted to regulate "teaching critical race theory" in K-12 schools through legislation or policy changes, according to an article by Education Week (Schwartz, 2021). These policy changes were rooted in the white supremacist value of the right to comfort, both emotional and psychological. Culturally responsive teaching made white constituents uncomfortable. And, if they are uncomfortable, then something must change.

Watson and Rosser (2011) discussed the transformational quality of Black leaders as a pivotal characteristic of successful Black leaders. The collective, community-focused quality of Black leaders differs greatly from the individualistic, resource-preservation that is often the focus of white leaders. Grimes (2005) describes Black women's leadership role in education as historically centering around the archetype of the caretaking community spokesperson. Further, the cultural aspects of leadership for Black women center on interdependence, indirect communication, and reverence for elders, whereas Eurocentric cultural values focus on

individualism, direct communication, and competition (Grimes, 2005). In my case, these stark differences resulted in problematic interactions between me, as a Black woman, and my white counterparts.

**Supporting Black Women.** I, along with all other Black women in public service, experience the cultural, contextual, and social world differently than white men and women (Grimes, 2005). It became apparent early in my board service that the practices and processes of the school board were often at odds with my racial identity as a Black woman. There was a sense of "the good ol' boys' club" (read: older white men's club) that I somehow had to learn to infiltrate if I wanted to be accepted as an "insider" despite being elected to the same board as my white counterparts. There was a lack of racial diversity, not only within the school board but within the district's administration as a whole. Despite being a school district with a population of more than 37% non-white students, our administrative team and board never had more than one non-white person during my tenure: me.

The lack of racial diversity frequently left me feeling as though I were the lone representative of the voices of Black students and their families. I also had a strong sense that my presence, words, and actions were being observed under a microscope, meaning I always had to be thoughtful about my words when I chose to speak directly about anything remotely related to race. I wanted any time I chose to speak on an issue to be perceived as something I either knew about professionally or personally and not solely because I was *the Black member of the board*. Black people who exist within predominately white spaces often navigate a fine line when bringing up race-related concerns. Bush (1999) described this "quadruple jeopardy of being Black, female, educated, and isolated" as a major source of daily stress for Black women in predominately white spaces (p. 22). In these spaces, Black women are forced to adopt

Eurocentric norms to survive, becoming "bicultural" while simultaneously working to not compromise their own cultural beliefs and values (Bush, 1999). With its origins in white supremacy, public school governance has no inherent mechanisms in place to support Black women who step up to lead, which contributes to the low number of Black women in school board positions. Ultimately, this perpetuates the lack of consideration for what Black women need to thrive in those spaces.

When I first started in this position, I thought I would need to let go of some of who I was to be successful. I had resigned myself to accept that some level of cultural assimilation was inevitable. However, what I learned through this specific incident and in several other moments during my time on the board was that what I needed most was to bring my full, authentic self to the board table. I needed to be me in the ways that mattered most—a passionate, caring, and visionary mental health professional who had the unique perspective of both personal and professional exposure to racially biased educational practices within the district. That was, after all, the reason I was elected to represent my community (not just the Black community). I had to remember that my constituents voted for me because I was all those things, and they wanted that voice at the board table. This subconscious but ever-present thought was what snapped me back into reality as the tensions rose in the board room and what prompted me to address the board and community during my comments later that evening.

> I disagree with the interpretations of the facts as we've been hearing them. I am trying to understand where people are coming from… I'm learning that people are not understanding equity how we're understanding equity and that is at the crux of the argument… because if we don't define something the same way, how can we talk to each other about it? So, I'm learning that folks who are on the opposite side of this—I'll speak for myself—than I am, are defining equity as taking something away from one group so that another group can be successful; so we are taking away opportunities for

> white students in Advanced Placement courses so that students of color can be in those classes… or we're lowering standards for white students so that students of color can suddenly be as successful as white students. And when I look at the strategic plan, we define equity. We say equity is individuals or populations of individuals will experience equal opportunity to succeed when provided additional supports needed to overcome barriers to success. I hope the community can understand that and if we can all get behind how WE are defining equity, I think the whole community could agree that we want that. We want to be able to give any student whatever they need to be successful regardless of what their race is... Not talking about race does not change the fact that students who look like this (Black, Latinx, Indigenous, non-white students) don't graduate and students who look like this (white students) graduate more successfully. It doesn't change that fact; it ignores the thing that is there. And I don't know why we're still at a point of being uncomfortable with being able to talk about race. To say that I'm Black, that I'm a Black woman, there's nothing wrong with any of you pointing out that I am that, because I am. And my experiences in the world are because of that… There's nothing wrong with talking about how someone's identity, in particular a student's identity, does that… impact how they navigate our school district.
>
> Jurdene Coleman, board comments, June 30, 2021

It felt important for me to address two major issues after the events of this meeting and the weeks leading up to it. The first was that it was clear that some people were choosing to deliberately redefine educational equity as a weapon to further their talking points. I shared the definition created by the district administration and the board in 2018 verbatim to emphasize the true meaning. The second issue I addressed was that talking about race was something we, as a board, needed to get more comfortable with. More specifically, the board could not do the work we set out to do if we continued to ignore or shy away from talking about race. In the final chapter, I explore what the work of public school boards—specifically white school board

members—could look like if the system employed leadership practices from a critical lens intended to dismantle its white supremacist origins, standing firmly for equity and justice not only for students but also for those public servants brave enough to serve.

# Chapter 5 - Critical Approaches to the Practice of Stabilizing

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to understand the impact of white supremacy culture and whiteness on my experiences as a Black woman and elected member of my local school board through the following research question: (1) How does white supremacy culture influence the sociomateriality of my local school board and (2) How did the sociomateriality associated with white supremacy culture impact me as a Black school board member in my predominately white community? This chapter provides an overview of the study's findings and implications for white school board members to employ critical leadership practices within their school boards and in their communities. In addition, I speak directly to current and future Black school board members with words of encouragement as they embark on their journey of public service. This chapter also addresses limitations of the study and ideas for future research.

## Summary of Findings

In response to Research Question 1, this study illuminated how school boards embody several white supremacist organizational values, including perfectionism, the right to comfort, and either/or thinking. White supremacy culture makes those in power fear making mistakes and losing the image of perfection. Thus, it is nearly impossible to challenge the status quo, especially in such a public forum as a school board meeting. Examining complex issues such as race-conscious student achievement or culturally responsive teaching is difficult for school boards because of an aversion to exploring race-related topics in predominately white spaces. These and other complicated topics require re-examination of personal biases—in many cases those biases of white school board members—and the aversion to engaging in uncomfortable conversations that keeps school boards stagnant. Similarly, the complexity of issues related to

race and race-conscious student achievement requires leaning into the middle, which is in direct conflict with either/or thinking. As board members, we cannot resign student achievement to "either every student does well in the environment we provide, or they don't"; we must be open to considering that the environment we created perpetuates centuries-old disparities in educational attainment and that it is our responsibility as board members to make adjustments to ensure all students have an equal opportunity for success. In my quest for understanding my experience, I concluded that current public school board spaces, particularly in predominately white communities, are not built to support the inclusion and full participation of Black school board members.

In response to Research Question 2, I struggled internally with the dichotomy of my dual identities as a Black woman and a school board president. The responsibility to allow space for racist rhetoric during public comment at board meetings because it was required by precedent was unsettling, and it caused an extreme level of cognitive dissonance (i.e., inconsistency between my thoughts and my actions). The school board had no mechanism for stopping public comments that were racially hateful or filled with lies about systemic racism and the experiences of minoritized students and families. As the board president, I was in charge of holding both the weight of ensuring people their right to publicly share their voice and the affliction of my own Blackness being attacked by those same public statements.

In addition to the cognitive impact, the emotional impact of learning to cope with bigotry in the moment was extraordinary. The burden of being the only Black member of the board caused an emotional toll that often led me to be disconnected from myself throughout my board service. The disconnection allowed me to function in my role as board president, but at times it did not permit me to show up as my full self in moments when I needed me the most.

In light of the pervasive nature of white supremacy culture in U.S. civic spaces, the next section of this final chapter is dedicated to a discussion of re-envisioning the public school board system using an activity of leadership from L-A-P, stabilizing I conceptualize the stabilizing of school boards as a method of creating more inclusive spaces for Black school board members.

## Critical Approaches to the Practice of Stabilizing

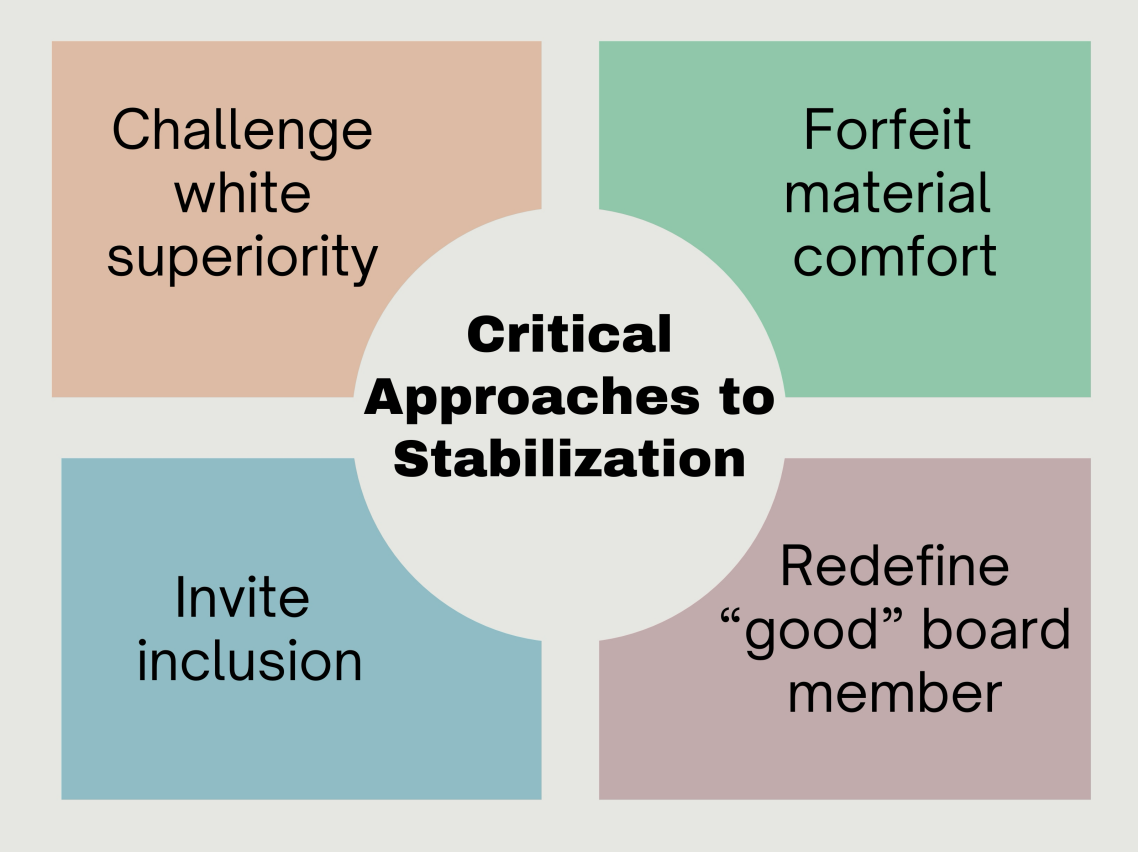
Leadership-As-Practice has not yet taken up the charge of taking into account the social identities of those who engage in the practice of leadership. This study aims to pull a critical lens over the expanding L-A-P literature, by building on one of the foundational practices identified by Raelin (2014), *stabilizing*.

Stabilizing as a concept in leadership theory, is characterized as a consistent practice of leadership focused on offering feedback to consolidate activity and evaluate effectiveness so as to bring about structural and behavioral changes, and ultimately learning (Raelin, 2014). I chose to build on the idea of stabilization by adding a critical lens with the intention of amplifying the need to hyperfocus on the limiting structures and norms within school board governance that have upheld white supremacy culture for centuries. The previous chapters reviewed the historical context in which school governance was created, one in which white superiority was the norm. This context created institutions that are inherently racist and designed with rules, structures, and practices that uphold white supremacy values and thus uphold power inequities between white and Black U.S. Americans. The goal is to evoke an image of "shaking up" and ultimately rebuilding the structures and behaviors of school boards in such a way as to create opportunities where Black Americans can not only participate but thrive during school board service. A critical approach to stabilizing within an organization requires discomfort. This discomfort is a

necessary step in undoing the generational impact of white supremacy and inequality, and this uncomfortable work is the responsibility of white school board members.

To concretize the idea of stabilizing school boards through leadership, I developed four critical leadership practices that facilitate the stabilizing of school boards (Figure 5.1): (a) Challenge the superiority of whiteness, (b) Forfeit material comfort, (c) Increase inclusion, and (d) Redefine the *good* school board member. These critical leadership practices were developed based on the systemic definitions of white supremacy in scholarly research today and call on school boards to reinvent how they interact with the place and space of their local school board and ultimately their community in such a way as to create an inclusive environment for Black school board members (Ansley, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Withers, 2017; Earick, 2018).

**Figure 5.1** Leadership for Critical Stabilization



## Challenge white Superiority

In Chapter 2, I introduced twelve characteristics of white supremacist organizational culture: (a) perfectionism, (b) either/or thinking, (c) sense of urgency, (d) defensiveness, (e) quantity over quality, (f) only one right way, (g) paternalism, (h) power hoarding, (i) individualism, (j) fear of open conflict, (k) objectivity, and (l) right to comfort (Jones & Okun, 2001). In this section, I explore alternative approaches to these values that, if prioritized, would allow white school board leaders to shift the culture of public school board spaces to create boards that foster inclusive dialogue and equitable decision-making, which would, in turn, create more inclusive spaces for Black school board members.

Of the twelve identified values, dismantling *defensiveness* and *right to comfort* should be prioritized before other values work can begin. You may recall that defensiveness can be seen when organizations refuse to take criticism, stifle new ideas, and negatively label those who bring differing points of view as threatening to the organization. This wall of defensiveness must be broken down, and a mindset shift is required so school boards can consider alternative ways of being. One path to reducing defensiveness at the organizational level is to make an overt agreement among key players to avoid taking feedback or criticism personally but instead approach feedback as an opportunity for organizational growth. Shifting to a growth mindset and a perspective of openness is key to change. Especially if you are reading this paper and your positionality includes *white school board member* or *white superintendent*, you should recognize the power you hold within your board to promote or hinder open dialogue about roadblocks to accepting criticism and feedback around inclusive practices. The institution of school boards must be willing to take an inward look at itself and consider barriers it has created to inclusion. It must also be open to changing practices to break down those barriers.

Giving up the right to comfort can easily be interpreted on an individual level, but when considered organizationally, this can have a profound impact on the system in question. All too often, efforts to increase inclusion of and engagement from minoritized voices stall out due to the discomfort of white people involved. When I think back to the many comments made by community members who were against culturally responsive teaching practices, these came from their misguided fear that their race would be seen differently (i.e., badly) and that this would mean they, as white people, would be pushed to have conversations with their children that they felt would lead to uncomfortable feelings (e.g., guilt, shame, confusion, etc.). These comments also stemmed from their belief that no [white] child should be required to feel any of those feelings.

What was left out of those monologues is that Black students were having those feelings all the time when teachers only talked about slavery as the origin of Black history, or only taught about accomplished Black Americans during February, or when their parents had to have *the talk* with them about how to interact with police in order to leave the interaction still breathing. Those uncomfortable feelings within Black families were to be tolerated because they did not impact white families. When school boards are considering how to shift toward creating inclusive spaces, these two values—defensiveness and the right to comfort—must be explicitly discussed and dismantled. Changes will bring uncomfortable conversations to the foreground and require white school board members to be willing to sit in that discomfort for an extended amount of time as they wade through what it means to engage in inclusive practices as a board.

White school board members should be prepared to make space, both literally and metaphorically, for the perspectives of Black school board members as they grapple with various issues as a board. For example, when racist comments were made by community members

during our board meetings, white board members should have used their platform to denounce those comments and discourage further speakers from making those types of comments. In similar scenarios, white school board members should not leave the burden of correcting a false narrative to Black school board members. Rather than maintain a fear or dislike of open conflict, white school board members must be willing to have dialogue on all issues, especially those related to race and racial equity. For school boards, it is not a question of whether white-centered power structures are better or worse for society. Instead, it is the movement to allow space for other ways of knowing and doing.

### Forfeit Material Comfort

In Kansas, the place and space norms used by school boards center on Robert's Rules of Order to manage the oversight of school board meetings. Robert's Rules of Order were created in the mid 1800s by Henry Martyn Robert, who, in a quest to bring order to a meeting he was asked to facilitate, developed this list of practices and norms of parliamentary procedure (Roberts Rules Association, n.d.). Over the years, civic spaces have embraced Robert's Rules of Order as the law of the land, but these very practices used to maintain order are the same practices that prevent true engagement from and with the public, particularly when complex decisions are made in school districts.

In my district, public comment is part of the agenda in two ways: (a) there is an opportunity at the start of the meeting for community members to speak about any issue not covered on the agenda and (b) during the business portion of the agenda, citizens can comment on an agenda item after the board has discussed it. Neither of these opportunities for comment is a true dialogue with the board. In both cases, citizens have three minutes to share their remarks without response from the board. The board can choose to discuss what was said amongst

themselves, but they do not engage in dialogue with the community member. This process does not allow for true dialogue about an issue *with* the community. This process also puts strict constraints on the speaker, giving a brief three minutes to address what could be a very nuanced topic. Finally, the procedure for public comment requires community members to stand or sit in front of a microphone at the front of the board and the entire room of visitors to give their statements. Many people struggle with public speaking, and this set up can be intimidating for many community members. In the next section, I briefly discuss how engaging with the community might be reimagined to promote increased engagement and participation from the community in a meaningful way for complex decisions, such as the case of deliberating about culturally responsive teaching practices. Table 5.1 summarizes these practices.

**Table 5.1 Summary of Inclusive Material Practices**

| Strategy | Justification |
|---|---|
| Speak to the complexity of the issue upfront. | Sets the expectations with the community that the issues will be handled slowly. |
| Invite experts to present ideas to the board and community ahead of decision-making votes. | Provides full information to both the board and community without the pressure of taking an immediate vote. |
| Encourage and answer questions from community members. | Demonstrates that community input is valued and prevents catastrophizing around false narratives. |
| Commit to engage in open dialogue, voicing concerns and asking questions. | Demonstrates the nuance of the issue, transparency on how individual members come to an issue, and potentially evolve their ideas. |
| Challenge personal beliefs that may inhibit progress toward equity and justice. | Shows willingness to work for the common good over personal interest. |

When complex issues arise, school board members should anticipate the need for a different approach to decision-making. First, the board should openly speak to the complexity of the issue and the corresponding need to engage differently than the usual processes. This would

set the community's expectations that a particular issue would be taken slowly, with their input taken seriously. Next, the board should plan for the presentation of information by experts from both within and outside the district, ahead of any decision-making votes. In our case, the board should have held a separate opportunity for community members to learn exactly what the proposal for culturally responsive teaching and learning included. For example, the company that we were to purchase the product from could have been invited to do presentations for the community, board members, and staff. In addition, sample materials could have been shared at this and other meetings to generate conversation and questions about what exactly culturally responsive teaching is and how it would impact our staff and students. In other cases, providing a community with district data, approachable reports, and/or open dialogue to support the content of a complex issue can help parents and community members gain a real understanding of the work of the board and the complexity of how decisions are made. It also demonstrates transparency and allows a board to get ahead of a false narrative about the *what* and *why* of a decision being considered. During discussion on complex issues, the board president's role should be facilitating dialogue about the issue and bringing all members into the discussion to ensure all perspectives are heard. Board members themselves have a responsibility to be informed on the issue, ask questions to gain understanding, and be prepared to challenge long-held personal beliefs in favor of movement toward the district's mission and vision.

### Increase Inclusion

In addition to challenging white supremacist values in public school board spaces, white school board members need to cultivate environments that promote the inclusion and engagement of Black school board members. Organizations in all industries have recognized the

power of having a diverse workforce (Armache, 2012). However, many organizations have not fully embraced the importance of inclusive organizational practices to realize those outcomes.

Inclusion in school boards is about ensuring everyone can participate in the processes at hand, be it policymaking, strategic planning, budgeting, or any other functions of the governing body. Recall that we have framed school boards and organizations within organizations, and we can thus utilize both leadership and organizational communication frameworks to understand inclusive practices. Effective inclusion practices allow members of an organization to feel fully connected and engage people across lines of difference. Gasorek (2000) proposed that a measure of inclusion within an organization can be seen by assessing the degree to which the following are true:

- Employees are valued and their ideas are taken into account and used,
- Employees partner successfully both in and across departments,
- Current employees feel they belong in the organization and prospective employees are attracted to the organization,
- Employees feel committed to each other, the organization and the organizations goals, and
- The organization continues to foster flexibility and choice and attends to diversity. (p. 74)

For school boards looking to understand the degree to which they engage in inclusive practices, I offer below some practical examples of a few of these characteristics.

When Black school board members in predominately white communities are elected to serve, their constituents have shown they want a different perspective to be part of the vision-setting for their school district. For those Black school board members, it can be challenging to enter a space where the perspectives of Black community members have not been heard. In these cases, white school board members should start by inviting the voices and perspectives of Black board members into discussions about *all* topics, not simply those that are—or have the potential to be—race-related issues. For board presidents, it is necessary to make space for Black board

members to add to discussions during meetings, and it is equally important to connect outside the board meeting to communicate openness and a desire to ensure their voice is heard. In my case, not only was I the only Black board member, but I was also the youngest board member by about ten years. This often left me feeling doubly unqualified to be in that role. Occasionally, the board president would ask me explicitly if I had anything to add because she knew that I frequently had a comment or a thought that would bring a different perspective to consideration. But sometimes I couldn't find the will or the space to bring it up. I initially took her calling on me as threatening—putting me on the spot—but once she was able to share with me her intentions, I immediately saw it as a support to my participation in meetings.

Additionally, Black school board members will bring with them decades of their own experiences of inequality and injustice, and those stories need to be validated by their white fellow school board members. Regardless of the individual experiences of white school board members, stories of discrimination and unjust outcomes should be held up as valid and taken into consideration when decisions are being made. As Black school board members share their perspectives on issues, white school board members must be courageous enough to accept and even amplify those experiences when they challenge longstanding narratives that go against community norms.

As school boards move toward creating inclusive spaces, cultivating a sense of belonging that is felt within the board and visible to the community is important to maintain the engagement of current Black school board members and encourage the participation of future Black school board members. As current Black school board members have positive experiences being engaged in their communities, they are more likely to encourage other up-and-coming Black leaders to engage in their community's civic spaces. All white school board members have

a responsibility to cultivate environments that not only appear inclusive from the outside but are definitively inclusive inside the board.

In a similar vein, white school board members must hold one another accountable for this larger mission and take responsibility for calling out behavior that goes against inclusive practices. It is not the responsibility of Black school board members to monitor or address prejudiced or discriminatory behavior among their white counterparts. By actively and publicly supporting inclusive practices, they show the community and future Black school board members that they truly value the presence of Black school board members in that space.

### Redefine the *Good* School Board Member

Black people often have winding paths to leadership and public service. In comparison to white school board members who more frequently come from families with generations of elected public officials, today's Black school board members are often still the first in their lineage to enter public service. Not understanding the inner workings of an elected body or the impact of public service on a family can make public service seem intimidating and unattainable for Black community members. However, as we previously discussed, diversity and inclusion in these spaces are key factors for organizational success, so we need more Black community leaders to consider public service. Therefore school boards should work to redefine what a *good* school board member looks like and open the door for more Black school board members to serve their communities.

When Black community leaders decide to run for office, they grapple with whether to make their racial identity a central part of their campaign. Even on the world's largest stage—the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election—Vice President Kamala Harris' racial identity as a mixed-race Indian and Jamaican woman has come into question. Despite her explicitly identifying as Black

and Indian American, a quick internet search reveals dozens of articles devoted to the "racial identity of Kamala Harris" (e.g., Alfonseca, 2024; Ho, 2024; Brown et al., 2024). Whether or not we decide to bring race to the foreground, it is often there before we arrive. Even though we do not have a choice, future Black school board members have an opportunity to recognize the added value that their racial identity offers.

When campaigning, they should use their unique experiences as a Black community leader to engage the public in understanding why their voice is needed. In predominately white communities, school boards are often made up of only white members. Black school board members' willingness to serve will ensure other Black constituents an opportunity to have representation in public policy. In addition, if the board they are trying to join does not openly talk about race and race-related issues, Black school board members should amplify that fact and focus on how they will bring those conversations to the foreground.

At the local level, the primary way that people choose to get involved in public service is a personal ask. Someone who has served or is currently serving sees something in a neighbor or a friend and simply encourages them to consider running for office. As was stated, white school board members make up the majority of public school board members and thus have a responsibility to notice and encourage racially and ethnically diverse people to run for office. While communities ultimately elect who they want to represent them, having more diverse candidate pools increases the opportunities for Black community leaders to be elected.

## Challenges of Autoethnography

I have always been a storyteller. I remember that in junior high, I hand-wrote a five-page essay on the night my mother left our home for the last time for an assignment meant to be a five-paragraph personal narrative. In that same school year, I started writing a story that was

passed around the school with such anticipation that, after two weeks, I couldn't keep up with writing the next chapter before people were requesting more of the story. When I started research in this doctoral program, I was drawn to qualitative inquiry because I was already a storyteller, and the idea that I could contribute to academia and leadership practice through my natural gift was highly appealing. As I learned more about the complicated process of telling stories to academic audiences, I also had to reckon with the challenges of sharing my experiences through autoethnography. In telling my own story, I do not intend for you, as the reader, to generalize my experience to other Black school board members. On the contrary, I hope that you will be drawn into the vulnerability and openness I demonstrated and leave with curiosity, wanting to know more about other Black leaders serving on public school boards. This lack of generalizability is often cited as a limitation of autoethnography, though *can something be a limitation if it was never an intention in the first place?*

Another challenge of autoethnography is the required vulnerability the author must espouse in telling a compelling story. This particular limitation was initially a roadblock for me in completing this project. I had to rewind and rewatch video footage of the most difficult moments during my board service. There were many times when I sat down to write, and after watching a minute of video, I had to walk away. I was still angry at those community members for the hurtful comments they made. I was still embarrassed at myself for letting the events unfold as they did and for not standing up for what was right in the moment. I was disappointed in my white fellow board members for not speaking up first. Each time I cued up the footage, I could feel my heart racing and my chest tightening, and I would just need to walk away. Autoethnography requires the author to work through all their feelings—even if the journey of processing these is unfinished—to present a cohesive narrative to the reader. In some ways, there

is a more compelling story in the unfinished emotions, and if the author can push through the discomfort, the result is a narrative rich in unique experiences that walks the reader through the author's journey of healing.

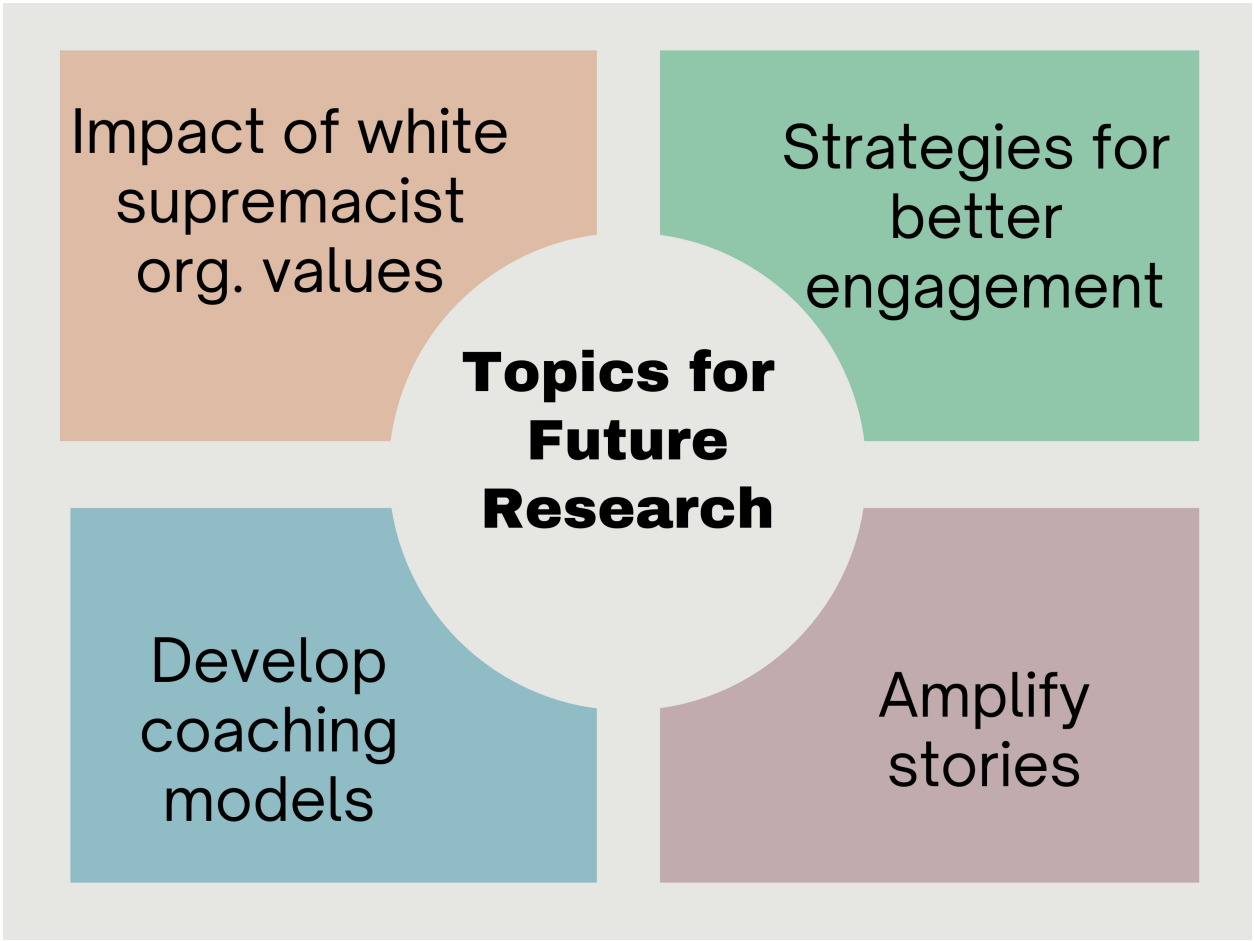
A final challenge, which I spoke to earlier in this work, is the difficulty of recreating your past without altering it. As a researcher, it was always my full intention to present my experiences without changing any part of the story. The reality is that though the overall substance of what happened and what I said is unchanged, I was left to infer the intentions of those around me and, at times, to infer my own thoughts in a given moment. A prime example of this occurred when I set out to write about this particular incident at the board meeting. I recalled the events in a specific way and had even retold that story a few times to others. However, after re-watching the recordings, I found that my story was based on what turned out to be false memories. When I watched the footage of the meeting and realized that I had misremembered the moment, I was stunned. I had to grapple with my own distorted memory and try to understand how and why my mind had altered the moment. After doing that internal work, I was able to revisit the moment on video and tap into how I felt and what I was thinking in those moments. Without autoethnography and this study, I might never have gone back to that moment on video and been able to correct my memory of what happened, which has allowed me to give myself so much grace and comfort in how I handled the situation. In this way, autoethnography was restorative.

As I stated, autoethnography is one person's story, and the literature on school board members' experiences is sparse. This final section provides considerations for areas of study to continue to expand the literature on school board service.

## Further Study of Black School Board Members

Figure 5.2 summarizes the areas of future research which are framed as an extension of each of the four practices identified in the previous pages. As a reminder, the four areas of action—or critical practices for stabilizing —are: (1) challenge white superiority, (2) forfeit material comfort, (3) increase inclusion, and (4) dismantle the canon of a *good* board member. Each of the areas below presents an opportunity for further study around public school boards and the service of Black and other non-white board members.

**Figure 5.2** Implications for Future Research



### Impact of white Supremacist Organizational Values

If you recall, this section focused on dismantling the white supremacist organizational values present in school board culture. Future research can expand on this idea and look at a broader swath of school boards across racial and cultural contexts in the United States to understand how and if white supremacist cultural values exist and are exercised in other places. We know little about the harm that the presence of these values in school boards can bring to communities, and future qualitative research should look at the impact of these values on all those impacted by school boards, including board members themselves, district administration, school personnel, students, and their families.

Taking this a step further, state boards of education should consider how to use such data to better recruit, support, and train future school board members from all backgrounds. This might take the form of developing and testing training programs for school boards with a focus on how to respond to racism and injustice in the role of a school board member, especially given all the nuances of each state's laws that govern board member behavior. When challenging white superiority starts at a systemic level, it can have lasting impacts on communities. Additionally, if any school boards have managed to reject white supremacist values and created inclusive and diverse spaces for the improvement of their district, their stories need to be understood and shared with both academia and practitioners in the state school board associations.

### Strategies for Better Engagement

This suggestion focused on revising how complex decision-making is done in school boards. By increasing the flow of information and the opportunity for learning, school boards can increase transparency and demonstrate to their constituents that they care about their concerns. Future studies in this area could focus on working directly with school boards to revise how they

manage complex issues. The ideas laid out in Table 5.1 are just one way of improving community engagement around complex problems. While many leadership and communication models have been applied to organizations, scholars have not yet applied these to school boards. Future research could examine processes of training school boards to use these organizational leadership strategies to address a complicated issue they are facing and collect data from all parts of the system—board members, district administrators, and families—to understand the impact of engaging the public differently. Specifically, it would be most interesting to know how community members feel when they are given much more information and insight into an issue, but the final decision is one they disagree with. This could provide insight into whether or not a deeper understanding of the issue and inclusion in the decision-making process would diffuse the impact of not getting the outcome desired.

### Develop Coaching Models

This stabilizing practice challenges white school board members to exercise interpersonal and organizational inclusion practices. This is another area where future research can be evaluative, developing training and coaching models to support organizational inclusion practices and assessing progress using pre/post measures in addition to qualitative data from school board members themselves. These training and coaching models should include the measures outlined in this chapter to gather a fuller understanding of the measure of inclusion before and after being trained. Additionally, if any boards have already done this work, and their board members report high feelings of inclusion, those stories should be highlighted through ethnographic research. Understanding how boards create and maintain a positive, inclusive culture is key to teaching other boards how to be successful in this endeavor.

This strategy also highlights the experiences of Black school board members. My story is only one story, and many more stories of Black school board members are yet to be told. Future research should focus on finding and sharing the experiences of other Black school board members and other non-white school board members currently serving their communities. These studies should encompass both predominately white school boards and boards that are more diverse. The more we understand the experiences of School Board Members of Color, the more we can start to positively influence those experiences and learn from them.

### Amplify Stories

The final strategy presented was to dismantle the long-standing canon of a good school board member. If I asked you to close your eyes and imagine a school board member, I could guarantee you did not picture me—a 30-something-year-old Black woman with kinky hair and caramel skin. You likely saw a vision of an older white man, maybe even a white woman, in a suit and tie with salt and pepper hair. If I asked you to imagine a city council member or a state representative, you would likely have a similar image come to mind. As the previous section suggested, we need to know more about those who serve—and not just those who serve on school boards. If public school governance has been impacted by centuries of white supremacist organizational culture, so have city, county, and state governments. Future research should expand our knowledge of the experiences of Black public servants in these varied settings to better understand the hurdles and challenges they have faced as they try to serve their communities. Scholarship aimed at surfacing their motivations for running for office despite the systemic barriers would also be beneficial for others contemplating public service in the future.

## Conclusion

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does white supremacy influence the socio-materiality of my local school board?
2. How did the socio-materiality associated with white supremacy impact me as a Black school board member in my predominately white community?

From the arrival of the Spanish on the U.S. coasts with enslaved Africans to the Civil War fought over the rights of states to maintain slavery, to Jim Crow laws created to maintain the subordination of Black Americans, to the enduring senseless murders of Black men and women by police and civilian white Americans alike, the history of the United States is engulfed in systemic racism. As a result, U.S. public institutions, including school boards, are steeped in white supremacist values. These values maintain distance and subordination between white and non-white members of organizations, such as school board members. To facilitate the full participation and inclusion of Black school board members, white school board members and those state-level organizations that support and train school boards must be willing to acknowledge the presence of such values and make intentional changes to school board governance laws, norms, and practices.

I hope that by sharing my own experiences, I have accomplished two primary outcomes. First, I hope to inspire change in these institutions through providing four critical approaches to leadership practices the that can be implemented by school boards: (1) challenge white superiority, (2) forfeit material comfort, (3) increase inclusion, and (4) dismantle the canon of a *good* board member. Done collectively, each of those efforts will increase opportunities for Black community leaders to consider school board service and ultimately bring their voices to the foreground regarding impacting their communities. My second outcome was what initially led me to do this study as an autoethnography. I hope that in sharing my experiences openly and fully, I have simultaneously validated the experiences of other Black school board members across the United States and encouraged them to continue to fight the good fight and serve their

communities. As I bring this to a close, I want to bring attention to the fact that the need for these critical leadership practices means we are not living in a world where critical self-reflection and inclusion are a natural part of how we govern schools. Reimagining a sort of pollyanna world where we have no systemic racism. Instead, I leave this work open-ended for the next scholars to pick up the torch and continue to critically analyze how we do public school governance.

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