# “Am I one of them ones”: Autoethnographic reflections of an African American administrator on educational reform in predominantly White communities

by

Brandon Jamaal Cheeks

B.S., Kansas Wesleyan University, 2005
M.S., Kansas State University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

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Here I offer a critical autoethnography as an African American Male who has engaged in various forms of educational reform in predominantly White communities. My personal stories will take you on a journey of my life and career in education as a teacher and leader through counter-storytelling with a focus on my experiences in administrative positions. Using critical race theory, along with diversity and reform frameworks found in the Kansas State Department of Education to guide my self-analysis, I offer stories which highlight my unique perspectives as a leader. While this story began with a specific focus on educational reform in Kansas, it ultimately evolved into a more personal story of growth and self-awareness which culminates with my reaction to a question posed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2023) during a Keynote address: “Are you one of them ones?”

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Alex RedCorn

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# Acknowledgements

I want to first acknowledge my Lord and savior Jesus Christ for giving me this opportunity to make it to this point in my life. I realize that I am only here because of God's grace and mercy. I am thankful for my family that have supported me during this journey. It has been an amazing journey pursuing my doctoral degree. To my wife Mrs. Ralita Cheeks, I want to thank you for the love and support. To my children Tamia, Jalen, Bralynn, Reagan, Rhythm, and Bree, I love you all! You all have given me motivation and encouragement during this entire journey. I also want to acknowledge my mother Mrs. Katie McCraw Laws who at a young age taught me the value of education. You were my first teacher, mentor, and encourager. I am so thankful for my parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and extended family. Mr. Vincent "Papa" Laws thank you for mentoring and supporting me. I am thankful for my mentors that have been so supportive over the years. I want to thank my Pastor Dr. Allen D. Smith and St. John's Missionary Baptist Church family for the support and encouragement as I pursued my doctoral degree. Brenda McDaniel, Millie Moye, Steve Rivers, Yolanda Jordan, and Dr. David Griffin thank you for showing me Black excellence in education. I must thank my Uncle Sammy T. McCraw for your support and help during this process. I appreciate my mentor and cousin Michael Toney who shared his love for basketball and education with me. I really appreciate all that you have done for me over the years. To my brothers Robert and Vance, I am so proud of the men that you have become. Coach Jerry Jones and Dr. Kathleen Barrett-Jones thank you for all your support over the years. Dr. Alex RedCorn, Dr. Jerry Johnson, Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw, Dr. Robert Hachiya, Dr. Mac Benavides, Dr. David Thompson, Dr. Anita Specht, and Dr. Matt Thompson thank you for challenging me and helping me during this process.

# Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family that has taught me the importance of education. I come from a family of educators that passed the knowledge to the next generation. I am hopeful that the future generations in my family will continue to value education. I want to give a special tribute to my grandmothers. Each of them shared three important things that have been instrumental to me arriving to this point in my life. They each valued faith, love, and education. Susie McCraw, Lillie Cheeks, and Minnie Laws truly were the rocks of our families. I am proud to be in the Cheeks, McCraw, Wright, Wall, Walls, Turner, Laws family! To my ancestors that couldn't see me complete this journey, thank you for the love that you passed down to each generation. I will never know all the struggles, pain, and tears that you endured coming on the ships of despair as you walked on the shores of the new land. Our ancestors are still alive today regardless of the challenges of the past. To the future generations of our family, continue to value education and strive to achieve your dreams! Uncle Sammy thank you for the words of inspiration, *"In America, we hold that all young Black men should have the opportunity to rise to any station in life commensurate with their initiative and ability. This precept is a theory that has served as the guiding principle upon which great American leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Thurgood Marshall, Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama relied on in their formative years. Education is the common theme that allowed them to emulate character traits of mentally strong leaders. Mental strength can be a stimulus for honing personal success in life and cultivating a professional career."* I have reviewed this quote many nights while reading and writing to complete this journey. I want to say thank you to all my aunts and uncles for all the love that each of you have showed me over the years.

# Preface

Throughout this dissertation you will find critical autoethnographic reflections of my story - Mr. Brandon J. Cheeks (aka: Mr. Cheeks) – as an African American educator and leader in predominantly White communities. I never imagined that I would be at this point writing my dissertation for the Educational Leadership program at Kansas State University. My primary goal was to further my education and learn from the professors to improve myself and ultimately achieve my professional goals to work in the district office or higher education institution. Education has been very rewarding to me. I have been blessed with the opportunity to truly make a difference in the young people that I have served over the years. I feel that I have offered diverse perspectives, hard work, experience, dedication, and professionalism to any educational institution that I have worked. Yet, being a minority leader working in predominantly White communities comes with challenges, many of which I discuss throughout this critical autoethnographic (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021) dissertation.

As an African American leader with experience in Kansas school Redesign efforts in two separate communities, this process began with a focus on Kansans Can Redesign, and the presence (or absence) of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in this statewide effort to reform this work. I was very curious about the diversity of stakeholder engagement across the communities engaging in Redesign, and how prevalent diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) played in the community engagement portions of the Kansas School Redesign efforts. However, over the course of this dissertation three things occurred: 1) Kansas school Redesign shifted focus within the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), and while school improvement is still a priority, “Redesign” language and programming appear to be phasing out. Then, 2) the process of engaging in autoethnographic reflections around KSDE

diversity structures and exploring my own experiences with school Redesign, improvement, and school leadership in a broader sense, my autoethnographic narratives started to shift my thinking. Overall, it started to become a very personal journey of self-discovery that became less about "Redesign" and more about the realities of engaging in any form of change leadership work as an African American male leading predominantly White environments. And finally, 3) the broader community tone around DEI work in schools has become increasingly politicized, and as a result, I found it was directly influencing my approach to school leadership. In other words, as you read you will see the tone shift over the course of the dissertation from an emphasis on Kansas Redesign, to a story of my internal tensions as an African American male leading in predominantly White environments. This started coming to the forefront as I worked through my autoethnographic writing prompts and started to become a story about how I move between feelings of fear and silence, contrasted with safety and security, all while trying to maintain hopes and dreams of being a positive contributor to the world in the field of education. As a result, you will see this story evolve with these twists and turns over the course of six chapters.

While this started with a more traditional dissertation format, due to the autoethnographic evolution of how it came together it won't follow a typical dissertation. In Chapter 1, I discuss an introduction to my story and the KSDE foundational structures reflection rubric. In Chapter 2, I discuss literature surrounding the Kansas Redesign and educational reform. In Chapter 3, I discussed the autoethnography, the importance of counter-storytelling, and my specific approach to building this critical autoethnography. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will highlight a series of narratives that outline my lived experiences as an African American male in education working in predominantly White communities. These stories start with a focus around Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) foundations reflection rubric focused on DEI and shift to key stories and

reflections around that show the tensions in my work as minority educator and educational leader. I address many of the stories in the form of poetry and letters to give an artistic representation of my lived experiences, which is common in arts-based methods and autoethnography (more on this in Chapter 3).

Overall, this journey took a lot of courage and self-reflection. However, I am not ashamed of being an African American educator and sharing my lived experiences in education and feel as though it is my obligation to share this story, and as Singleton (2015) says in his *Courageous Conversations* framework – to speak my truth. I will speak from my heart and share the perspective of an African American Male educator that many times have been neglected.

**Figure 1.** ***Dissertation Journey***

*Note.* Overview of my dissertation journey.

**Dear Reader,**

This is my personal story of an African American male as a husband, father, educator, Pastor, and coach. I made the conscious decision to share my personal lived experiences in hopes of informing future leaders of the importance considering diversity, equity, and inclusion in future education reform movements. The writing transformed from conventional to innovative over the process of the dissertation, so you will experience that transition as you move through the dissertation. During this process I incorporated the use of writing letters and wrote authentic original poems to make the writing more impactful, as I was inspired by famous poetry, speeches, and music by African Americans. I utilize this creative approach to make connections with future educational leaders and empower leaders of color to spark dialogue with anyone that focused on education reform efforts. The use of code-switching and storytelling doesn't make this purely academic in the sense of APA format and style. This dissertation won't be the typical academic dissertation, but a creative artistic approach to making a heartfelt plea to educational leaders to consider incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (and later, belonging, as you will read about) in the discussion of future educational reform efforts.

During this journey of exploring educational reform, my dissertation evolved over three phases. The first phase was exploring my lived experiences with Kansas Educational Reform movement. I identified my struggle with remaining silent, struggling to survive, and finding safety in the educational system. I directly worked in a Redesign school but have seen the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) begin to shift away from the Redesign language over the years. The second phase was realizing that this story was bigger than just education reform in one state but could help impact education reform movement in the future efforts. I continued to learn during this process and saw the impact of critical race theory. Social justice in education

was another important issue that considered during this process. The third phase was incorporating my lived experiences as a leader of color with my unique cultural viewpoint that many marginalized groups haven't had the opportunity to share. Throughout, I utilize counter-storytelling and share my adaption to the Eurocentric norms that surround me. My stories also include code-switching, and an effort to share a perspective that is usually silenced. Overall, I finally realized that my story matters and needs to be shared.

This eventually guided the name change from *Autoethnographic Reflections on Kansas Redesign: An African American Male Perspective in Predominantly White Communities*. The new title reflects educational reform, my African American male perspective, and personal creative touch of being "one of them ones". This title evolved into, *"Am I One of Them Ones": Autoethnographic Reflections of an African American Administrator Perspective on Educational Reform in Predominantly White Communities.* Being one of them ones was inspired by my lived experience attending the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) as a Jackson Scholar and hearing the one and only Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings (2023) speak on the topic: *Are You "One of Them Ones"? Leading the Educational Reset in a Post-Pandemic Era.* Given the opportunity to share my lived experiences in an innovative manner has given me a voice and empowered me to strive to do more. I am hopeful that future educators can find value and utilize this work to improve future educational reform movement. My reflections as an African American Administrator are unique considering that I am one of the few in the communities that I have worked in the state of Kansas. My intentions of sharing my personal lived experiences are to improve the future educational movements and share the experience from an African Americans male leader perspective that has many times been ignored.

**Reader**

Accept my writing

Understand why I'm writing

You are an impactful educational leader

Regardless of if you are Black, White, or Brown leader

I have high respect for Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes' poetry

The bravery and emotions that I read inspired my poetry

Please take time to read my letters

Consider the thoughts within my letters

I ensured that I stayed respectful during this process

Understand that being vulnerable and sharing my research wasn't an easy process

Adapting to the status quo has become my norm.

Code-switching as a minority leader has also become my norm

**R**emember you have a choice to make

**E**ach and everyday

**A**nd it will impact the lives of so many young people

**D**ecide if you want to take on the challenge

**E**ngage in the movement

**R**ealize that it's not an easy task

**D**edicate each day to make a difference

**E**very child needs you

**I** made a choice to write my story

**B**elieve that you can make a difference

## Chapter 1 - An African American Leader Experiences with Educational Reform

**Dear Kansans,**

The first time that I heard about the Kansans Can School Redesign I was so excited. Dr. Watson told of the vision for Kansas to lead the world. I was sitting in the Community Education Center listening to the vision of the future of Kansas on a tour. I remember thinking how exciting it was going to be to have the opportunity to take this journey. I was on my way to my first administrative job in a Redesign school. I was excited about participating in taking part in the state initiative. I was optimistic about being able to change the approach to how school was run. I was most excited about the mentoring and interest-based groups that the school was implementing.

During the process Kelly Breckunitch interviewed me. My acceptance of the job was directly tied to the school being a Redesign school. I was quoted discussing me accepting an administration position due to the Redesign project. Breckunitch (2019) quoted me:

> All those pieces that are a part of our Redesign, I think it fits right along with my own personal philosophy of education. The biggest piece for me is building those relationships with the kids because I think if each student can have a relationship with someone, then hopefully that will help the whole education process for them. (para. 1)

I remember sitting there and thinking Wow! I felt this was a great idea and this can have a positive impact on students. I was sitting in a listening tour thinking this is going to be amazing. School districts and leaders would be able to help students by changing the way that we view success in school. This included opportunity to make changes to the one size fits all approach. I began to think about all the possibilities of the future of education in Kansas.

My fixed mindset of you need to go to college to be considered successful suddenly began to change. I realized that many of my former students were doing great regardless of the path they took. I left thinking how amazing this can be for the students of Kansas. I was inspired to do my master's special project focused on being college and career ready. I planned a panel discussion for middle school parents about the importance of the youth to start planning now. I was able to get representation from public school district Superintendent, private college President, and City Manager. This was the perfect group to discuss the importance of youth preparing for the future. The process made me start reflecting on my journey in life and how it could have been different with the Redesign concept was implemented when I was in school.

I want to start this autoethnography by telling you a little about my personal journey. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and I am a product of inner city and suburban school districts. My experiences include teaching, administration, and coaching in Kansas public school districts. I worked in a diverse setting that really gave me a lot of experience, and I also participated in a Title I after school program in the Middle School setting, with subject areas of focus on reading and math. This included working one on one and in small teams to work on improving the student's skill levels in those two subject areas. My classrooms were filled with various forms of inquiry, integration, technology, and most importantly cooperative learning. Each of these aspects allowed me to better my students and reach high levels of success. I also have coached at the middle school level as the head basketball, track, and cross-country coach. I was a teacher leader, educator, mentor, and coach at predominately White middle school for 14 years prior to moving to administration and served as Youth Pastor at a Missionary Baptist church. I have worked as the director of summer school and youth camps at in Kansas. I have coordinated schedules with the teachers and developed curriculum and many other related skills. I worked as

an administrator at intermediate School in Kansas which was a Redesign school, as well. According to the superintendent at the time I was the first Black administrator in my first administration role. I continued my journey in public education as assistant principal at a Middle School in Kansas, and I currently have three jobs as passions. I have been the first African American principal of an elementary school, student support advisor at local college, and assistant to the Pastor at church. My aspirations in my professional and personal life are centered around leadership. In my first administration position I recall realizing how administration appeared to be less diverse than the teaching staff. However, teaching and building administration staff within the district do not mirror those breakdowns. According to statistics compiled in 2019, "building administrators are 86.6 percent White, teachers are 97 percent White" (Breckunitch, 2019, para. 13). This reflects many school districts not only in Kansas but across the United States. It seems the higher in leadership that I go it becomes less diverse.

I recall reading about Governor Kelly of Kansas forming a Commission focused on Racial Equity and Justice. The focus of the commission was tasked to study issues around racial equity and justices. I bring this up because it was formed after a reaction to the national issues centered around race. According to the *Governor's Commission on Racial Equity and Justice* (Governor of the State of Kansas, 2021):

> In the wake of national calls for justice, accountability, and reforms to address racial disparities, following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others, Governor Laura Kelly signed Executive Order No. 20-48 to establish the Governor's Commission on Racial Equity and Justice. (p. 6)

As I reviewed the report it had recommendations centered around topics that involved public education, which included information about teacher diversity. I began to review the report and

thought: “here we go again”. I was intrigued about who was selected to take on this task, and as I turned the page and was surprised when I saw the picture in the report. I began to think this must be one of the most diverse groups that the governor has ever constructed and had me wondering about the outcome of the report would have potentially looked different if the group wasn’t as diverse. A fascinating fact that was found in the *Governor’s Commission on Racial Equity and Justice* (2021) report was,

> Black students randomly assigned to at least one Black teacher in grades K-3 were 9 percentage points (13%) more likely to graduate from high school and 6 percentage points (19%) more likely to enroll in college than their same-school, same-race peers (p. 10).

This was part of the complex struggle I have faced not only in Redesign, but education in general. I have never been on a committee as diverse as Governor Kelly created, and it is empowering when you have others at the table that may have similar thoughts and experiences. I imagined how things might be different if when I attended meetings it was a much more diverse group at the table when certain topics were discussed. In my career as an educator, I have been one of the only African American males in my building.

**Dear Commission,**

I realized the task that you had was important work for the state of Kansas. Ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion is something that should be a focus to ensure a better state for everyone. Toldson (2022) described, “Teachers who promote inclusive education have the support of parents, and together they can build partnerships for inclusive learning spaces that benefit all children” (p. 1). I wanted to personally thank you for the great work that you did to improve the state. Governor Kelly, I appreciate the diversity of the groups structure. The work

that was done was impacted by the make-up of diversity that addressed important issues that impact people of color. This report helped me to make connections to the importance of considering diverse stakeholders and seeing the outcomes that may be different because of lived experiences. I think it is important to be intentional about promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Dear Leaders,**

Since I first wrote this, things are changing. As I reflect on my personal experiences and draw connections to the unearned power and politics that many people have failed to understand or realize has occurred in America over many generations to people of color. The daily effects of racism and news centered around race has had a tremendous impact on my life, and as someone working in predominantly White communities, I feel it daily. I have recognized over the years that many issues that people of color have experienced remain hidden to many, and the truth is that many of my colleagues have denied it over the years. Forecasting future directions for education will be centered around political activism. School leaders must get a political pulse, or the students and staff could have some serious consequences. This could affect them emotionally or professionally. As I wrote this, I thought about how this is currently affecting our world. School leaders must navigate the social and political complexities, and in recent years this has become more pronounced as DEI has started to become a trigger word. School leaders must find ways to navigate social media and political drama that could have viral ramifications that could impact the leader and the school.

Leaders must understand the intersections of the local, state, and federal policies and laws that could impact the school. Politics matter in education and its importance in school leadership. My thoughts as I began to read were how true that statement is in school leadership, and school

leaders can promote student success by being aware of those politics – and mindful of them as they engage with the community. But still, educational leaders must respond and influence politics in schools, as politics will remain in every school environment. To be true advocates for the students the school leader must be engaged in politics and make decisions that would be in the best interests of the students. School leaders need to have political understanding of how to get people to work together. This will help school leaders become more effective.

School leaders' professional and civic political voice had become increasingly complicated. With the combination of district, state, and federal accountability provisions. Administration must consider the cost and impact of carrying out policies that seem destined to hurt the school and most importantly the students. School must seek the appropriate political voice to find help for the student. School leaders must face the local and state issues daily. Then they also face state and federal mandates that continue to come each year. It's important for educational leaders to involve the educational stakeholders associated with the school community. Another important thing to think about is that demographics are changes in the public schools and that it's important that leaders are prepared to serve diverse communities.

**Dear Memory,**

I remember my first teaching experience that I was able to get an opportunity to work in one of the most diverse schools at the time in district. I was proud to become a teacher at a Middle School. The first principal that hired me was Hispanic. He was the only administrator at the time that seemed to be interested and willing to hire me for a teaching position. Ironically, he was a Hispanic male, and I remember not being able to get an interview in other schools in the district. One White administrator told me that they thought I was too shy. I was two days from taking a job in a larger and more diverse school district. It was an amazing experience that

included meeting the Black superintendent at the time. The human resource department set up three interviews for me. Two had high minority population and one was majority White. I was offered jobs at two of the schools in that district. Yes, I guess you can figure which one didn't offer me a position. Then I received a phone call from a Hispanic principal. He was one of the principals that participated in the partnership with the school district and local college that was interested in diversifying the workforce in his building. He previously hired two minority males from the local college prior to interviewing and hiring me. One was African American, and one was Hispanic.

It was a great experience working under a minority leader that really encouraged and pushed me to pursue becoming an administrator in the future. Well, life was different for me my first few years at the school. I was able to work with three special ladies, all African American female educators. They were all members of my church. These ladies mentored and encouraged me along my journey. One of the ladies was the department head for social studies. It was amazing to see her leadership in action. I did my student teaching under her, as well. She did a wonderful job incorporating Black History Month and Women's History Month activities into our curriculum map. The second lady was a catalyst and living legend in her own way. She was a wonderful science teacher and would ensure that her students reach their highest potential. They both received teaching awards while teaching. They also encouraged me to pursue higher education and graduate school. I am writing about this experience because it was a lot different when they worked in my building compared to years later, after they retired or moved outside of the profession. After they left, I was the only minority working in a certified position for many years.

This dissertation will give you a glimpse of the view of a minority school leader in predominantly White environments. I have unique leadership experiences that have centered around my professional goals and faith walk as a minister of the gospel. When you try to lead others, you realize that it involves so much more, as you must be able to adapt and work with others to ensure that you all are moving towards the same goals. When I reflect on my path and role as a leader, I realize that I learned so many things that have helped me become a more effective leader.

Unfortunately, during this journey, I have seen times that I had to adapt to my surroundings to ensure that I didn't eliminate the opportunity to be a catalyst for change. I must ensure that I am not seen as a threat to others, because from my perspective the stories that you see on television and hear from other people of color are true. I have been out at stores and been treated differently until someone recognized oh, that's Mr. Cheeks. It's sad but true how some people treat you differently when you wear a suit as opposed to sweatsuit in public. In my early years as an educator, I recall going into a particular department store and feeling a sense of being watched and not approached for service. It was interesting that I would have to seek out someone for service when I was wearing casual attire, yet the service felt different when I entered the same department store wearing a shirt and tie. The employees seemed to find me, and I didn't have any problems. Imagine going to the grocery store and seeing your student wearing sweatpants and the student smiling saying hello. Then you look over your shoulder and see the parent basically scolding the child, "*who was that*?", while it appeared that the parent seemed disgusted. Then the student said, "*that's my teacher, Mr. Cheeks*", and their facial expression changes quickly. At the parent teacher conference that same parent is so nice and tells me how happy they are that I'm their child's teacher. My most annoying situation was seeing a former

student while waiting in the line in public. Of course, I am going to ask the student how you are and what grade are you in now. Then the parent turns with a nasty look on her face and says, "*YOU KNOW THAT SHE IS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT*!" I was in disbelief, but calmly responded, "Yes, I know I'm Mr. Cheeks her former teacher." These are just some examples of the experiences that have shaped my thought processes as a person and educational professional. It is important to share some of the experiences of my life, so others might learn from them.

My story isn't the only one in Kansas as an African American male in education. When you love encouraging young people and strive daily to have a positive impact on students, and realize that sometimes the shades of your skin can impact people's feelings about you. I have seen this happen over and over. When I introduce myself to people it seems that I must ensure my specific title, *Mr. Cheeks*, to be accepted. I remember walking in a store seeing one of the kindergarten students and smiling saying *"hi"* and the look on the face of her grandparents who didn't know me. Then I saw the mother of the child the next week and she told me that her parents asked if the principal was a Black guy. As I bring these stories forward, I hope to encourage a deeper collective reflection and continue to move our educational institutions forward for future generations.

**Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric**

**Dear KSDE Leadership,**

I appreciate the time and effort put into creating a rubric to address such an important thing that impacts districts. It really has impacted me to see that the department of education sees the value of ensuring that everyone is important and valuable. Reflecting on the Redesign and lack of diversity discussion specifically, I feel that this was really needed to make changes to reach all students. I remember when I discovered the Foundation Structure Reflection Rubric

focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). It was a moment where in a sense I felt we have hope for meeting an important aspect of schools in Kansas. The goal of diversity, equity and inclusion was "two-fold" (KSDE, 2021). My thoughts were centered originally to whether staff in the districts will ever reflect the student body. I feel that each child should have a positive relationship with some adult in the building, and I feel within that positive relationship we can encourage, we can empower the young people to do great things not only in this school, but in this world.

We need to establish culturally responsive environments resulting in safe schools and classrooms. This involves informed staff members in collaboration with stakeholders who developed a culture and climate that is inviting to each student, and where each student is provided equitable opportunity through access to quality instruction, evidence-based resources, and facilities. I began to think how many times I have sat in meetings and discussed issues that involved students that felt that they weren't safe at schools or the classrooms. I feel that many times we can't get to establishing a culturally responsive environment due to lack of diversity in the workplace. This includes staff members making comments that offending people of color. Many times, the situation is due to lack of knowledge and understanding. I have requested many colleagues during my time in education to please consider the impact of the statements that they are making. Many times, people of color have experienced comments from staff members or classmates that have had a negative impact on their school experience. Many students have experienced comments regarding hair. I know a lot of African American students, specifically girls, that have felt uncomfortable with staff touching and asking if their hair was real. This is a situation that many students face daily, and many don't say a word. I was able to learn about this due to many students feeling comfortable telling me and the reality is that some of the students

were my own kids. These actions don't make students feel a sense of belonging. How do you make a school environment better for students that walk in the hallways and make statements with N-word? The impact of the statement doesn't matter if it ends with an a, er, or ers… The culture of many schools has this happening on a regular basis and many students specifically Black students remain silent. Many don't feel safe due to not feeling that a staff that isn't diverse or they see as one my mentors would say "They want to see someone like us." I recall talking to a student and the statement was made they won't understand, and I know exactly what the response will be. I feel that is sad when the students don't feel safe to discuss these things. Two, the system embraces the richness of diverse and inclusive environments. This recognizes, but is not limited to students with disabilities, racial/ethnic diversity, religious beliefs, gender, socioeconomic status, English learners, sexual identity, homeless, youth in foster care, single families, and active-duty military families.

I finally feel the time is right to be open and honest about my feeling of embracing my diverse background. The second part to DEI is one that touches me the most. I love the fact that it is talking about embracing diverse and inclusive environments that will truly help students. I truly feel that all groups that were listed are important, but for this writing I will only focus on racial/ethnic diversity. I have found myself in many of the other categories and serve students in each subgroup listed. With everything going on in the world I feel that if the DEI section wouldn't have included all the subgroups it would have been under political fire with the only focus was on the racial/ethnic diversity. I have had many conversations over the years that have gotten uncomfortable if topic shifted to be centered around race. After some time, I put the meeting behind me and then suddenly it was presented to the board of education. It was a hot topic, and it was people out to support both side of the issue. I stayed updated by reading board

briefs, newspaper articles, and social media. Then suddenly I was made aware of a post by a person that stated that the outsider came in and started this trouble. Immediately, I was very upset that this happened. It was no system in place that could help me with my feeling alone and seeing no way to address diversity, equity, and inclusion.

One experience that really haunts me to this day is the time that I was invited to a committee that was discussing topics around race. A decision was made that they wanted to make changes to right the wrong of some discriminatory practices that were acceptable at the time. I remember sitting at the meeting and thinking about how this would impact me. I was the only minority at the meeting and the only Black male. I was working at the building they were discussing changing. I finally got the courage and let the group know what the reality would soon be. You know that I will be blamed for the change simple because I was the only African American employee in the building. I believe that they listened, but thought I was just making a statement due to being African American. The issue was presented at school board meeting a few months later. It was an important moment in time for me. I realized that due to the concern that people quickly decided to take a side on the issue. The next school board meetings that discussed the issues had some very interesting public forum discussions. It was uncomfortable for me because honestly, I felt like I took a trip back in time with some of the comments being made. It seemed that it was some undertone racism in the different comments and response to them. It was soon after that a Facebook group was formed with a group opposed to making changes. I eventually was sent a post indicating that I was the reason that the action was being presented. It really made me upset, because no one took the time to respond or defend that the information was false. I contacted the person to discuss, and the person declined having a conversation. I did eventually write to the group and express my disappointment in no one taking to the time to

respond. Since the group had a Google doc with the meeting agenda, I decided to review the document to ensure that nothing stated that I made the proposal. The interesting part of the group was that the African American male that was blamed wasn't even a part of the group when it was presented to the group originally. The person that made the post was originally a member. Knowing this information didn't help me feel any better but showed me how difficult things can be for minorities. When the majority is silent it can be very lonely.

**Dear Emphasizer,**

The lived experiences shared here are my opportunity to share counter-storytelling of my personal life. According to Solórzano & Yosso (2002), counter-storytelling is the "method of telling the stories those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 32). This isn't intended to seek pity or to get responses centered around I am so sorry that has happened to you. I have heard that too often in my time as an educator in Kansas. This is to inform you of how different the lived experiences of African Americans in education. My stories will focus on the lens of leadership, but I have faced many issues prior to becoming an administrator. I am hopeful that the reader will make a connection to the importance of the foundational structure reflection rubrics focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The important thing is for you to take actions and make positive change if you are in a position of leadership. Following the foundational structure reflection rubric is a step in the right directions. My hope would be that district leaders and building leaders would review the document and see how they can improve the current state of the district. Taking time to reflect on how focusing on DEI can improve the culture and climate. Ensuring that you have diverse stakeholder groups can help address equity issues. Having a guide to ensure that DEI is considered during any district initiative is imperative for school improvement. Every district should identify steps for improving DEI efforts.

**DEI**

**D**efining diversity equity and inclusion for all

**E**vidence of actions taken to ensure culture of inclusion.

**I**dentifying areas to improve the overall system for all student groups.

**Reflection**

**R**emember that everyone counts in this world.

**E**veryone should have access to a quality education.

**F**orm groups with diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

**L**earn from past mistake and improve the educational system.

**E**veryone has an opportunity to make a positive impact.

**C**ontinue to strive for improvements in the world.

**T**each others the importance of DEI work.

**I**nclude the marginalized groups that has been discarded over time.

**O**pportunities to grow and improve should be a major focus.

**N**ever lose hope even on the difficult days.

**Rubric**

**R**emember that everyone counts.

**U**nderstanding other beliefs are important.

**B**elieve that you can make a difference in the world.

**R**ecognized the positives that comes out of focusing on DEI.

**I**nclude all stakeholder groups.

**Co**mmit to making positive changes.

**Figure 2.** ***Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric***

# Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

- Physically and emotionally safe climate/culture.
- Involved and diverse stakeholder participation.
- Elevate and incorporate student voice.
- Monitor and adjust policy/practice based on:
  - Climate and culture data.
  - Leadership and educator capacity building.

### Definition

The goal of diversity, equity and inclusion is two-fold.

One, to establish culturally responsive environments resulting in safe schools and classrooms. This involves informed staff members in collaboration with stakeholders who develop a culture and climate that is inviting to each student, and where each student is provided equitable opportunity through access to quality instruction, evidence-based resources and facilities.

Two, the system embraces the richness of diverse and inclusive environments. This recognizes, but is not limited to: students with disabilities, racial/ethnic diversity, religious beliefs, gender, socioeconomic status, English learners, sexual identity, homeless, youth in foster care, single families and active duty military families.

| | EMERGING | IMPLEMENTING | TRANSITIONING | MODELING |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | • Work is becoming more evident.<br>• Plans are taking form.<br>• All of the relevant pieces are in place. | • There is evidence that work is being done.<br>• Plans are being actively put into action. | • There is evidence that work is moving in a positive direction.<br>• There are pockets of implementation and sustained efforts. | • Work is a part of the school culture, and efforts are being made to maintain, embed and improve quality. |
| Mission and vision | System has a mission and vision in place, but it doesn't specifically address diversity, equity and inclusion. | System has a mission and vision in place that addresses diversity, equity and inclusion, but it doesn't drive policy or practice. | System has a mission and vision in place that specifically addresses diversity, equity and inclusion, and there are aligned policies and practices supporting this foundational structure. | System has a mission and vision in place that specifically addresses diversity, equity and inclusion, and it is a guiding principal in all aspects of system decision-making. |
| Professional development and resources | System has a professional development plan in place, but diversity, equity and inclusion are only addressed indirectly. | System has a professional development plan in place that utilizes disaggregated data to establish goals and professional development needs. | System has professional development plan in place that addresses the needs of the district regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, and have begun adding resources aligned with goals. | System has a professional development plan in place containing short- and long-term plans for addressing diversity, equity and inclusion, and has a plan for providing resources for supporting this plan. |
| Monitoring effectiveness | The system informally collects data on effectiveness of initiatives and programs related to diversity, equity and inclusion. | System uses formal surveys and questionnaires to collect effectiveness data relative to diversity, equity and inclusion, but all stakeholder groups are not included. | System uses formal surveys and questionnaires to collect data from all stakeholders relative to diversity, equity and inclusion, and combines this with district data to monitor effectiveness. | System has a system for collecting longitudinal data from all stakeholders relative to diversity, equity and inclusion, and this data is incorporated with district data to inform short and long-range planning. |
| Social-emotional learning | System has selected a social-emotional curriculum that is being utilized in isolation with no connection to diversity, equity or inclusion needs. | System has selected a social-emotional curriculum that is incorporated across the curriculum and promotes a culture of understanding and acceptance. | System collects data relative to social-emotional learning and uses this data to address policy and practice relative to diversity, equity and inclusion, and to support individual student needs. | Systemwide social-emotional instruction, policies and practices are fully embedded in school culture. A systemic process is in place to collect data and identify student needs relative to diversity, equity and inclusion, and a mechanism is in place to respond to these needs |
| Special populations | System is compliant with the minimum legal requirements to provide equity and access to federally protected groups. | System has identified a broad range of subgroups and disaggregates data to identify needs, learning gaps and to align interventions. | In addition to academic monitoring of identified subgroups, the system monitors student engagement and involvement in curricular and extracurricular activities to ensure opportunity, access and inclusion for all students. | System has evidence of narrowing learning gaps with all subgroups. Audits of student engagement and involvement in activities demonstrate equity with regards to access, diversity and inclusion within student groups. |
| Differentiated instruction | Academic progress is monitored, and students with needs for academic and/or enrichment needs are offered additional support. | Cross-curricular/grade-level teams for general education intervention have been established to identify students with varied learning styles and academic needs. | Instructional decision-making and differentiation incorporates input from educators, parents and families. Differentiation is not only based on academic data, but also on student interests and passions, so instructional opportunities are personalized. | System has a culture of inclusion relative diversity, equity and access. Student voice is elevated, giving them increased ownership and choice over their own educational experience. Moves between grade spans are intentionally planned to ensure a seamless transitional learning plan pre-K-12. |

KANSAS STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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September 2, 2021

*Note.* Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric from Kansas Department of Education (2021)

**Being Transparent About my Subjectivities, Motivations, and the Limitations**

My subjectivities will be found throughout this autoethnography, but here I want to help the reader understand my experiences related to education, students of color, and specifically Kansans Can School Redesign. This subjectivity statement is an important way for the researcher to be transparent about life experiences. This will impact my autoethnography moving forward due to my personal experiences. Bhattacharya (2017) discussed qualitative studies should share values, beliefs, and assumptions. The subjectivities aren't bias and shouldn't be viewed in this way. Peshkin cited the following quote to describe subjectivity: "We cannot rid ourselves of this subjectivity, nor should we wish to, but we ought, perhaps, to pay it very much more attention…" (Cheater, 1987, p. 172, as cited in Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Embracing subjectivity has helped me critically examine the research. This ultimately will help the reader understand the validity of my research. Being an African American male, I don't have some privileges of Whites in the world. According to McIntosh (1989), "All White people benefit even if they were not alive during the time of US slavery or if their ancestors immigrated to this country after the Civil War" (n.p.). I acknowledge that I have unearned power and privileges for being a male in this society. I also have the privilege of not being criticized for my religion in America.

I have thought about the privileges that I received since I live in America, I can get a free quality education. This is some of what I was taught as a young child that you should take advantage of this privilege. This is why I focused my dissertation on education. My topic focused on educational reform specifically in Kansas and the impact on students of color was due to the value placed on education in my family. My family comes from a history of educators in my family in both public education and higher education. I fell in love with learning about

education in high school. I read books such as the *Mis-Education of the Negro* by Dr. Carter G. Woodson (2009) and *Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B DuBois (2016). These books inspired me to read and investigate the American education system as it dealt with race. This led to me completing my undergraduate senior thesis paper over the process of school desegregation. These stages of my life show me the impact that the American education system can have on students of color.

My story will show some of the challenges that people of color face as a minority in education in America. I find myself often being the only or one of the few persons of color in education in Kansas. I started teaching at a school with five certified minorities working in my school building. After retirements and job opportunities I found myself being the only minority certified staff member in the building. I often wondered why it was so few certified staff members that were people of color. The representation of people of color in education declined tremendously after the landmark case of Brown vs. Board of Education. Will (2019) discussed:

> The unintentional consequence of the case still impacts education today: It caused the dismissal, demotion, or forced resignation of many experienced, highly credentialed Black educators who staffed Black-only schools. After the decision, tens of thousands of Black teachers and principals lost their jobs as White superintendents began to integrate schools but balked at putting Black educators in positions of authority over White teachers or students. (para. 3)

I have many life experiences that have dealt with race and equity in the American educational system. I am an African American male who was raised in the Memphis, Tennessee. I was raised in a faith based Christian home that focused on the value of getting a good education. Growing up in Memphis gave me a wide range of educational experiences in public education system. In

these experiences I was able to see the inequalities of school funding and programs that seemed to only seem available for less diverse schools. I witnessed how funding affected the school budget and available resources. In one school they only had used classroom sets of textbooks, and in the other they had brand new textbooks that were allowing students to take home the old textbooks. This opened my eyes at a young age about equity in education.

Prior to entering the educational leadership doctoral program, I have always valued education and helping students of color feel empowered. My current profession is a building principal, student support advisor in the office of diversity at a private college, and ordained pastor at a Baptist Church. I have valued education and sought ways to help students of color at every institution that I have worked. I have served on equity councils, facilitated anti-racism training, and worked at a school that was Redesign school. Some of my experiences working in Kansas Public Schools I have realized that when I attend meetings at the local, district, and state meeting I am usually the only person of color in the room. Many times, people look to me to answer questions related to race and diversity issues.

Whenever given the opportunity to share my story as a person of color on diversity issues I get the opportunity. While working at a Redesign school I realized that I almost every time one of the few administrators that was a person of color at all stages of the Redesign effort. While it was a variety of stakeholders attending Kansans Can meetings, I quickly realized that it was a lack of representation of people of color at the table. I found myself at the many meetings as the only or very few persons of color at meetings that I attended. This shaped my mind around the idea that students of color didn't have a voice at the table to speak on their behalf in the school Redesign effort. While attending a state board meeting the school leadership team presented over the changes being made at my school during the implementation of the Kansans Can school

Redesign initiative. During the meeting we discussed the school's implementation of porch visits. One of the leaders asked could this be implemented in the large inner city due to teacher safety concerns. I invited the leader to come and attend some porch visits sometime, because I felt a teacher shouldn't be afraid to go into the community that they teach the students. He eventually schedules a meeting with me to discuss and hear my viewpoints from a person of color. I have realized that I will be given the opportunity to speak on behalf of minority groups due to the fact I have been given the opportunity to sit at the table. I want to make it very clear that I only speak from my experiences and views of the world living as a minority in America. Personally, I have struggled all my life to find an opportunity to discuss race and issues I have recognized related to the lack of diversity representation in education. Through my experiences during the process of implementation a Kansans Can School Redesign Project in a previous position I held, I identified potential issues surrounding the roles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school Redesign process. The population of Kansas is continuing to change, and I find myself wondering if having diverse representation at the table has continued to stay the same during meetings for the Kansans Can School Redesign process. Previously, I was one of the few minorities involved in the Redesign discussions. Everyone has life experiences that can influence the thoughts that they have and many times this can be related to issues related to race and diversity. According to Muhammad (2015), "there is substantial evidence to support the theory that our personal views are shaped by our life experiences, and those views have an impact on student achievement" (p. 20). With lack of diverse representation, I began to ponder if this could have an impact on many of the students in the state of Kansas. This thought many times left me feeling hopeless about the opportunities to discuss equity issues that could arise dues to lack of diversity and representation to ensure that all students and communities were

represented during each stage of the Redesign process. During this process I realized that my focus should be centered around a critical theory for my theoretical framework.

The limits of this study are centered around what will be considered fair and equitable when it comes to people of color in education. Identifying what will be acceptable research of my collogues will be another issue. Many of the participants will not be people of color and may not recognize the importance of diversity and inclusion. According to Adams & Bell (2016), "Without truly valuing diversity, we cannot effectively address issues of injustice" (p. 34). This study will try to open the opportunity to have a discussion on the topic of equity in education and seek to reveal some of the potential issues of the school Redesign project. There are very few leaders of color in Kansas who have experience with school Redesign in multiple predominantly White communities. I hold a unique perspective that can add value to the Redesign conversation moving forward. Utilizing autoethnography has added another layer to my limits. My writings will be subjective to my lived experiences and can only be interpreted through those lenses. This has given me a voice, but potentially can cause people to feel uncomfortable when discussing the topic of race. Subjectivities and positionality will be another limit that could potentially cause people to not want to engage in conversation that will be centered around equity. Even with the potential limitations that are a lot of positive possibilities. Many of the possibilities are centered around improved understanding of race relations during a time that we have so much racial divide in America. This study is an opportunity to help connect Whites and people of color to accomplish equity in education. This study possibly can help other value diversity and embrace inclusion in education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) allows people to think critically and open the opportunity to seek ways to improve relationships better Whites and people of color. This study will provide an

opportunity to connect the diversity, equity, and inclusion movement following the recent events in history centered around race. Kansas educational systems have some overlaps when you discuss CRT. This study has the potential to motivate change in the Kansas educational system to focus more on equity and ensure that more diverse schools are participating in the Kansans Can School Redesign movement Kansas Department of Education decision to focus and shift toward school had some real challenges for a lot of schools and communities. I have the experience of having to make changes in the school and involving a variety of stakeholders. I worked at a school that completed two years of Redesign. It involved us making adaptive changes during the process. We took input for all stakeholders and surveys and made the necessary changes to ensure a smooth transition from traditional school setting to a school implementing redesign. The stakeholders played an important role in the success of the Redesign effort. While the Kansas Can Redesign project has included a variety of stakeholders, there is value in asking critical questions related to role of people of color in Kansas Redesign efforts. During the next chapter I will reflect on the impact that stakeholders play in educational reform and KSDE Redesign project.

## Rationale: Why Me? Why is it Important to Tell My Story

This study is important due to the lack of focus on diversity and representation research to ensure that all students and communities are represented in Kansas school Redesign process and given the focus on the success of every student, it is important to ensure that equity is at the forefront of any education reform movement. This dissertation is an extension of several that have focused on Redesign. This is the first dissertation study that has focused on the diversity and equity centered around the Redesign. Given that Kansans Can is a recent development (approximately four years old), there has not been much time to do much research on this

process, and there is minimal literature aside from a handful of dissertations and publicly available information on the KSDE website (KSDE, n.d.). This dissertation is an extension of the work that has been focused on Redesign schools. The work that has been done to this point has focused on facilitation of implementing school reform, the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in the Redesign, and secondary school Redesign. I have had to unique and privilege opportunity to meet three people that work dissertations centered around Redesign. Dr. Ben Proctor (2020), Dr. Brad Neuenswander (2018), and Dr. Jay Scott (2023) all did some valuable research around Kansas Redesign. I feel compelled to share some brief information around their work.

Proctor (2020) discussed the perspectives of key stakeholders undergoing school Redesign. His attention was on a middle school in Midwest Kansas. Dr. Proctor's dissertation didn't focus on diversity, equity, or inclusion. Neuenswander (2018) was the Deputy Commissioner for the Kansas Department of Education at the time of the Redesign movement. He shared his experience with an autoethnographic narrative. He shared insight to the quest to improve the educational system in Kansas by conducting tours across the state. His work focused on how the tours gathered input from stakeholders in public education and businesses. He was one of the most involved people during the Redesign movement besides the current Commissioner of Education Dr. Randy Watson. Dr. Proctor and Dr. Neuenswander included great information but didn't focus on the information presented in this work. I clearly identified that what has been done hasn't focused on diversity and equity lens in the Redesign concept. Dr. Jay Scott did work centered around the Redesign. According to Scott (2023), his research picks up where Neuenswander (2018) leaves off. His research captures the beginning of the community conversations tour to the building of the Kansans Can Vision, State Board of

Education Outcomes, and the definition of a successful high school graduate in Kansas. Dr. Scott was a Redesign coach that worked with secondary schools in the Redesign process. According to Scott (2023):

> Although I had a lifelong exposure to education, that exposure was limited to small, non-diverse school environments. From my experience as a student, I had a very limited perspective as to what school entailed. Every other student and teacher in my small elementary, middle, and high schools looked just like me in terms of race. My first experience in going to school with students of color was in college. As a teacher and administrator, I worked in large, suburban schools in northeast Kansas with very little racial and socio-economic diversity. With all this taken together, at times it can be difficult to empathize with and relate to the challenges large and/or highly diverse schools faced through the Redesign project. (p. 14)

Another reason why this work is important is to get a perspective of an African American leader in education. All the dissertations shared valuable information about the Redesign process, but none have shared information alone the lines of my research. Dr. Neuenswander mentioned information about the changing population, but from his research it didn't include information about ensuring diverse stakeholders being at the table to represent the population of Kansas. Neuenswander (2018) discussed how the minority population in many districts are changing. When the minority becomes the majority, they still don't see some of the privileges that other groups had. Given this context from someone who was very involved in the Redesign project, from my vantage point there appears to be a lack of focus on diverse representation to reflect the demographics of Kansas population. Neuenswander (2018) stated:

> Yet sprinkled across this state are the small communities that represent classic Americana, where 100% of students are White, prom is still held on the old gym floor, all students graduate high school, and the towns themselves are often referred to in country-music lyrics. One must wonder, then, whether most Kansans are aware of the subtle changes in demographics taking place in their state – and whether today's policy makers are aware of the same. For most, I assume the answer is no. (pp. 8-9)

Many school districts aren't making any changes or recognizing the changes in demographics across the state. It seems more business as usual. While speaking on the topic of colorblindness and racial inequality in our American schools, Drakeford (2010) explains, "I am certain, at any rate, that Americans cannot afford to retreat from our moral obligation and social responsibility to provide equality of educational opportunity and outcomes for all students in our schools" (p. 3). As Neuenswander (2018) described above, the demographics of Kansas are rapidly changing. KSDE data shows a constant change in demographics data of the school student population, with White populations declining over from 2016 to 2020. People of color (KSDE, n.d.) have steadily increased over the same period. Whites have decreased from 65% to 63.3 % from 2016 to 2020. Minorities has increased from 35% to 36.7 %. The United States Census data showed the total population of Kansas in the White alone subgroup declined from 88% to 83% from 2010 to 2020 These enrollment changes have been happening all over the state of Kansas. Neuenswander (2018) stated that the demographics around Kansas are making subtle changes. Proctor (2020) referenced the importance of "how the demographic of the community and school were important elements in the community deciding Redesign was best for them" (p. 69). It is worth noting that none of these dissertations focused directly on equity, diversity, and

inclusion. Therefore, there is a lack of representation from people of color on this topic in the minimal literature that we have. As we look back to Drakeford (2010), we are compelled to address these important issues as she urges, "the phenomenon of racial inequality of educational opportunity and outcomes in America's schools is, quite simply, unacceptable" (p. 3). This is what led me to pursue a preliminary analysis of student demographic data from KSDE related to the school Redesign process. Table 1 below shows the changing demographics in Kansas.

**Table 1.** ***Demographics of Kansas Public Schools***

| *Year* | *White* | *Black* | *Hispanic* | *Other* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2016 | 65 | 7 | 19.2 | 8.8 |
| 2017 | 64.6 | 6.9 | 19.5 | 9 |
| 2018 | 64.2 | 6.9 | 19.7 | 9.2 |
| 2019 | 63.8 | 6.9 | 20.1 | 9.2 |
| 2020 | 63.3 | 6.8 | 20.5 | 9.4 |
| 2022 | 62.5 | 6.7 | 21 | 9.8 |

*Note*: Kansas State Department of Education (Kansas Report Card 2016-2022)

As I was reviewing demographic data, I stumbled upon a rubric centered around diversity. This rubric didn't have a direct seem to have a direct tie to the Redesign but seemed to be a valuable tool that could help guide educators across the state.

## Research Purpose

As mentioned in the preface, the focus of this study shifted over the course of the autoethnographic process. As the emphasis on Redesign shifts in the state of Kansas, and as my autoethnographic processes shifted the narrative through the evolving writing and self-discovery process, I learned more about myself as a leader. The original the purpose of this

autoethnography was to explore my lived experiences as it relates to being a leader of color during the Kansas Redesign process and explore potential structural overlap between the Foundational Structures Reflection Rubric at KSDE focused on diversity and the Redesign process. The original questions are stated below.

## Research Questions

RQ1: What are my personal experiences as a leader of color, working in predominantly White communities in Kansas as it relates to new Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?

RQ2: Given my experiences as articulated in RQ1, how might we reimagine education reform to respond to the needs of diverse communities in Kansas?

While these questions still drove the autoethnographic processes as described in Chapter 3, research question one surprisingly took me into a deeper personal autoethnographic discovery about myself as a leader, as you will see in Chapters 4-6.

## Critical Race Theory (CRT)

**Dear CRT,**

I must acknowledge before I continue with writing this dissertation my hesitation in continuing in this journey due to the political climate centered around critical race theory (CRT). I learned about CRT during the doctoral program and finally felt I could express myself. According to Solórzano & Yosso (2002), "Critical race methodology in education focuses research on how students of color experience and respond to the U.S. educational system. From developing research questions to collecting, analyzing, and presenting data, critical race methodology centers on students of color" (p. 37). The biggest attraction to CRT was the ability to share my personal experience based on my experiences dealing with race. I became more

engaged with the topic in class and reading books about CRT. I realized that all these years I wasn't wrong in my thinking that it is another version of the story that I could relate to. Then, strolling my twitter feed I saw multiple deaths of Black men. As I write now, I am hesitating saying names for fear of political backlash. So many years I have kept quiet and even refused to post certain articles due to the position that I could put myself in.

I had a former student reach out to me asking to meet about potential job opportunity. This was surprising because I hadn't talked to the student in many years. I was extremely proud of the man that he had become. I agreed to meet and excited to hear about the great things that he was going to do next in life. I have purposely omitted the actual title of the job due to some situations that I have faced. The conversation eventually got to an awkward silence. He asked the question, "What do I do?". He just accepted a job and was approached by a supervisor to delete a post that he made regarding the loss of life of a person that was killed by police officers. It is a hard thing to discuss knowing that I many times won't post certain things to ensure that it won't cause controversy due to my position and make up of my surroundings. Once again, I found myself in a position not knowing what advice to give. I told him do what he felt right in his heart. I let him know that I don't post certain things to have the opportunity to try and educate others and make a difference in other people lives. I am saying this to give to perspective to why it is hard to understand the attack on CRT. The political climate in America and living in Kansas has created some interesting situations. No, I am not imaging it. I have heard comments about potentially racially motivated issues that have happened in the world. Why are they marching? Why does it have to be about race? I support the police. Why don't they just get over it? Well, this is why I am taking the courage to try and express my lived experience as a minority leader in a majority White institution. As I am writing this a 16-year-old boy was shot in the head for

accidently knocking on the wrong door in Kansas City. The young kid was a Black male, and the suspected shooter was a White male. It is something that seems to be more common the older that I get. The protest has started, and justice marches has started to form. No, I don't know the details or the outcome. I just wanted to ensure that the reader is aware these are the type of issues that minority educators will face when they enter department meetings or enter the teachers' lounge. Many people have expressed they are not comfortable working with coworker regarding Facebook post being made that they feel are racially motivated.

Now let's shift my focus back to education and another example of my hesitation in writing about CRT. I read a *Washington Post* article about a Texas town's first Black principal, Dr. James Whitfield, who was fired over CRT although the school admits it was never taught. According to Johnson (2021):

> Whitfield's job was in danger. Over the summer, White adults had accused the principal of embracing critical race theory, a decades-old academic framework that argues racism in America is systemic. Critical race theory has become a target for conservatives around the country. Texas passed two controversial laws this year meant to ban any mention of it from public school classrooms. (para. 9)

Critical race theory was used to criticize him. Dr. Whitfield is an example of how CRT and other race related issues can impact a minority leader. Systemic racism is still something that minority leaders are concerned about. Since, CRT has been a hot topic in education many minority leaders have been concerned about how to lead and address issues centered around race. This is an extension of the same political context that influenced the foundational structure in KSDE

focused on diversity. This foundational structure may not be branching over Redesign, but it is needed in education.

When you read about the attacks on education and how many times it seems that minority leaders are becoming the center of controversy when race situation happen. My personal experience makes you make a specific choice will the leaders about you support you if you pursue it or will you be known as the troublemaker. If you don't have other that will be able to relate to the struggles it does become hard. Why do you have to convince others about fundamental issues related to race? Why do you have to explain that comments offend minority groups? Why do you have to be afraid that writing a dissertation of important work will cause you problems? These are some of the concerns that I face a minority leader. Please don't be shocked with my next sentence. I certainly contemplated dropping out of the doctoral program due to the attack on CRT. I've been asked to speak to groups around CRT. The group was a women's book study group. They were focused on issues related to race. Well, I didn't try to convince anyone of whether to support or attack CRT I simply provided documentation and shared a video clip of Gloria Ladson-Billings. This would include some personal stories of how my first year teaching the double treatment I would get depending on the clothes that I wore. It was a department store that I frequently shopped at that I would get treated differently when I went after work with my shirt and tie on compared to weekend attire that consisted of wear matching outfit with blue jeans. It was amazing to know that if I shared my story to colleagues many would debate me about it. Stereotypes are a real thing.

When I was in college many people guessed that I attended a community college that was known to have African Americans on the basketball team. At the time the university that I attended didn't have a very diverse student body. One time I got upset when they asked if I

attended the other school. So, I answered honestly. I attended college on academic scholarship and yes, I am a two-sport letterman. I look back and I don't know why it bothered me so much, but I believe it was a feeling that people didn't feel that I belonged at a private university. At the end of the day, I am telling you this so that you can understand it's okay to not understand everything, but please allow others to tell their lived experiences. This is especially complicated considering this is the current community that I lead in now.

My personal reflection really connected with the following quote referencing CRT. Drakeford (2010) wrote:

> Critical race theory is an offshoot of a more general critical theory related to the resistance and oppositional pedagogy founded by critical scholars and theorists such as Paulo Freire, 12 Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple, and others, and more specifically, critical legal studies (CLS). The difference between CLS and CRT is that CRT extends its assessment of the impact of racist ideology beyond the courtroom and places race at the core of the broader context of social inequity in all areas of American society. (pp.11-12)

CRT offers a framework that goes beyond understanding racism in classrooms. It also insists that we continue to work towards a more just system of education. As educators and students, we are aware of the transformative power of ideas. According to Zamudio et al. (2011), "It is our hope that educators and students consider CRT as a call to action, a call to participate in a movement for an emancipatory education"(p. 165). The focus of using this theory is to ensure that representation for people of color.

Reflecting on the recent events in America that have sparked the conversation about race makes this study even more relevant. CRT helps challenge Eurocentric epistemology and is

much needed when reflecting on issues centered around race and education. According to Zamudio et al. (2011), “Critical race theory provides us with an alternative theoretical lens and pedagogical orientation that we believe will help us to address the problems of schooling that students of color confront” (p. 161). I realize that the use of CRT in education can be very uncomfortable for people of color and Whites. The significant of race in education can be complex and often hidden in unwritten rules and systemic racism. I was surprised that the emergence of CRT in education and the reality that it has allowed for the study of race in a way that can be accepted by scholars. As Zamudio et al. (2011) described, “critical race methodology in education challenges biological and cultural deficit stories through counter-storytelling, oral traditions, historiographies, corridos, poetry, films, actors, or by other means” (p. 132). CRT will help examine people of color’s experience and the impact that the Kansans Can Redesign Project impact them.

I was sitting at home in my class learning about CRT then something clicked, and I was like wow someone finally gets me. During my education I always wondered if anyone would ever understand my lived experiences. I felt empowered reading, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) when they described how, “Critical race methodology in education offers a way to understand the experiences of people of color along the educational pipeline” (p. 36). This was a concept that I hadn’t experience until I go into a doctoral level class. If you haven’t noticed by now that I’m an African American male and a minority. I’m from Memphis, Tennessee and have family members that fought, protested, and march during the Civil Rights Movement. I understand that slavery was not a good thing for my ancestors. I have researched and know that many slaves were raped, murder, and beat during slavery and were considered property. Each year teaching, I have worked tirelessly to educate people on the improvements we have made in America from

slavery to segregation. I also try and show how we still have work to do, and that racism still exists but we everyone regardless of color, race, religion, and gender can make a positive impact on society. I have been followed in stores. On a personal note, I have seen and experienced the negative effects of White privilege. I have had the cops called on me while coaching track for being a Black man yelling at a group that was mainly White. I decided to take the kids on a long run to ensure they were in shape for the season. I had taken the student athletes on many runs in the past off campus while as assistant coach. I would send the kids on a run and ensured that they partnered up for safety. I went to a location that was the halfway point to check on how the students were doing. I recall that it was extremely hot outside that day so I was yelling out to the students to partner up as they may the return to the campus. Then I turned and saw a police car rolling up to me. When he saw me, he put his head down and asked if I was the coach. I told him that I was. He then preceded to tell me that he needed my license. Then he told me that someone called the cops on me. The reason for the call was a Black guy was yelling at kids during track practice. While I was yelling for the students to get a partner as we run back on campus due to the temperature being so high and I was ensuring the kids were safe.

I really feel Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on two America's is still true today in many aspects. I have been called a n-word walking down the streets of a town in Kansas. I have been pulled over for apparently rolling through a stop sign but didn't get a ticket. When you see me what you see is the question that always comes to my mind. I've always done what I could to protect and ensure that my students feel valued and respected regardless of shade of their skin. My main concern is that diversity isn't valued or embraced. It's sad that people of color aren't feeling valued, appreciated, or supported when issues come about that deal with such

sensitive issues about racism. What are we to do? Yes, I completely understand that people may never be able to realize the impact race has on people of color.

There has been a lot of controversy centered around critical race theory. Many people have made accusations that schools, and school leaderships have promoted and taught CRT in schools. Many educators have been directed how they teach and discuss current events, encourage civic engagement, and teach about America's history of racism. This is a sensitive topic for me considering how the viewpoints of some can have a negative impact on district leaders. With the narrative centered around CRT it will possibly impact minority school leaders at a higher rate if issues centered around race comes up. I feel that leaders must be aware of everything that is presented and discuss things with district level leaders to ensure that they will have board support centered around issues. I specifically would be concerned more if I was still in the classroom teacher history. Living in a current political environment that seems to label race and equity topic CRT it will be interesting to see how the future of education will look.

**Dear Teachers/Mentors,**

You will never know the impact that you had on my life. When I was hurt you were my doctor. I will never forget how you have me a Band-Aid at recess. When I was discouraged, you were my Pastor. I will never forget how you had faith in me when everyone put me down. When I was struggling you were my cheerleader. I will never forget how I was struggling reading, and you keep cheering me on. When I was having problems in math you were my coach. I will never forget how you help me after I struggled on my homework. When I was sad you were my counselor. I will never forget how you took time to talk to me after the difficult moments I faced. When I had a bruise, you were my investigator. I will never forget how you recognized what I was going though at home each night. When I was hungry you where the lunch lady. I will never

forget how you always had something for me to eat when I came to school hungry. When I felt I had no future you were my doctor. I will never forget that you have me the prescription that if I have a dream that I can accomplish it regardless of the issues I face if I keep the faith. When I think of you. You were more than a teacher. More than my hero. You were my guardian angel. So, I ask you never to give up on any student that you encounter because you could be to them what you were for me. Please consider the life of everyone is valuable and take time to listen when student approach you about their lived experiences. Don't disregard their perspective because it is different from you. Many times, you will never understand the impact that you made on the future leaders of the world.

**Dear Understanding,**

I wish you would understand. I really wish you would understand. When my child sees that a school had just made national news regarding an incident surrounding race in school it may impact them. I wish that you would understand that my child is going into an environment to play a sport that they love, but in the back of their mind they may be thinking about the situation. Knowing about a racial incident really impacts students of color especially when they are unsure if it was addressed. I wish you would understand that it's not okay to not find a way to visit with a student about literature that will be talking about slavery, include racial terms, or information that have impacted a marginalize group of people. I just want you to understand that one bad interaction can seriously impact the trust and relationship that you had with that student. I hope that each reader understands this is my lived experience as a husband, father, and educator. Please understand that I am willing to be vulnerable in hopes for a better future for my kids and future generations. The national news that includes information impacting the lives of minority students make them worry about what will happen the next day. They will worry that a

friend may say something, or students will discuss in the hallway. Just understand that things will impact some student differently based on lived experiences and historical perspectives. Please understand that according to Delamont (2009), autoethnography is essentially lazy, literally lazy, and intellectually lazy. Understand that this isn't the only perspective. Understand that in the next section it will give you an overview of how it helped to empower me to continue in this work. Using autoethnography takes a lot of courage and vulnerability to share your personal story.

## Autoethnography

**Dear Advocates,**

As I reflect on my personal experiences, I can draw connections to the unearned power and politics that many people have failed to understand or realize has occurred in America over many generations to people of color. According to Boylorn & Orbe (2021), autoethnography allows a focus on personal and cultural critique. The daily effects of racism and news centered around race has had a tremendous impact on my life. I have recognized over the years many of the issues that people of color have experienced and many of my colleagues have denied over the years. Forecasting future directions for education will be centered around political activism. School leaders must get a political pulse, or the students and staff could have some serious consequences. This could affect them emotionally or professionally. As I wrote this, I thought about how this is currently affecting the world currently.

School leaders must navigate the social and political complexities. School leaders must find ways to navigate social media and political drama that could have viral ramifications that could impact the leader and the school. Leaders must understand the intersections of the local, state, and federal policies and laws that could impact the school. Politics matter in education and

its importance in school leadership. My thoughts as I began to read were how true that statement is in school leadership. According to Boylorn & Orbe (2021), “Cultural experiences are oftentimes taken for granted because of the seemingly interconnected and multicultural society we live in” (p. 3). This experience is often lacking due to lack of diversity at the table. Leaders should be aware of the district demographics and be intentional about capturing the perspective of others. Educational leaders must be aware of the politics in education to be an effective leader. School leaders can promote student success by being aware of politics. Educational leaders must respond and influence politics in schools. School politics are involved at every level of the government. Politics will remain in every school environment. To be true advocates for the students the school leader must be engaged in politics and make decisions that would be in the best interests of the students. School leaders need to have political understanding of how to get people to work together. This will help school leaders become more effective. School leaders’ professional and civic/political voice has become increasingly complex, with the combination of district, state, and federal accountability provisions. Administration must consider the cost and impact of carrying out policies that seem destined to hurt the school and most importantly the students. Schools must seek the appropriate political voice to find help for students. School leaders must face the local and state issues daily. Then they also face state and federal mandates that continue to come each year. It’s important for educational leaders to involve the educational stakeholders associated with the school community. Another important thing to think about is that demographics are changing in the public schools and it’s important that leaders are prepared to serve diverse communities.

I started this journey focused on telling a story and painting a picture of the positive things and all the potential that the Kansans Can School Redesign held for Kansas. I also began

to think about how the Redesign project could improve. I pondered if people of color were represented at the table when decisions were being made. The other thought that came to mind was did any district or school plan focus on diversity, equity, or inclusion in their Redesign plan. I got to a point where after completing some preliminary interviews and projects that the clear-cut answer was NO! So, this was the turning point in my decision to changing to a method that I could write about my personal lived experience.

Reed-Danahay (2021) explained autoethnography as an intersection of three writing genres:

1. "native anthropology," in which people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group;
2. "ethnic autobiography," personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups; and
3. "autobiographical ethnography," in which anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing. (p. 2)

I will focus on a combination of ethnic autobiography and autobiographical ethnography to tell my story. This will be myself reflection of my life in a lens that I see daily. My writings are my own views shaped by my entire life experiences. I will interweave critical autoethnography to tell my story. Stubblefield (2022) explained, "Critical autoethnography moves beyond simply documenting an experience to deconstructing it through theorization and critical analysis" (p. 102). This will allow a view of my first-hand experiences of lived experiences while critiquing the complexities of educational reform. According to Boylorn & Orbe (2021), "Critical autoethnography allows for critical self-reflexivity and cultural commentary to examine embodied experiences, relational encounters, and intercultural conundrums" (p. 6). My

experiences have been different being a minority leader in Kansas. My writing will focus on the perspective of being an African American male educator in Kansas.

Over the years I have felt silenced until I decided to choose autoethnography as a methodology. Autoethnography really gave me the courage to reclaim my voice. I finally was like this is the perfect opportunity for me to write about things that have impacted me. Focusing on my personal experiences as a teacher, African American from Memphis, and school administrator really help form my story. I was familiar with the Redesign considering that I work at a Redesign school. My cultural experiences really helped shape many of the stories. I wanted to capitalize on my inside knowledge as a minority and educator. One of the most important principles of autoethnography that impacted me was the opportunity to break my silence. Critical autoethnography allowed me to find my cultural identity while writing my dissertation. The writing is intended to offer another perspective on the important work of educational leaders across Kansas.

The demographics of educational leaders suggest that minority voices aren't necessarily being heard across Kansas. RedCorn (2017) explained:

> However, as I explain the specific methodological foundations of autoethnography, I must also acknowledge how this work is informed by critical autoethnographic scholars such as Boylorn & Orbe (2013) and Holman Jones (2005). These leaders in the field emphasize how critical autoethnography prioritizes marginalized and intersectional experiences for the purpose of not only privileging those perspectives in the scholarly discourses, but also for the political purpose of influencing social justice praxis. Here I explain how this project aligns with these specific qualities of critical autoethnography. (p. 52)

Critical autoethnography helps explain the specific challenges marginalized people have. My focus is to improve the thought process of any Redesign movement in the future by identifying an area that didn't seem to be focused on during the Redesign process. After the initial stages of Redesign, the foundational rubrics were developed that focused on diversity. This makes me wonder how outcomes may have ended if it was introduced and emphasized during the launch of Redesign.

Over the years I have remained silent on a variety of issues when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As an African American male educator in Kansas, I have found myself being one of the few minorities that my colleagues interact with. I have attended meetings and found myself in awkward conversations centered around race. I am not asking for sympathy but want to acknowledge many times discussions centered around diversity and equity become uncomfortable for minority leaders.

**Sympathy**

I know what the cage fills like.

When the sun shines, I investigate the windows of hope.

When the storms rage, I sit at home and pray.

I see the small opportunities to share my whispers.

Yet, I understand the limits of the cage.

I understand the zoo and circus culture.

I can sympathize with the animals in the cage.

The bird sings, the tiger roars, and the giraffe looks out.

The bird sings to gather allies.

The tiger roars to take a stand.

The giraffe to see the directions to take.

Given opportunities, but the cage is still here.

I know why the cage is still in place.

The cage stops any opportunity of hope.

While only sympathy is offered.

No change is happening.

The cage is still locked shut.

**Dear Reality,**

Once I was really offended by a colleague making a joke about Black people eating chicken. Well, let's not say offended because I have grown to not let people's ignorance offend me. I wonder can I say that in this dissertation? Well, I guess I can since this is an autoethnography. I have visited with my wife about the stories that we have faced with coworkers making comments that truly are offensive. You feel a sense of having nowhere to turn. If you bring it up, you offend times hear comments made across Kansas. They didn't mean it in an offensive way. It's just in your head it's not about race.

My wife and daughters have expressed numerous examples of comments made about their hair. This has really hit home for me. Many educators think that an elementary students should explain cultural things to them. I have had many meetings trying to explain why the comment made to my kids. I will give you a few examples of things that aren't okay. Is your hair real? How did your mom do that? Is that a cultural thing? At the end of the day, it comes down to is the conversation even worth my time. If I have a relationship with the person, then it is easier to have the conversation with them. Visiting with my wife and kids helps me decide if we want to visit regarding school issues that my family has faced. The only exception is when I

personally feel the line has been crossed. I often have remained silent on issues knowing that if I speak people will assume I am speaking for the entire African American community.

Imagine having a conversation about whether we should celebrate Black History Month (BHM). This is just one example of the type of uncomfortable conversations that you can have. This conversation happened many years before the many incidents in America surrounding controversial killings of Black males. I find it difficult to have a productive conversation with issues centered around race when my focus is loss of life, and the other perception is centered around justifying the reason why the person got killed. This is related to education because I remember the conversation that was taking place when I was in the 8th grade between the students after the OJ Simpson verdict. It was a school divided once the verdict was read the minority students cheers and the White students were upset. I remember listening on the radio in class as my teacher went into the teachers' lounge to watch on television. As I reflect on the scenario, I don't understand how the students were left unsupervised. It was unique school in the suburbs a newly opened school Middle School. The school was predominantly White, but had students bused in that made up for many of the people of color. The verdict was read, and I remember some of the student cheering and the teacher came back in the room and seemed really upset and started yelling at the students. Let's just say it was extremely awkward. We had double lockers, and mine was at the bottom and I overheard two White students talking about how they couldn't believe that he got away with murder. I am telling this story because race does impact students and major events in America does affect students' lives even if it is thousands of miles away.

## Counter-storytelling

I will use counter-storytelling to help emphasize the autoethnography. I will utilize counter-storytelling to share my perspective as an African American male educator in Kansas. The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) elaborated, "Counter-story is defined as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (p. 32). Researching counter-storytelling has really helped me make connections with CRT. According to Zamudio et al. (2011), "Critical Race theorists agree that an oppositional voice to the dominate or master narrative (i.e., the dominate story or taken-for-granted truths) is an effective tool in making visible structures, processes and practices that contribute to continued racial inequality" (p. 18). I personally feel that CRT is a way for another perspective to be shared. Being a former history teacher, I honestly feel that if you read a book of historical events that happened you would get different perspectives. I especially like reading primary source documents and past assignments that I assigned that asked students to take a position and write an argumentative essay.

The decision to use counter-storytelling was the best way that I could tell my story in my authentic way. I am not writing to convince the reader that my views are the only perception but requesting your permission for my counter-story to offer another viewpoint from a person of color. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017), "critical writers use counter-stories to challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs" (p. 50). I will attempt in the most political way to share my personal experience as an African American male educator. This will allow me to tell the perspective of my personal story as I reflect from look at the mirror. I have lived my life with someone looking from the outside telling a perspective or determining

how I should feel about situations that have personally affected me. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) explained, “The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). This has been exciting concept to be able to share my unapologetic story of my life as an African American educator. Delgado (1989) reminds us that “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436). Counter-storytelling has been my freedom during this process. Finally, after nearly 20 years working in education I have been able to find my voice.

## Code-switching

I have come to the realization that I have adapted to my surroundings my entire professional career. According to Graham (2021), “Code-switching is defined as the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of languages in conversation” (p. 22). I eventually realized that when I described the approach with dealing with society as becoming a chameleon was code-switching. Weathersby (2020) stated,

> The definition of a chameleon is a lizard (the lizard that changes its colors Regularly is an example of a chameleon) that can change colors to match its surroundings or a person who varies their personality depending on who they are with or the type of person they are around. (p. 20)

Code-switching is a way of becoming a chameleon. Weathersby (2020) futhered explained, “The standard definition of Code-switching is when a person who speaks two or more languages uses these languages throughout the conversation to bring others into the conversation to bring comfort and belonging” (p. 2). My entire life I have found myself changing my daily interactions to ensure that others were comfortable. According to Weathersby (2020), “Believe it or not, we all have done it, but there are times that more cultures have to do it more than can cause pure

frustration" (p. 1). I have a lot of passion like Malcom X, but ensure that I tone it down to be more acceptable like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I have found issues with ensuring that my tone and presentation of myself is acceptable to the majority. This is how I feel daily. I recall John Graham discussing this experience with code-switching while reading his book. He discussed his experience of his daughter recognizing how his wife changed her voice when she encountered certain people. These are the moments that I am in disbelief that it's people in the world that relate to my lived experiences that understand that I must make some changes daily to ensure that I can be accepted by the majority. I have the ability alternate my dialect to meet the audience that I am around. This has given me the ability to go to communicate with people regardless of socioeconomic status or cultural background. It seems that I am the one that must change to ensure that people are feeling comfortable. I can attend board meetings and communicate with the everyone without anyone looking at me funny. This is my reflection of living as a Black man in education.

I many times have wondered if I have abandoned my blackness and, in some ways, adapted to become more acceptable. In a sense my term chameleon really means "The Acceptable Negro". This is what you are seeing as you turn the pages to read this dissertation. I blend in a variety of people with different backgrounds. I remember early in my career the questions they would ask me when they saw me outside of school on the weekend compared to Mr. Cheeks at work. They would ask me, "Why don't you wear that to school?". Although I smiled in my heart, I wanted to tell them my real reasons. According to West (2017), "Black survival requires accommodations with and acceptance from White America" (p. 86). I dress up and wear professional attire to ensure that I can open the door for other people of color to have

an opportunity one day. I am a chameleon to have the opportunity to impact others. The different versions of Mr. Cheeks vary on the day of the week.

**Dear Love,**

Reflecting on this journey has really impacted our lives. Sharing stories that have affected both our lives has taken another direction in understanding that we have in a sense adapted to the cultures that surround us. From traveling to our families, attending association dinners, church functions, and of course our kids' events. Never did I imagine attending volleyball games yelling side out. Code-switching has become natural part of life. I laugh when our kids refer to how we sound different when we talk to different people. Some of my favorite memories are the kids' impersonations of how we talk at certain places. Many people don't understand, but reflecting on our classes and life discussions I now realize that we should have written the book on it. Weathersby (2020) clarified, "people code-switch so they can adequately communicate, to fit in a place to get the desired results" (p. 1).

I have found myself my entire life acting differently around different groups of people. I currently find myself code-switching to complete this dissertation. I must ensure that I tone it down to ensure that people are comfortable and not feel offended. I won't apologize for the decisions that I have made to advance my career. I feel I have stayed true to my core values and beliefs. I have done what I needed to do to ensure that I could be at the table to make some positive change in the world. Moving forward I will take the next step to be brave and speak out to ensure that I do my part to make the world a better place. After many conversations I know that we have faced some challenging moments in our personal and professional careers over the issues of race. Understand that we have made decisions to help our children and future grandchildren.

**Dear Children,**

I was reminded writing this dissertation about all the funny and sometimes sad stories that we shared that are centered around code-switching. Recently we were driving, and you made mention of how you heard me talk different when I am back home in Memphis compared to talking to people in Kansas. Reflecting on many times that I have asked you to ensure that you are aware of the audience that you are speaking too. I know that I have asked you to change roles depending on if you are at school, church, convention, department store, and many other places. Please know that it was out of love. I have seen how cruel the world can be when you aren't aware of your surroundings. I pray that this doesn't impact the way that you see or view the world or myself. I try to protect you from being mistreated and yet it seems that things still happen.

One of my favorite television shows growing up was the Fresh Prince of Bel Air. The show starred Will Smith. He was street smart teenager from Philadelphia that had a rough background that was sent to stay with his family in Bel Air. It was many episodes that code-switching was taking place. The main situation that involved code-switching was between Will and his cousin Carlton. One episode Carlton visited Will's old neighborhood and as society would say, was acting Black. This included him changing his clothing to hip hop attire and talking slang. It portrays Carlton as the acceptable African American male that dressed in dressy clothing and attended private school. After reflecting on the episodes of Fresh Prince of Bel Air I realized how many times I code-switch each week. Code-switching has become a natural phenomenon in my life.

# Chapter 2 - African American View of the Literature: Reviewing Literature on Redesign, Stakeholder Engagement, and Leadership by People of Color

## Literature Review Process

The literature review process started with a focus around educational reform using the Kansas State University library search page and the Educational Resources Information Center which is also known as ERIC. Topics and areas of focus were around American education reform, Kansas Redesign, Kansans Can, school design, reform, and school improvement. During this process, the search was modified to exact search, articles, and dates were adjusted to get more current articles. When each of the articles were reviewed, the initial step started by examining the abstract to ensure it was pertinent to the selected topic. After reviewing each of the selected articles the next step was to review the article by reviewing the sections and conclusion. If the article seemed to have relevant information aligned with my research topics, especially if it was centered around a stakeholder group that was involved in educational reform, that article was saved.

This literature review is divided into the following sections: Introduction of the Impact Stakeholders have on K-12 Educational Reform; Family Stakeholders; School System Stakeholders; Community, Organizational, and Political Groups Stakeholder; and the Kansas School Redesign. This literature review will also incorporate personal autoethnographic reflections that are connected to my lived experiences.

**Dear Stakeholder,**

I personally saw the importance of having the key stakeholders support during the Redesign process. Scott (2023) implored schools to “engage as many stakeholders of the school as possible including parents, community members, and students” (p. 206). When you have

parental support, it will help tremendously when you are trying to implement change. Being in the middle of Redesign and realizing that a group of parents not supporting part of the process can really disrupt the process.

One area of Redesign was difficult to navigate was personalized learning. Learning for all at your own pace is a great concept. Where did we go wrong? The implementation of personalized learning using the platform *Summit Learning*. This was a tremendous challenge. I knew trouble was brewing when some students were struggling on adapting to the change. Key stakeholders started questioning the platform, and doctors began questioning if the *Summit Learning* platform was causing physical and emotional ailments to the students due to screen time. When you see various stakeholders standing up against something it is hard to lead a school when you seem to be defending instead of sharing the positives of what's going on. Things really got uncomfortable when parents wanted to meet and ask questions about the new learning platform, and it didn't seem that you could say anything to help the cause. Reflecting, administrators involved in Redesign would all describe how family support or non-support could have a tremendous impact on its success. Well, my experience was really going well sharing the positive things of the Redesign, and how Redesign gave me some joyous moments. I was able to enjoy time working with the students with the mentoring sessions and seeing their faces light up with the interest base groups on Friday afternoon. This all was going well and even had some positive interaction with families and community partners. Regardless of the positive things happening, however, things started feeling overwhelming negative when Facebook parent groups, online articles, and news stories started posting negative stories about the platform. So, my biggest takeaway in the early stages of Redesign was: stakeholder engagement can be messy, but it still needs to be done for any reform movement to be successful.

## External Stakeholders Involvement in Educational Reform

In the American educational system methods of improving performance have focused on schools' leaders, families, and community groups when implementing educational reform in the United States. According to Park (2022):

> In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education formed by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell released the report *A Nation at Risk*. The most famous line of the widely publicized report declared that 'the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people' (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). Characterized by its authors as 'an open letter to the American people,' the report called for elected officials, educators, parents, and students to reform a public school system it described as "in urgent need of improvement. (para. 1-2)

These groups all can play a vital role in educational reform. Examining the relationships between different stakeholders that impact educational reform will be a focus. A basic assumption pertinent to educational reform is that stakeholders have influenced policy and reform efforts. A recurrent theme in this literature is stakeholder groups are vital to educational reform in America. According to Holmes (2012), "*A Nation at Risk* analyzed the problem—mediocre education and increasing competitiveness in the global economy – and provided the solution – educational standards for teachers, and educational standards for students" (p. 10). A lot of reform movements have continued since the report. Education reform has been taken place in the United States since Euro American schools began, and reforming schools are as old as time. According to Glass (2008, as cited in Friel, 2012):

> Criticism and reform of the education of young people was old when Quintilian

> (35-95 A.D.) was young Plato (427-347 B.C.E). The denigration of children, particularly adolescents, has been prominent in most nations since the Industrial Revolution. (p. 4)

A substantial body of research revealed that education reform was heavily impacted by stakeholder groups. It seems that educational reform has been impacting the education system for many years. America will continue to seek educational reform. Educational leaders, community groups, parents, and students can help with educational reform. The groups discussed played a vital role in educational reform. Many educational reform efforts have involved stakeholders that were involved in the process. A variety of stakeholder groups have influenced school reform over the years. Van Ranken & Goodson (2020) stated, "For decades, the nation—including educators, community members, and scholars—have been grappling with the idea of school reform" (p. 1). Multiple policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and No Child Left Behind Act have focused on educational reform.

Education reform in America has focused on improving education and many approaches have been taken to develop new policies. While they have taken various approaches, one point has been clear—they have been seeking change (Van Ranken & Goodson, 2020). The Kansans Can Redesign effort was focused on developing educational change in Kansas. Educational reform seems to involve many stakeholders' groups that seek to influence the education system. Further research surrounding educational stakeholders emphasizes the specific roles and responsibilities that must be fulfilled for the successful education of students (Muhammad, 2015), and key stakeholders played essential roles in the Kansas reform movement (Hardrick, 2012). According to Oerleman (2007) (as cited in Hardrick, 2012), "educational change is about redefining roles involving shifts in power and responsibilities between the many different actors

involved, including school administrators, teachers, parents, community, and students" (p. 1). In the following sections I offer an overview of the literature around different stakeholder groups.

**Family and Parents as Stakeholders**

Family engagement improves the educational experience, and family stakeholders' involvement in educational reform can have a powerful impact on education. According to Mitchell (2020):

> As important as family engagement is to education, families are part of a broader set of external stakeholders that make up the support network of a school community. This broader community, with locally unique social and political nuances, should be a tremendous asset to the local schools. (p. 3)

Decades of research have shown that when families are engaged in their children's education, outcomes for their children are much better (Glavey-Weiss, 2009). The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which sets the standards for family engagement that are included in federal laws, has been in existence since 1897, well over 120 years (National Parent Teacher Association, n.d.). Kansas state statute requires that each school in every district establishes a school site council composed of the principal, teachers, school personnel, parents of the students attending the school, and other community members; to provide advice and counsel regarding school performance goals and objectives; and to make recommendations regarding budget decisions. They may also make recommendations to the school board regarding identifying and implementing best practices for school management and instruction (Kansas State Department of Education, n.d.). Parents have a history of being strong advocates for change in education. Parent and community groups have caused a variety of changes and led to educational reform in schools by employing a variety of methods to achieve preferred outcomes, and parent involvement has

driven change and empowered parents to affect transformative change (Allahjah, 2012). Some examples of parent involvement were found in No Child Left Behind which pushed for testing accountability, parent choice, and parent involvement. Family support, according to Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017), can have a positive impact on student success, which can directly impact educational reform. Đurišić and Bunijevac further explain, "Increased parental involvement has been shown to result in increased student success, enhanced parent and teacher satisfaction, and improved school climate" (p. 149). While the literature is clear that parent engagement is very important, it is also clear that we need to strategically consider diversity when doing parent and family outreach. According to Brewster and Railsback (2003),

> In order to encourage and foster this comprehensive involvement with all families, school administrators and teachers must develop mutual trust, consider the different cultural attitudes some families may have towards schooling, and be diligent in reaching out. (para. 1)

It is important to ensure that families feel a sense of belonging and feel welcomed into the school buildings across America. Toldson (2022) further explained:

> Black parents' matter. Diverse perspectives are essential. Today, less than half of children in the United States under age 15 are white, yet critical race theory (CRT) opponents normalize bigotry and ignore racially and culturally diverse parents' thoughts on education. For more than a century, education has misrepresented and purposely distorted the history of Black, Indigenous and other people of color, along with the narratives of additional communities that have been marginalized. (para. 1)

We must create an opportunity to get more voices to the table that are more representative of the student population. The next section will discuss the impact that students have as stakeholders.

### Student as Stakeholders

Student voice can impact and influence learning that can change policies, programing, and educational reform. Many policy changes have come directly from student testing and outcomes. The literature review supported the idea that student voice can strengthen student engagement. Student voice and choice has become a major topic of discussion for education policy. Student perspectives are essential for school improvement. Buckley (2016) stated, "Students' perspectives allow adults to confront the dynamics of power and inequality and help create a space for young people to exercise their power" (pp. 8-9). Students can really impact educational reform movements. Students have been directly impacted by the school system leaders and their implementation of educational reform initiatives. Buckley (2016) also explained, "Clearly, there are numerous benefits to including students' perspective in educational research. As such, the use of student voice research will likely continue to increase" (p. 10). The next section will examine the impact of the school system stakeholder groups on educational reform.

## Community, Organizational, and Political Stakeholders

Educational reform stakeholders were represented by community, organizational, and political groups in the literature review. The phenomenon of education organizing to transform school communities can impact the success of education organizing (Whitman, 2014). According to Muhammad (2015), "Activism is as American as apple pie. Nearly every gain made in American society came from activism" (p. 7). This review will highlight the overall impact that community, organizational, and political stakeholder groups can have on educational reform.

**Community Groups as Stakeholders**

Community based educational reform is increasing and can play an integral part of educational reform, and community groups can influence public decisions and lead to positive educational changes. Community support can reflect a variety of needs and interests of the community which can have positive impact on educational change. Grassroot groups have influenced education reform in many communities (Castillo, 2013), and community organizing can lead to significant educational school reform movements. Stakeholders interested in forming community groups can improve education. Ultimately community groups working together to find solutions to educational problems can improve the quality of life in communities and school districts (Whitman, 2014). Castillo's (2013) study found the following:

> The process of organizing for educational change has left most of the grassroots groups with differing levels of empowerment due to their participation in the group, the group actions, and the resulted change. The relationships built, leadership that has emerged, and the action that has been taken have fostered a new sense of urgency in three of the grassroots groups who only need more time and organization to mobilize the masses of these communities. It is recommended that the School District listen to and partner with these grassroots groups because they communicate authentic needs that arise out of a deep concern that leads them to participate, speak up, and build collective agency; thus, becoming forces to be reckoned with. (p. 184)

Collaboration with the school district and community groups can lead to successful organization of educational reform. The partnership of schools and community groups can be powerful and attract attention from political leaders that many times lead educational reform efforts.

### Teachers Unions as Stakeholders

Teachers' unions are another organizational group that influences educational reform. Teachers' unions have advocated for more funding and improved public education (Moses, 2011), unions have also been involved in politics that impact educational reform (Moe, 2012). Educational policies and practices have often been a factor in educational reform. The National Education Association which is the largest teacher's union in America has been involved in educational reform efforts (Moe, 2012). Teachers' organizations have served as power supporters for change in America, and they were involved in women's suffrage, civil rights, and a variety of other movements. In summary of teacher's union support of educational reform, the literature review would support the idea that they are a key stakeholder in education reform, as many education reform initiatives are determined during political lobbying, collective bargaining, and direct support of the teacher unions.

### Political Groups as Stakeholders

The literature produced numerous examples of education reform that involved politics. According to Moses (2011), "education reform is executed at both the state and national level, which makes it difficult to institute uniform change" (p. 2). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, *A Nation at Risk*, America 2000, Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top were some of the various educational reform efforts that were discussed in the literature reviews. Educational reform was a priority with the Obama Administration, which invested money toward quality preschools to every child (Glavey-Weiss, 2009). Federal and state guidelines for school reform dominate the landscape of public education (Keaveny, 2013), and as a result, educational reform inherently involves politics. Federal, state, and local officials have

created education reforms to improve the educational system (Friel, 2012), and presidents have had a powerful impact on the educational system. According to Friel (2012):

> Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal brought about the notion of social responsibility among the American people. These social responsibilities have had a lasting impact on policies enacted on behalf of society and public education. This change became the basis for the subsequent exploration of the relationships between Roosevelt's notions of social responsibility, Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. (p. iv)

President's shape educational reform based on their experiences. Friel (2012) explained, President Johnson brought to the office experiences of teaching, politics, military service, and poverty (p. 164). It appears that educational reform has been an important political talking point. Friel (2012) explained, "President Bush had three major agenda items at the onset of his presidency: education, a ten-year tax-cut, and a foreign policy initiative" (p. 164).

Political groups and parties will continue to be involved in educational reform (Stralek, 2018). It also seems that political groups will continue to impact educational reform with the research found in the literature review. Martinez-Alvarado and Perez (2023) explained, "In 2023, more than 45 bills were introduced across state legislatures targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education" (para. 1). It is imperative for school district leaders to stay informed about decisions that will impact school districts. According to The Chronicle of Education (2024),

> *The Chronicle* is tracking legislation that would prohibit colleges from having diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or staff; ban mandatory diversity training; forbid institutions

to use diversity statements in hiring and promotion; or bar colleges from considering race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions or employment" (para. 1).

If passed in higher education, then it could eventually impact K-12 educational system.

**Internal School System Stakeholders**

The reviewed literature included findings suggesting that key educational leaders in the school system can utilize their leadership skills to successfully implement educational reform. School leaders are expected to lead change and ensure that all students get a quality education. Leadership in school districts have the charge of leading mandated change with the focus on the students that will be directly impacted due to the mandated reform. The literature reviewed showed that school leaders continue to respond and react to mandated change and school reform efforts (Wright, 2010), and school leadership can have a tremendous impact on educational reform, as well as teachers. Overall, teachers, administration, and district leader groups play a vital role in any reform efforts. The next section will review the impact of these stakeholder groups on educational reform.

**Teachers as Stakeholders**

Teachers have an opportunity to impact educational reform due to its daily impact they have on student achievement. Teacher education reform in the United States is more prevalent today than ever before, as teachers are the focus on the impact that they may potential have on students. They have influence to teach students to be informed citizens. Teachers have played a vital role in implementing change and educational reform movements. Teachers will continue to be involved in educational reform. Teachers need to be at the forefront of any reform effort and the training required to make it happen (Perez, 2018). Teachers have experienced changes in evaluation systems, curriculum, and professional development, state testing, and whole school

reform, and regardless of the reform effort teachers are one of the most important groups to consider (Klaf, 2009). School administration stakeholders was another group presented in the literature review.

**Administrators as Stakeholders**

Administrators as educational leaders are responsible for implementing educational reform from the direction of legislation (Hotmire, 2018). The ability to effectively implement federal and state mandates in a timely manner, while still meeting the needs of faculty, staff, and students, is a true test of the application of prevalent educational leadership theories (Keaveny, 2013). Building administration are important leaders in ensuring that reform efforts are implemented in buildings. Weiner-Friedman (2016) concluded, "the dramatic underachievement of students in the United States has provoked a call for the reform of public schools to improve their performance" (p. i). Furthermore, according to Scott (2023), speaking specifically on Kansas Redesign, "through the Redesign process, principals will lead a visioning process, provide leadership through change, engage stakeholders, and instill order and structure to what can be a very chaotic change environment" (p. 74). As seen here, the building leader is instrumental in the success of implementation of educational reform. Another group that plays an important role is the superintendents of schools, which I discuss in the next section.

**Superintendents as Stakeholders**

Superintendents have the task of leading school districts and ensuring that any educational reform is implemented, while also tending to the politics of the school board and what changes that come from the state legislature. According to Perez (2018):

> The complex contextual role of superintendents to serve in the implementation of these new initiatives is pivotal. If superintendents do not play an active role and

> build a coherent plan to implement the new standards and reform initiatives, districts will grapple to define best practice to provide students the skills necessary for college and career. (p. 76)

Perez (2018) also stresses how, "the literature revealed that reforms implemented at the local level, which put the right drivers in place and empower a collaborative approach, seem to effectively address the whole system change and build coherence among stakeholders" (p. 80). The next section will discuss other stakeholder groups that can impact educational reform efforts.

## Kansas Can School Redesign

The focus of this section is to review relevant literature focused on the Kansas Can School Redesign Project (KCSRP). The process of the KCSRP started in 2014 by the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE). Kansas was seeking meaningful ways to measure student success and identify an accountability system that would address the needs of the students. The Kansas State Boards of Education (KSBE) started reviewing the direction that they wanted the education system in Kansas to go in 2014. The state board, represented by 10 members, hired a new Kansas Commissioner of Education, Randy Watson. Commissioner Watson sought ways to seek input regarding the needs of Kansans. Watson (2020) stated, "In the fall of 2014, the Kansas State Board of Education charged me with gathering information from Kansans as to what they wanted in their school system" (p. 1). Commissioner Watson was seeking information regarding what Kansans wanted the state educational system to look like. Commissioner Watson, along with the members of the KSBE and Kansas Department of Education (KSDE), focused on creating a new vision for the public education system in the state of Kansas. According to Nguyen (2016), "Before the initiative began, said state board chairman Jim McNiece, 'there were many voices telling the state board and the legislators what they could and could not do, but the

voice of parents, business, and local stakeholders wasn't part of the process'" (p. 1). Commissioner Watson was determined to get input from Kansans across the state. Including all stakeholders on the tours was a strategic part of the process. According to Proctor (2020), "the vision for the KCSRP process began in the fall of 2015 with the hiring of Dr. Randy Watson as the new Kansas Commissioner of Education and his subsequent 27-city tour of Kansas" (p. 71). The tours would enlist information from over 2,000 Kansans. According to Nguyen (2016), "to kick off Kansans Can, KSDE invited 2,000 local stakeholders to give their opinions" (p. 1).

In addition, Dr. Neuenswander shared information regarding the tour and the stakeholders that were included in the process. According to Neuenswander (2020):

> The tour consisted of 20 locations across the state and included approximately 1,700 attendees broken into 287 focus groups, representing educators, parents, students, higher education officials, business leaders, community members, and public officials, including legislators. Some of these events were held during the day, while others took place in the evenings. (p. 2)

The stakeholder groups were a group of Kansans that had a variety of backgrounds. According to Proctor (2020), "state leaders, district leaders, building administrators, and teachers all shared that changing a system is hard work and requires adherence to a change process that involves all aspects of the organization" (p. 89). Seeking key stakeholders was an important factor considered during the process of identifying what Kansans wanted for the educational system. Neuenswander (2020) explained, "It was important for us to hear the voice of all stakeholders who wanted to be engaged in conversation about redefining success for students in education; we wanted to focus on the ideas of community and conversation" (p. 2).

Engaging the community was an important part of the KCSRP. According to Neuenswander (2020):

> In addition to the 20 locations where we hosted the community conversation events, it was decided to add seven additional listening events across Kansas that specifically targeted the voice and input from the business community. We felt it important to engage all voices in Kansas, including those of employers that hire our young Kansans once they leave the educational system. (p. 2)

Seeking input from voices in the community and across the state of Kansas was important in the success of KCSRP. Nguyen (2016) also described how, "Deputy Commissioner of Education Brad Neuenswander and members of the state board began conducting the focus groups in January 2015" (p. 2). Including a variety of perspectives was the plan to engage stakeholders in meaningful discussion centered around goals and plans for the education system in Kansas. Scott (2023) offered, "The degree to which the change affected stakeholders collectively and individually varied from large impact to small or no impact" (p. 1).

Under the direction of Commissioner Watson, Kansas changed the direction of education, and meeting with the stakeholders helped identify the best outcomes and needs of the students. According to KSDE (KSDE, n.d.), the board and KSDE intended to look at every requirement to determine if and how they are supporting or impeding Kansas schools' abilities to address the needs of each child. During the Community Conversations, Kansans said:

- Our children need quality pre-school, including all-day kindergarten.
- Changes need to be made to address school culture. The student who chooses to pursue a technical education or a two-year college has to be valued and supported as much as the student pursuing a four-year degree.

- Counselors and social workers need new, dynamic roles. They should be able to focus on helping individual students explore career paths and develop individual plans of study.
- Businesses should play an integral role in a student's education. Internships and job shadowing are important.
- Community service should play a larger role in education.
- School should be reorganized around the student, not systems. Equity and common sense should coexist.

Working alongside KSDE several new areas of Kansas education were being considered to improve the educational system in Kansas. Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) leaders, along with Kansas State Board of Education members, conducted more than 20 community conversations with teachers, parents, business leaders and community members across the state before setting a new vision for education (KSDE, n.d.). The community conversations led to research centered around the future of education. Watson (2020) explained:

> After months of studying the research conducted from listening tours and matching that data to current educational research, the State Board of Education launched a new vision for education in October of 2015. Just as audacious and bold as President Kennedy had proposed the moonshot in the early '60s, this new vision inspired educators, parents, business, and community leaders toward education reform in Kansas. (p. 1)

This vision was going to break the mold and change the dynamics of the educational system in Kansas.

Proctor (2020) further explained how, "this concept of breaking the mold of public education in Kansas eventually led to the development a vision for redesigning public education in Kansas" (p. 72). The Kansas vision was a collaborative effort from the results of the tours, and

the feedback was compiled along with data from the community tour to ensure that all voices were heard. The vision from KSDE states, *Kansas will lead the world in the success of each student*, and the vision was centered on Kansas students being successful after they graduated from high school. The information gathered that would determine a successful student included academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability, and civic engagement. As stated by Proctor (2020), "whether it was state Redesign leaders or local administrators and teachers, study participants shared the belief that there is an excitement and energy around the KCSRP" (p. 84). The new vision and direction for the educational system would look at other ways to determine student success. As mentioned by Proctor (2020), "In a deliberate attempt to counter the reform efforts that almost exclusively emphasized academic accountability through state standards and assessments, the KSBE developed a new set of criteria to determine the success of schools in the state" (p. 15). The outcomes for measuring progress were social-emotional growth, high school graduation, kindergarten readiness, postsecondary success, and individual plan of study.

**Dear Administrators,**

My journey being an administrator for a Redesign school allowed me to see firsthand the implementation of the Redesign process. The journey started with having community and parent meetings. It seemed that majority of the information was based on giving an overview of the things that we would be doing at the school that was new. Some of the highlights discussed were interest-based groups and presenting *Summit Learning* platform. Attending district meetings and board meetings to give updates were all part of the process. The big trip included a weeklong staff training to learn about the *Summit Learning* platform. The process started with prework to

be completed prior to leaving for the training. The administrators were sent information about leading the change management process.

The assistant superintendent was part of the process and was the district leader. There was communication between the leadership and summit learning during the entire process. The commitment included four core classes in ELA, Math, History, and Science. The professional development was to ensure teachers were prepared for the implementation of the launch. It was a big team building session, and I was a new administrator and didn't know the staff. When I entered the room, it was expected that I would be one of the only minorities in the room. The training included breakout sessions for both administrators and teachers. Teachers were presented information over the different components of the *Summit Learning* platform. They presented information over small group, whole group, and individualized approach. This was our emphasis in the redesign process, but were we being intentional about who we were engaging? And how? Did we take any steps to ensure we were hearing from all stakeholder groups?

## An Overview of Kansans Can School Redesign Process

### Results of the Tours

The launch of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project was to move towards a more student focused educational system. The Kansas Department of Education wanted systemic change to improve the education system in Kansas, and the feedback from the tours was centered on what Kansans wanted from their schools and the expectations from the state's 24-year-olds that were products of the Kansas school system. According to Neuenswander (2020) the tour consisted of 20 locations. The tours included a variety of stakeholders and had 287 focus groups. The tours stakeholders were teachers, administrators, superintendents, parents, students, public officials, paras, legislators, and business leaders. Outcomes were established about what Kansans

wanted for the Kansas education system and what they viewed as successful high school graduates. The outcomes from the Kansans tours are listed below (KSDE, n.d.):

- Kansas children need quality preschool including all day kindergarten
- Changes need to be made to address school culture
- New dynamic roles for counselor and social workers
- Collaboration between schools and businesses
- Reorganize schools around students around students, not the system
- Community service needs to play a bigger role.

**Application Process**

Dr. Watson challenged school districts to apply to become a part of the Redesign project. School districts that applied would be known as the Mercury 7 Project. According to the KSDE website,

> In support of Kansas' vision for education, Kansas leads the world in the success of each student, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) launched the Kansans Can School Redesign Project and invited every school district in Kansas to apply for the first round, called Mercury 7. (para. 1)

Mercury 7 districts that decided to apply had to select one elementary school and one secondary school to participate. They had to be committed to the five outcomes established by KSDE. The five outcomes listed below were established to define successful Kansas high school graduates. The districts must have had support from their local school board, school faculty, and local Kansas National Education Association (KNEA). Once a school district decided they wanted to join the Kansans Can School Redesign movement. The school districts had to have specific plans for the application process. A total of 29 school districts initially applied to become part of the

Mercury 7 Project. The school district had to develop a vision, set goals, and develop action steps for each school that will participate. A team also had to be selected to participate in the implementation process. No specific ways for reaching the criteria were provided for Mercury 7 school districts. According to (Mulligan, 2012):

> The main requirement of being Mercury 7 school was to focus on the following four pillars within their Redesign plan that would eventually be presented and approved by the state board of education (a) student success skills, (b) community partnerships, (c) personalized learning, and (d) real-world application (KSDE, 2019). KSDE believes each of these pillars will lead to the reform of Kansas schools and the success of students. (p. 21)

Although no specific criteria were given for the selection process, the state board of education focused on five key outcomes to measure the progress of Redesigning schools. The following list was found on the Kansas Department of education website (KSDE, n.d.),

- Social-Emotional growth, ensuring all children enter kindergarten at age 5
- providing each student with individual plan of study (IPS)
- increasing high school graduation rates to 95 percent
- making sure students are civically engaged by the time they leave high school, and
- increasing the percentage of high school graduates who earn postsecondary degrees and certificates from 44 percent to 71 percent.

**Dear Mama,**

When I was a child, I never imagined that my life story would become part of my dissertation. The life experiences I faced have some similarities to the school Redesign process. As you read this you will see how I was able to relate my personal experiences to the Redesign

process. I realized why I like the potential of the Redesign effort the more I was able to relate to my personal lived experiences. I recognize the value in education that you had passed on from generation to generation. I remember you writing letters to schools to get my brothers admitted, opening new doors and opportunities. Now I look back at this stage of my life and I can finally say thank you for believing in us and ensuring that we got the opportunity to strive for greatness. I was able to see educators at all levels that looked like me, and I truly believe this gave me hope that one day I could become an educational leader. I was inspired by former African American leaders that I saw growing up, like my former neighbor and elementary school principal, my former high school principal, my former basketball coach, and my former Memphis City Schools superintendent.

*Kindergarten Readiness*

Looking at the kindergarten readiness focus in the state of Kansas I am truly thankful for my lived experience. My life was influenced by a lot of factors, but I soon realized the impact of education. Education was a vital part of my childhood. My public-school education started by attending Douglass Growers Pre-School in Memphis, Tennessee. I remember wearing my white robe and hat at the pre-school graduation. I never imagined that I would be starting a journey that would eventually lead to me becoming a doctoral student at Kansas State University. My mother ensured that I had a solid foundation for future academic success. I remember my mother ensured that I had all my immunizations records up to date and had my birth certificate.

The transition plan for preparing for kindergarten started before I set foot in my first classroom. My mother ensured that I attended the necessary events prior to school and took me back to school shopping for my school supplies. I recall reviewing the expectations for me when I would start school. As I reflect on all that my mother did to prepare me for kindergarten it's like she

read KSDE recommendations for kindergarten readiness. I was blessed to have music cd's for learning the alphabet and educational games. We took many trips to the library and participated in the summer reading programs and attended the free summer educational camps. I loved the times that my mother would read books. We had daily routines that helped me be prepared for school. This included having time to get up in the morning, bedtime, regularly scheduled meals, outdoor activities, and the opportunity to have plenty of enrichment opportunities. The times that I watched television included educational shows sesame street, reading rainbow, and one of my favorite shows, Mr. Roger's Neighborhood! I also remember life skills being taught about the importance of learning my home address and home telephone numbers.

*Social-emotional growth*

The journey to kindergarten was exciting. I attended Treadwell Elementary school, home of the Eagles in Memphis, Tennessee. I enjoyed kindergarten so much that I have vivid memories of creative play, naptime, storytelling, and just a tremendous love of the classroom. Everything was going great until I realized the importance of social emotional support at schools. Imagine reflecting on the great things that your mother and family did raising you and suddenly realizing that she couldn't prepare you for the day you would find out one of your teachers would be leaving. The day is the best I could describe it. My kindergarten teacher was sitting on a chair in the front of the room. My classmates were all sitting and focused on the teacher, and then my teacher announced that she would not be returning due to a family emergency. My heart was crushed. I understand how real traumatic experiences can impact your life. I now reflect on seeing the school guidance counselor in the room as students began to cry and emotionally upset. I reflect on my experiences and realize the importance of the support that I had at home and school.

The 2nd grade social emotional meltdown. I recall wanting to do well in school and striving to get on the honor roll, but I had a teacher that didn't believe in me. She humiliated me in front of the entire class simply because I told my mother that I wanted to make all A's and Bs. My mother must have written her letter expressing my desires. She asked me if I knew where my mother worked. I politely told her no, and she called on a student named Adam and said do you know where your mother works? The student said yes. She turned to me and said that "kids on the honor roll know where their mother works". Being in education for almost 20 years I still don't see how that correlated to anything about grades. I did ask my mother where she worked that night, but the trauma it caused me I didn't have the courage to tell her. My mother worked for the Internal Revenue Service for many years. Such a sad thought about how much emotional damage a teacher can do to innocent young children.

When I was in 6th grade one of my all-time favorite teachers and children's church workers broke my heart. She announced that her husband received a new job and that she would be leaving in the middle of the school year. To make matters worse she was replaced by what my classmates would call the meanest sub around. Well now being an administrator, I wish I could hire her. Many people don't realize the impact that these events have on a child. I look back and realize how much it impacted my life, and the power of such a positive environment.

The love of a mother is something extremely special. As I reflect on one of the saddest and proudest moments in my life was watching my mother care for her mother. Many people may not understand the trauma that students experience outside of school. The journey of waking up each morning eating breakfast and going to school each day. I maintained my composure of worry and thoughts of how my grandmother was doing. How do you focus on learning ELA and Math when none of that matter at all when one of the most influential people in your life is in the

hospital? After school was over, I remembered getting picked up and going home to eat dinner. Then my brother and I would wait until my mother got home. We knew that we had to complete our homework and be ready to go to the hospital. The ride seemed like a lifetime. Driving and listening to *I Remember Mama* song by Shirley Caesar tape was the routine. I memorized the hospital code to the parking lot and loved stopping by the hospital shop for candy. I reflected on this and felt that my mother ensured that we had something to make us smile. Visiting my grandmother and trying to help her as much as possible was the highlight of the day. Seeing my grandmother smile and knowing that my mother was happy on the days that she was doing well. This is something that is very important to understanding how important being socially and emotionally regulated can have on the success of students, and it influences my motivations to ensure that all students feel that sense of belonging, as well.

*Individual Plan of Study*

How can families support the individual plans of study (IPS) for young people? This is an important thing to reflect on and consider. Early in my education I struggled with speaking. My first grade teacher worked with and provided extra support to ensure that I would stay on track. I attended a after school program that provided me extra support. I remember spending time with the speech teacher. The struggles that I encountered included my mother purchasing Hooked on Phonics to ensure that I had the necessary tools to be successful as I was entering kindergarten. I see how powerful a student IPS could be with a collaborative approach with the school officials and family members.

When in high school I was able to select a path to prepare me for college, and this included having the opportunity to have dual enrollment for college courses. The option to have dual enrollment was a great experience. The teacher was extremely passionate about education

and business. At that time, I was interested in business and was able to start learning about it. This was helpful, but my mother also played a vital role in ensuring that I was prepared for the workforce. She introduced me to the *Beautillion Militaire* that selected African American young men from Memphis to participate in a program that matched us with career interest mentors. We work on a variety of skills that prepared us for college and career paths, which included trips to the mayor's office. Ironically, it was Mayor Dr. Willie Herenton, and he was a former teacher turned superintendent of Memphis City Schools. This is a very important fact that will connect us to a later story about minority leaders.

*Civic Engagement*

Growing up in a household that focused on having a solid foundation centered around Jesus Christ, I found myself in church, a lot. This would include attending Children's Church, Sunday School, Tuesday Night Fasting, and Saturday Youth Group. In the Black church in the South, we got the opportunity to see local, state, and even national leaders attend service to talk about the importance of voting. I will never forget the opportunity to see Vice President Al Gore. This was because of my family values, and due to my family involvement in the church that I learned the importance of voting and volunteering. My first experience included helping a local leader run for district judge, and during school I learned about the structure of government. I was able to understand history and the impact it had on the world from school and family members. With the growing controversy of critical race theory, I am thankful that I had a family that taught me about the Civil Rights Movement. This wasn't just about things you read in books, but it was about the history of my own family. I was blessed to have a family that participated in marches and protests for equality. My great grandfather was one of the first to crack voting barriers in Fayette County, Tennessee.

*Academically prepared for postsecondary*

While in high school taking those dual credit hours, it really helped me get a good start on determining if I wanted to go to college. I have many family members that worked at Fed Ex, and they had some good jobs with career advancements that didn't require them to continue getting master's degrees. My Godmother, Crystal Oliver, is also a vice president at Fed Ex, and at the time of graduation she was the managing director. This is where a lot of people looked for employment in Memphis. Having those classes gave me motivation and confidence that I could be successful at a college. Having a family that is supportive and help review essays were another aspect that helped me be academically prepared for postsecondary. I am thankful even to this day for having an Uncle that is willing to look over and edit my papers when needed. While it was helpful, the university that I attended for junior college my freshman year also had a great program to help me with the transition. Another key component is having good school counselors, and I can say that one of my school counselors really helped to ensure that we were on top of things and helped in any way. However, I did have one that, let's just say, I didn't really feel that she felt that I would do well at all.

*High School graduation*

My journey in high school was unique. I attended both Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools. I attended Kirby High School, Germantown High School, and eventually graduated from Treadwell High School. Attending three high schools allowed me to see school budgets and resources were extremely different depending on the neighborhood that you lived in. Some of the things I noticed there were different textbook adoptions, facilities, class options, furniture, having hot water to wash hands, and racial and socioeconomic segregation. From my current vantage point, I can see that these inequities were tied to imbalanced political

power and broken local school funding models. I do feel that one thing that school funding couldn't replace in my education was replacing some of the finest teachers and the sense of belonging I felt at Treadwell High School.

At Kirby High School I was able to join Future Farmers of America and enjoyed learning about greenhouses, which was a unique experience living in the inner city. It was something that I had a passion for and connected with things I did at home. At the time I had a lawncare business that consisted of multiple yards around Memphis. My family had a passion for gardening, lawncare, and farming. This connection was something that I felt really engaged me in learning, and besides sports this was something that really engaged me in learning.

The next opportunity that I had was applying to enter Germantown High School to get into the broadcasting program. This school was in the suburbs and had a state-of-the-art broadcasting station, and it was a great opportunity to learn about other interests that I had at the time. I was eventually approved and accepted to attend the school starting my 11th grade school year. The classes that I had were good and the school had a lot of great things. At the end of the day things that lead to me leaving ultimately was not feeling a sense of belonging. I couldn't connect with any of the staff or truly get acclimated to the adjustment of transferring to a school that wasn't as diverse in the staffing or student population.

After a conversation with my family, I was allowed to transfer to where my grade school education started. I was able to go back to Treadwell. This was a school that had administration, teachers, school resource officers, counselors, and staffing that were very diverse. It was a wonderful experience when you felt those connections with the teachers and staff. I was able to be involved in multiple extracurricular activities such as Distributive Education Clubs of

America (DECA) and multiple sports opportunities. This is my story of how important some things were that kept me engaged and connected to school.

*Postsecondary success*

Reflecting on my entire life, I realize that my lived experiences prepared me for this point. I feel as if I am holding a mirror and looking into a mirror at the same time. If you can imagine it seems like a never-ending reflection of yourself. I see Brandon in a white robe and hat at Douglas Grower preschool graduation. I remember the performance and graduating from the first graduating class at Southwind Middle School. Graduating from Treadwell High School was a proud moment for me. I had multiple family members that graduated from Treadwell. It is hard to imagine that I would become the Senior Class President for Kansas Wesleyan University. A defining moment in my life was when I realized that I had to decide to drive to Kansas State once a week to take a class to graduate on time. Special arrangements were made so I could take one class that I was missing to student teach. The decision was to just graduate with teaching degree or travel to take the class. This was a big decision because at this time I didn't know much about Kansas State and had finally adjusted to Kansas Wesleyan.

I decided that I would try the class and see if I could do it. This was life changing because I walked into class and saw my first and only African American professor that I had during college. It was like I finally saw someone that could relate to me and took the time to mentor me in one semester, and I was grateful that I had gotten to visit with him over the years. From that journey I have been blessed to continue my education at another purple school. I eventually obtained my master's degree from Kansas State University. I realize that my entire life shaped me to get to this point of becoming a doctoral student. Academically, I see how the vision of Kansans Can Redesign Project could extremely positively impact on a student's life. Proper

implementation will ensure that a student will be a successful citizen in this world, but I also became increasingly aware that my movement across predominantly White and predominantly Black learning environments shaped how I understood the power of representation. In other words, how can we ensure that we're connecting with a diverse group of stakeholders when we engage in reform? How can we make sure our students find the same sense of belonging and engagement with people who look and act like them, so they can more likely succeed?

**Mercury 7 Selection**

In August of 2017, the Mercury seven school districts were selected to participate in the Kansans Can School Redesign project. Each district had to present their plans for Redesign with the Kansas State Board of Education. The seven districts selected were Wellington USD 353, Coffeyville USD 445, Liberal USD 480, Stockton USD 271, McPherson USD 418, Twin Valley USD 240, and Olathe USD 233. Each district presented a plan to the Kansas State board of education. The plans included the vision and goals established for each of the schools. None of the school's vision statements had a direct connection to diversity. Each district school's plans were approved and given permission to launch the plans for Redesign. Kansas State University did some brief documentaries about the mercury seven school. It seemed to be no discussion centered around diversity in the Redesign. Reviewing the vision of the selected school in the Mercury Seven district seemed to not include specific guidelines centered on diversity.

## Kansans Can Literature: Summarizing a Special Issue

This section is dedicated to the Kansans Can 2020 special issue of *Educational Considerations (Vol 46,* No. 2) which was focused entirely on Kansas' efforts in education. Each article in this issue is summarized below highlights various points and perspectives around the redesign movement. It is interesting to see the different perspectives of the Kansans Can

Redesign movement, however, upon reading the special issue one things becomes clear: None of the articles highlight diversity, equity, or inclusion as a point of focus.

### *Kansans Can: Redesigning Education in Kansas Kansans Can: Redesigning Education in Kansas*

As Watson (2020) explains in the introduction to the issue, "in the fall of 2014, the Kansas State Board of Education charged me with gathering information from Kansans as to what they wanted in their school system" (p. 1). He also explains how the state board determined to have the initial phase of the school Redesign named after the space program presented by President Kennedy in 1962 at Rice University. This was referring to the Americans' travel to the moon and back to the earth.

> We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win. – John F. Kennedy

Watson (2020) explained, "Just as audacious and bold as President Kennedy had proposed the moonshot in the early '60s, this new vision inspired educators, parents, business and community leaders toward education reform in Kansas" (p. 2). The stakeholders wanted to see change in the Kansas education system. Watson (2020) further explained how, "this vision had clear metrics for success – Lead the World. Those metrics were all focused on a single point of obtainment – the Success of Each Student. The vision was clear, difficult to achieve, compelling and viewed attainable by 2026" (p. 1). Below, I'll explore how others in Kansas viewed this initiative and how this vision has impacted school districts all over the state of Kansas.

***What Does a Successful 24 Year Old Look Like?: Reflections from the State Board of Education***

The Kansas State Board of Education focused on having Kansas lead the world in the success of the students. They wanted to change the approach of reaching each student. According to Porter (2020), "for many decades we have attempted to fit the student into the system, and many students have been successful. However, many have not" (p. 1). The focus shifted to having a system built around the students, and the state of Kansas was focused on determining an educational plan to reach each student. The article focused on how many students become disengaged in the educational system when they see how the required classes are relevant to life and career interests. Porter (2020) described how:

> The Kansas State Board of Education is responsible for each Kansas public school student. Right now, about 14 of every 100 incoming high school freshmen do not graduate. In addition, there are students who do graduate who are not prepared for the next step in their lives. This is not acceptable, and we cannot expect different results by following the same path. (p. 1)

The outcome would be to focus on the state of Kansas developing Individual Plans of Study for students based on engaging the student. According to Porter (2020):

> By developing Individual Plans of Study based on student interests, abilities, and passions and by developing plans based on what is important to each student we expect to not only improve the graduation statistics but also, and more importantly, engage all students so that they have a much better chance of leading a fulfilling life. (p. 1)

The goal is to have successful 24 year old that can have success their entire life.

### *Kansans Can: Redesigning Schools*

Kansas wanted to develop an educational system that would improve student success and the state board consisted of 10 members that set the educational priorities for the Kansas public education system. Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) held strategic planning retreats every two years after elections of the new board members. According to Neuenswander (2020), after the hiring of a new Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson, a decision was made take tours of Kansas communities, seeking input regarding what Kansans want and value in their public education system. After restating much about the listening tours mentioned in previous sections, Neuenswander (2020) adds, "as Randy and I continued our travels across Kansas, we heard loud and clear that the state accountability system used for accrediting schools was out-of-balance with our priorities" (p. 84). Kansans wanted an approach that included other measures of student success rather than depending on test and assessment scores, and the new approach will engage stakeholders and help recognize students as individuals. The new system focused on increasing student engagement, have more project-based learning, high quality pre-k programs, and innovative school partnerships. Neuenswander (2020) emphasized:

> I am excited for the future of education in Kansas and honored to have been a part of this incredible journey. It is difficult to describe exactly what the future will look like for education, but I commit to ensuring we continue to push forward. The recommendations from the Committee of Ten were revolutionary more than a century ago, but they no longer align with the needs of our schools, our communities, and the life experiences of our students as they enter adulthood. (p. 149)

### *Leadership During Change*

The Kansas Education System didn't see much change over recent years. According to Miller (2020):

> The national education system, similar to the Kansas education system, has seen little change since the 1800s (Throckmorton, 1967). In fact, over 50 years later, there have been few changes. Children come to school around the age of five to enter kindergarten and then move through the current system by age and grade level. These children sit in rows, are addressed by the expert teacher, are given information, and are expected to memorize and regurgitate the material in a standardized testing process. (p. 2)

The current system has caused issues for creating a positive learning environment. Leadership is an important factor in making a difference in the educational system. A survey was developed to gather input from school leaders across Kansas to help lead school improvement efforts. Miller (2020) futher explained:

> The survey contained 16 questions. First, three demographic questions were asked so that data could be disaggregated by school/district leader perceptions, level of engagement in the Kansans Can Redesign project, and the number of buildings and students at particular levels (elementary, middle, and high school). The remaining questions included a range scale (large, some, or little to indicate their level of activity) or yes/no and provided opportunities for open-ended responses. (p. 8)

The outcome revealed that strong leadership is an important factor of success in schools. Miller stated, "Commissioner Watson and Deputy Commissioner Neuenswander set out across Kansas to gather information across 84,000 square miles" (p. 2). The new strategic plan wanted

stakeholders to think engage differently about the future vision of education for Kansas (Miller, 2020).

Miller (2020) expanded:

> Information was solicited from community members representing not only the school personnel and parents, but also economic, business and industry interests, with a focus on preparing children for the future of Kansas. In total, 20 community conversations and seven Chamber of Commerce focus groups were held throughout Kansas including well over 2,000 individual participants involved in the discussions. Specifically, over 100 people participated in the business and industry focus groups. (p. 3)

An electronic survey gathered another 100 responses, which accounted for 287 focus groups, with members of many backgrounds, positions, and political parties, as well as business and community leaders (Neuenswander, 2018). Events were held both during the day and in the evening, and responses were gathered and analyzed from each of the community conversations, and all data sets were compared for consistency (Neuenswander, 2018). Finally, the 2015 Kansas community conversation and future strategic planning by the Kansas State Board of Education led to a new project effort: Kansans Can, Redesign (KSDE, n.d.). The new strategic plan intended to encourage stakeholders to think differently about Kansas education and lead to the vision for Kansas to lead the world in the success of each student (KSDE, n.d.). The State Board measurable outcomes focused on five key areas: academic preparation, content preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement (KSDE, n.d.).

### *Redesign: A Case Study of Change in a Kansas School District*

According to Van Ranken & Goodson (2020), “for decades, the nation—including educators, community members, and scholars—have been grappling with the idea of school

reform" (p. 2). The state of Kansas had 29 applications from districts across Kansas apply for the initial cohort named Mercury 7. Kansas was seeking changes in the educational system. According to Van Ranken & Goodson (2020):

> Kansas Education Commissioner Randy Watson and the Kansas State Department of Education determined the time was right for change in the state's education system. The path toward that change was unveiled as the Kansas Can School Redesign Project, an ongoing program that would involve multiple cohorts of districts developing their own pathways toward improvement. Each round of selected districts was named after the U.S. space program: Mercury 7, followed by Gemini I, Gemini II, and, finally, Apollo. (p. 2)

This article focused on the Kansas Can Redesign according to the perspectives of a district superintendent. Various entities have developed a variety of policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to its most recent version, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Schneider & Keesler, 2007) and debated the value of accountability and assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2004). An important thing that came from this was that districts are searching for change. USD 240 Redesign included communication with a variety of stakeholders. Some of the ones listed in the article included administration, teachers, parents, and site council members. The outcome was that the Redesign included ongoing adjustments and improving stakeholder partnerships.

***Our Moonshot: Dighton Public Schools***

Dighton Public Schools embarked on a journey of school Redesign. According to Amberger (2020):

> Through Redesign you have the opportunity do whatever you choose to do to make your school reflect the needs and desires of your community. I believe our public-school

> teachers can do the great things we keep hearing private and charter schools do if we would just let them. (p. 2)

The Dighton Redesign story included challenges, but they focused on continuing to persevere.

### *School and Community Relations in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project*

Schools and communities play an important role in Kansans Can Redesign. According to Mitchell (2020), "since July of 2017, approximately 72 Kansas school districts and approximately 183 schools have volunteered to Redesign their schools around four Redesign principles as part of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project" (p. 2). Kansans Can School Redesign Project has sparked interest from school districts across the state of Kansas. An important part of the school Redesign was engaging stakeholders by developing a shared vision for redesigning the school. Mitchell (2020) discussed:

> Many of the earliest launch schools proved to be very successful in engaging stakeholders to collect authentic feedback early in the process. However, even with these attempts, some school districts were surprised by pushback from stakeholders early in the implementation phase of the Redesign. (p. 2)

Stakeholder engagement is an important part of the Redesign process. According to Mallon (2004, as cited in Mitchell, 2020), "the fields of education, child welfare, child psychology, and social work have created decades of research on the importance of family and community engagement" (p. 1). Mitchell (2020) expanded:

> For schools in Kansas, engaging families in decision-making is not a choice; it is required by law. Section 1118 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal law for Title I funding, views parent involvement as participation of parents in regular, two-way,

and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring:

- That parents play an integral role in assisting their child's learning;
- That parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school;
- That parents are full partners in their child's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision making on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (Kansas State Department of Education, 2019; Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 1965). (pp. 2-3)

Kansas state statute also requires that each school has a site council that includes stakeholders. The Kansas Redesign showed that engagement of families and communities was extremely important in process. Some of the key points were community engagement, communication, and relationships. The article highlighted two districts' methods to reach families and stakeholders.

***Redesign Resiliency: Kansas Secondary Redesign Schools Navigating COVID-19***

During the process of school Redesign in Kansas a national pandemic temporarily closed school buildings. Scott (2020) stated:

> This announcement came from Governor Laura Kelly on March 17th, 2020, in response to the spread of COVID-19. As soon as those words came out of Governor Kelly's mouth, you could nearly hear the collective gasp of every person across the state, most especially educators, students, and families. This executive order made Kansas the first state in the nation to close school buildings until the end of the school year. It was a drastic, courageous, and controversial decision made by Governor Kelly, via close consultation with the Kansas Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson. (p. 2)

During the pandemic and closing of schools across the state of Kansas secondary schools faced a variety of challenges. Schools had to adapt to the challenges of rethinking educating students and developing an effective way to deliver instruction. According to Scott (2020):

> In conclusion, the secondary redesign schools responded as well as can be expected to the greatest adaptive challenge in education in most people's lifetimes. Staff and students modeled resiliency in the face of what seemed like insurmountable odds at the beginning of this challenge, and that resiliency, developed earlier through the redesign process, carried them through the remainder of the school year. Students in secondary redesign schools showed high levels of self-directed learning and engagement, due to the paradigm shift from an adult-centered to a student-centered environment where students had more voice and choice at the system and classroom level before the pandemic caused schools to close. (p. 6)

Many of the redesign schools were able to connect the challenges faced during the pandemic with implementation of school redesign. According to Scott (2020),

> Redesign schools were able to use design thinking to respond to a rapid, highly adaptive, and forced change. Using the lessons learned from school redesign, secondary schools were able to accomplish what some thought impossible; keeping students engaged and learning without stepping inside of the school. (p. 6).

***Individual Personalized Learning (IPS)***

This article was centered on personalized learning and the impact that it can have on students. According to Hughey (2020):

> Personalized learning is designed to address the disengagement of today's students and to be proactive in closing the growing achievement gaps occurring in far too many schools.

> The goal of personalized learning is to engage students in the process, building on their interests, aptitudes, and strengths, thus creating intrinsic motivation for achievement and success. Students feel empowered when involved in goal-setting and decision-making processes. (p. 2)

Personalized learning can reach the diverse needs of students. Personalized learning can address many needs that school's face each year. Hughey (2020) further discussed:

> The creation of an individual personalized learning environment, including micro-credentials, could occur with P-12 student in a traditional or alternative educational setting or in professional development for educators or other professionals. Personalized learning initiatives can be formed to fit the needs of the participants and aligning with the systems and structures to pursue the personalization and credential that best fits the need. The benefits of individual personalized instruction support needed learning opportunities that will accommodate the learner's personal and professional life. (p. 8)

Individual personalized learning is structured to support the learner's needs. This article focused and gave reflections from the participants IPS.

***Re-licensure Kansans Can: Redesign Professional Learning and Re-licensure***

Professional learning is an important part of education. Educators engage in a variety of professional learning provided by school districts, and many participate voluntarily to learn more. Many educators participate in professional learning to fulfil re-licensure requirements. According to Erickson (2020):

> The vision of Kansans Can is leading the world in the success of each student. How can Kansas lead the world in the success of each student? Kansas can lead the world in success of each student by first leading the world in the success of each educator. How

> can Kansas lead the world in the success of each educator? Kansas could do so via a new brand of teacher-led learning and re-licensure—micro-credentials. (p. 11)

Kansas needed to consider other ways to obtain re-licensure. At the core of the Kansans Can vision is the challenge for Kansas educators, administrators, policymakers, and citizens, in general, to rethink how our schools operate, analyzing every requirement to determine if it is a support or impediment to our schools' ability to address the needs of each student (Kansans State Department of Education, 2019). This is a challenge that Kansas educators face as well. Kansas needs to identify ways for educators to have success by having micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are the idea to develop Individual Plan of Study for educators. According to Erickson (2020):

> In the end, it is clear that personalized learning is more than a fad and cannot be stereotyped as something millennial educators do. It can serve as an impetus for a meaningful learning experience that can enhance one's sense of efficacy, become a pathway to re-licensure, and, most significantly, impact educators on a personal level, transforming their professional identities and/or bringing them closer as a team that trusts, respects, and believes in their collective ability to serve students. (p. 13)

***Case Study: Career Pathways in Rural Kansas Redesign Schools Case Study: Career Pathways in Rural Kansas Redesign Schools***

This article centered on the approach that rural secondary schools were utilizing to prepare students for post-secondary success. According to Herbst (2020), "rural school districts do face unique challenges when rising to the challenge to integrate academics with career and technical education" (p. 6). This study focused on the specific challenges that they faced in rural Kansas. Some of the challenges were tied to resources and a variety of other areas that need to be

overcome. The conclusions of this study showed economic stability depended on the students being able to being equipped with both academic and non-academic skills.

### *Post-pandemic to Post-secondary Success*

The KASB conducted a research project to determine how well Kansans were feeling about public schools. The outcome came back that it was an over emphasis on testing. According to Heim (2020):

> For context, we must go back three decades, to the early 1990's. Education policy in the early 1990's can be summarized through a 1992 law called *The School District Finance and Quality Performance Accreditation Act*. The law codified two changes to education policy that have affected school district governance and operation until this day. (p. 2)

Many changes have happened over the years regarding school governance. QPA allowed local school boards to set goals for student improvement. School and district leaders focused performance goals for the student. Heim (2020) provided more information, "Commissioner Randy Watson toured the state, talking with business leaders, teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members" (pp. 1-2). Kansas State Board of Education and Commissioner Watson focused on identifying the direction that would go for measuring the student in Kansas.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a topic that has started to spark controversy in public education in the United States. Wagner (2021) stated:

> Education is one of the key pillars of society. It feeds the younger generation with knowledge to prepare them for the roles in society in the future. The goal of education in the United States is to enable all children to achieve their highest potential as individuals. It is therefore a key area of focus for Critical Race Theory, which looks at the intersection

> of race and education. Critical Race Theory is helpful in understanding inequities in education. It dissects some of the legal victories that are most cherished, and other reform movements in education, including multiculturalism, in the civil rights era. (p. 37)

CRT included many principal figures that have influenced the movement. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017):

> The late Derrick Bell, formerly at Harvard Law School but serving as visiting professor of law at New York University when he died in 2011, became the movement's intellectual father figure. Most famous for his interest-convergence thesis, Bell authored many of CRT's foundational texts. Alan Freeman, who taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo Law School, wrote a number of leading articles, including one that documented how the U.S. Supreme Court's race jurisprudence, even when seemingly liberal in thrust, nevertheless legitimized racism. (pp. 6-7)

The contributions of all these scholars have impacted the way that people have viewed the world and social structure.

According to Muhammad (2015), "Critical race theory (CRT) emerges in the 1970's when a group of legal and academic scholars came together to study the subtle nuances of the problems associated with race and equality in the United States" (p. 19). It started in the field of law with activist and scholars started studying about race, racism, and power. According to Cobb (2017), "while critical race theory started as a legal movement, its application to the field of education is evident because public education is a direct by-product of laws enacted by politicians" (p. XXVIII). State legislatures make laws that focus on education, and CRT can examine the racial implications of those laws. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) also pointed out that

> Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Cheryl Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams were major early figures, as well… The movement [also]counts a number of fellow travelers and writers who are white, notably André Cummings, Nancy Levit, Tom Ross, Jean Stefancic, and Stephanie Wildman. (pp. 6-7)

CRT is a movement that seeks to find the relationship with race, racism, and power. More information regarding CRT came from Tate (1997):

> CRT recognizes that racism is endemic in U.S. society, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically. Thus, the question for the education scholar employing CRT is not so much whether or how racial discrimination can be eradicated while maintaining the vitality of other interests linked to the status quo such as federalism, traditional values, standards, established property interests, and choice. Rather, the new question would ask how these traditional interests and cultural artifacts serve as vehicles to limit and bind the educational opportunities of students of color. (p. 234)

Students of color's educational barriers is also an area that CRT can examine. Wagner (2021) explained:

> The majority of Americans are still unaware of what Critical Race Theory is. When this topic is brought up, one of two perspectives usually comes to mind, depending on one's knowledge and understanding of the subject. First, Critical Race Theory is a way for us to understand how racism could potentially be shaping public policies in America. Second, Critical Race Theory encourages people of color to hate White people. These are very different viewpoints, revolving around the same topic. (p. 6)

These views have caused a lot of misunderstandings surrounding CRT. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017), "the critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 3). The work focused on relationship between race, racism, and power. CRT raised questions surrounding equality and principles of constitutional law, as described by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), "Critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (p. 3).

The early origins of CRT started in the 1970s at Harvard Law School. CRT was formed from critical legal studies and radical feminism. At that time lawyers, activists and legal scholars were focused on the stalled civil rights era. Many writers began to focus their attention on confronting racism. Some of the notable writers were Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado. The late Derrick Bell was known as the intellectual father of CRT. He was the author of many of the foundational texts. In the summer of 1989, they held a workshop in Madison, Wisconsin. The workshop focused on identifying internal problems and struggles around central issues. The birth of CRT movement was in legal studies, and now there are many spin-off movements that have come from CRT. Many scholars in education use CRT to understand issues schools face. Political scientists, sociologists, women's studies professors, theologians, and health care specialists have used critical theory and its foundation. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017):

> Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to

> ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better. (p. 8)

CRT has three basic tenets and multiple themes provide a foundation for CRT. I will examine the ones listed by authors Delgado & Stefancic (2017). The first tenet is the notion that racism is ordinary not aberrational. Delgado & Stefancic, (2017) further explained:

> First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational-"normal science," the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country. Second, most would agree that our system of White-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group. The first feature, ordinariness, means that racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged. (p. 8)

The first tenet focused on the conception of equality. Some of the points made were centered around some of the discrimination practices in the world. Some of the most blatant examples given were mortgage redlining, hiring practices, and immigration dragnet. Racism is hard to address due to it not being acknowledged. According to Ladson-Billings (2021), "The first tenet of CRT is the notion that racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly. Rather, to a CRT scholar racism is the normal order of things in US society" (p. 42). The second tenet is the idea of interest convergence. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017):

> The second feature, sometimes called "interest convergence" or material determinism, adds a further dimension. Because racism advances the interests of both White elites (materially) and working-class Whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. Consider, for example, Derrick Bell's shocking proposal that Brown v. Board of Education—considered a great triumph of civil rights litigation—may

> have resulted more from the self-interest of elite Whites than from a desire to help blacks. (p. 9)

This tenet suggests that the world is centered around the status quo. There has been a belief that the world has been centered around the majority group. The second tenet focused on acknowledging that we have oppressed minority groups in the world. Interest convergence argued that Whites would support progress if there was something in it for them. The third tenet was the social construction of race. According to Delgado & Stefancic, (2017),

> A third theme of critical race theory, the "social construction" thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. (p. 9)

The third tenet gives the idea that race has been socially constructed. Society has decided to create races regardless of science. Society has focused on things such as skin color and other physical traits. Delgado discussed that people may feel that racism is declining, or class is a more important topic. People of Color suffer rejection regarding seeking loans as compared to Whites. While the prison population is comprised mainly of people of color, many high level positions are filled by Whites. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) stated, "the prison population is largely Black and Brown; chief executive officers, senators, surgeons, and university presidents are almost all White" (pp. 12-13). Whites seem to have more pay and are almost the only people that are winning Oscar awards. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) explained, "people of color lead shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school, and occupy more menial jobs than do Whites" (p. 13). This brings about a lot of discussion about race as related to class. The

relationships between race and class seem to be a topic of discussion when researching CRT. People of color believe that its more racism in the world compared to White people.

Racism is centered around the idea that a group of people allocate privilege and status. Racial hierarchies in the world have caused a dominant group to receive more favorable benefits. The early years of CRT were centered around the realists' views that society is centered around privileges and status. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017), "in a classic article in the *Harvard Law Review*, Derrick Bell argued that civil rights advances for Blacks always seemed to coincide with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite Whites" (p. 9). Many events in the United State history proved that Bell was mostly correct. Four themes emerged: interest convergence or material determinism, revisionist interpretations of history, the critique of liberalism, and structural determinism. Interest convergence or material determinism argued that people of color only would get civil right when their interest converged with White. Revisionist interpretations of history focused on the historical record of the United States. This is the center of the controversy in the United States' politics today. This replaces the comforting historical view of history of the majority interpretation of historical events. The revisionist historical events capture minorities' experience and interpretation of historical events. The critique of liberalism focused on the framework for addressing racism. There is a belief in color blindness, equality, and equal treatment of people. Structural determinism is the idea that the system is designed to redress wrong.

Legal storytelling is something that Derrick Bell used to capture history and give other perspectives to historical events in the past. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) discussed:

> Critical race theorists have built on everyday experiences with perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a deeper understanding of how

> Americans see race. They have written parables, autobiography, and "counter-stories" and have investigated the factual background and personalities, frequently ignored in the casebooks, of well-known cases such as Korematsu (the Japanese-internment case) or Plessy v. Ferguson (the separate-but-equal case). (p. 45)

With different interpretations of things that happened with people's lived experiences it's imperative to get both sides. Ladson-Billings (2021) explained, "when one group describes its worldview or story as "real history," "truth," or "objective science" and others' worldviews as myth, legend, and lore we validate one narrative while simultaneously invalidating the other" (p. 48). This is where CRT is criticized for being negative due to the legal storytelling perspective of people of color. According to Stubblefield (2022), "CRT sheds light on those challenges that confront Black leaders in education past and present Counter-storytelling is a tenet in critical race theory that is used to contradict racist characterizations of social life" (p. 11).

Intersectionality is another thing that is connected to CRT. It identifies overlaps according to race, sex, and class of people. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017), "'Intersectionality' means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings" (p. 58).

CRT has had many spinoff movements over the years. Delgado & Stefancic (2017) explained:

> Although CRT began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline. Today, many scholars in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum

and history, bilingual and multicultural education, and alternative and charter schools. (p. 7)

Ethnic studies, critical white studies, philosophers, sociologists, theologians, and health care specialists all spin offs of CRT. According to Delgado & Stefancic (2017), “unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. (p. 8). CRT has also impacted other countries in the world.

## Educational Policy Analysis

In my quest to explore the intersection of diversity and Kansas Redesign, as part of a methods course, I conducted a qualitative pilot project study and policy analysis, and this dissertation become an extension of that work. The conceptual framework used for this classroom level project focused on critical race theory (CRT), and this theoretical perspective helps address issues about race and equality related to representation. The focus was centered around critiquing diverse stakeholder involvement in the policy development process for school districts that engaged in Kansas Redesign. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews of school and district leaders. The interviews showed me that many school leaders were interested and excited to participate in the school redesign process as compared to the traditional way of learning. Each administrator shared a unique perspective according to their lived experience, and during the process I was able to identify some common themes.

I found three thematic categories in this study: executing for change, impact on students, and preparing for redesign. However, a key finding to this research was very clear:  None of the administrators’ thought students or color or community diversity were considered a priority during any stage of the redesign process. In other words, there was no focus on specifically improving performance of students of color, elevating their achievement scores or graduation

rates regardless of what the state data showed. What tended to be the focus was the struggle of families and faculty utilizing the individualized learning and technological platform, as personalized learning was a key point of emphasis in redesign. Therefore, this classroom level pilot study also affirmed that there was a lack of focus in the literature on diversity as it relates to the Kansas Redesign.

## Conclusion of Literature Review

In conclusion, the literature review identified themes and gaps related to education reform and key stakeholders. One theme identified in the literature review was that many stakeholder groups influence educational reform. This literature revealed educational leaders that have played a pivotal role in educational reform (Friel, 2012). The literature review examined how the educational system has been centered around the effects of educational reform. According to Keaveny (2013), "Educational reform dominates the landscape of education today, with no foreseeable change in the future. Educational leaders are responsible for implementing reform efforts with careful consideration to not only the directives of legislation and authoritative expectations, but also to the needs of the people that have a direct relationship with within the school setting" (p. 178). The literature review showed how educational leaders played a major role in the implementation of educational reform. The literature review also supported the idea that educational reform takes place when stakeholders are involved. Gaps in the literature review centered around the impact that various groups can have on successful implementation of educational reform. According to Stralek (2018), Measurements around student achievement include test scores, grades, credits earned and graduation rates, but measurement for parental engagement or participation in school improvement and reform are not part of any reporting measure from schools to the state and federal level. Another gap was how to effectively

determine if educational reform is providing a quality public education regardless of student's zip code. This included determining which stakeholders have the greatest impact on successful implementation of educational reform (Glavey-Weiss, 2009). The literature review presented a variety of stakeholders that have impacted education reform but failed to make determination of which group (e.g., educational leaders, community groups, parents, students) provided the greatest impact.

Youth, parents, community groups, school leaders, and political parties have influenced reform efforts. Each group has an impact on educational reform in America. We must understand that educational reform is a high priority in the United States. Each stakeholder has vested interest in the educational system. A variety of stakeholders can have an impact on the implementation of education reform. Education reform has changed the education system. Key stakeholders have played a huge role in implementing educational reform in America. Political groups in many cases have turned educational reform into a political debate instead of seeking opportunities to unite and create policies that can truly have a positive impact on student growth. Each of the groups that have influenced educational reform was able to impact the educational system in America. Several of the articles pointed to how important educational reform is to America. Studies of educational reform and its relationship to key stakeholders were highlighted in the literature review. Stakeholders are the leading exponents of educational reform. There was a growing body of evidence in the literature review that educational reform is shaped by stakeholders. Leaders in educational reform continue to shape education today. However, even during the literature review I saw a lack of focus of diversity in educational reform.

## Chapter 3 - African American Exploration: Understanding Critical Autoethnography

### Method

This critical autoethnographic study was designed to deepen our perceptions of school leaders as it related to the school redesign process, particularly as it relates to diversity and my experiences as an African American man leading in predominantly White environments. This chapter will outline my autoethnographic process, including the research purpose, research questions, purpose and standards for quality, theoretical and methodological frameworks, and my process for taking a deep dive into my own lived experiences.

### Research Purpose

As mentioned in the preface, the focus of this study shifted over the course of the autoethnographic process. As the emphasis on redesign shifts in the state of Kansas, and as my autoethnographic processes shifted the narrative through the evolving writing and self-discovery process, I learned more about myself as a leader. The original purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my lived experiences as it relates to being a leader of color during the Kansas redesign process and explore potential structural overlap between the Foundational Structures Reflection Rubric at KSDE focused on diversity and the redesign process. The original questions are stated below.

### Research Questions

RQ1: What are my personal experiences as a leader of color, working in predominantly White communities in Kansas as it relates to new Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?

RQ2: Given my experiences as articulated in RQ1, how might we reimagine education reform to respond to the needs of diverse communities in Kansas?

While these questions still drove the autoethnographic processes as described in Chapter 3, research question one surprisingly took me into a deeper personal autoethnographic discovery about myself as a leader, as you will see in Chapters 4-6.

## Purpose and Standards of Quality

Qualitative inquiry was a logical approach in pursuit of my research purpose and questions. Tracy (2010) focused on ensuring that "high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f)significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence" (p. 839). The topic of this research is very relevant in the state of Kansas, and Kansan Can School redesign is significant in the Kansas State Department of Education's vision for the educational system in Kansas. According to Tracy (2010), "good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative" (p. 840), and this self-examination was done very diligently. Tracy (2010) also explains how, "researchers should evidence their due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care, and thoroughness" (p. 841), and how "sincerity as an end goal can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing" (p. 841).

Through the autoethnographic process I describe in this chapter, I discuss my processes and how I am very transparent about personal subjective experiences, in hopes that this research could resonance with a variety of audiences. This connected with Dadds' (2008) idea of "*empathic validity"* (p. 2). The research was able to provide insight to lived experience and promote empathy to the reader, which has value considering diverse experiences and stories have not been emphasized in the literature at this point. Toliver (2022) explained, stories are essential in qualitative research, as scholars consistently gather stories to learn more about the people they

are studying. This dissertation will include personal stories of my lived experiences as an African American male educator working in predominantly White communities.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks: Critical Race Theory and KSDE's Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Focusing on a theory that could explore difficult issues surrounding race led me to the work of Derrick Bell Jr. who is known as the founder of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is the theoretical framework driving this critical autoethnography. According to Bhattacharya (2017), Bell highlighted the inequities of race from minority perspectives (p. 74). This theoretical perspective helps address issues around race and equality, issues surrounding representation and diverse perspectives surrounding my experiences leading in predominantly White communities and my work with Kansans Can school redesign. I really relate to this work because it challenges and exposes systems that have negativity affected people of color. Bergerson (2003) suggests, "Critical race theory (CRT) has provided a foundation from which to develop conversations about race" (p. 52).

CRT's roots are in legal studies, with legal scholars such as Bell, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Kimberley Crenshaw as key contributors. CRT was developed in response to the shortcomings of critical legal studies (CLS) in addressing the legal system's perpetuation of racism. The history of CRT was influenced by multiple scholars. According to Bell (1995, as cited in Bergerson, 2003) CRT is "a body of legal scholarship… a majority of whose members are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law" (p. 888). CRT address the perpetuation of racism found in the legal system.

According to Tate (1997), "the defining elements of CRT suggest that this theoretical perspective can provide novel and innovative ways of exploring educational policy, research, and practice" (p. 236). CRT has a brief history in education. Regardless of the timeframe it truly has had a positive impact on the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Understanding the barriers people of color face in education has been a major focus in my dissertation process as I engage in autoethnographic writing and analysis through counter-storytelling. CRT helps works like this address and unveil major issues surrounding racial issues in America. CRT also examines unequal and unjust distributions of power which directly relates to diverse perspectives related to Kansans Can School Redesign.

As a practitioner working in Kansas Schools, I also use the KSDE's Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to guide my writing. This rubric (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1) focused on six areas to determine effectiveness. The key parts of the rubric are mission and vision, professional development and resources, monitoring effectiveness, social emotional learning, special populations, and differentiated instruction. The goal of the rubric is to create a culturally responsive environment and create a system that embraces diverse and inclusive environment.

Personally, I have struggled all my life to find an opportunity to discuss race and issues that I have recognized with the lack of diversity representation in education. During the process of implementation of the Kansans Can School Redesign Project I identified potential issues surrounding the roles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school redesign process. The population of Kansas is continuing to change, and it appeared that the representation at the table has continued to stay the same during meetings for the Kansans Can School Redesign process. I often found myself being one of the few minorities that was involved in the discussions, which

many times left me feeling hopeless about the opportunities to discuss equity issues that could arise due to lack of diversity and representation to ensure that all students and communities were represented during each stage of the redesign process. During this process I realized that my focus should be centered around critical theory for my theoretical framework, and the lens that helped me understand the study was using CRT. As Bhattacharya (2017) describes, "this lens offers us some ways to organize our thoughts, lay out our assumptions and beliefs, and logically defend the organizing patterns through which we might want to explore the topic of interest" (p. 6). This framework can help show the world from another perspective and point of view.

## Methodological Framework: Autoethnography, Writing as Method, and CAP Ethnographies

The history of autoethnographic methodology is connected to Karl Heider who connected personal experiences about cultural members' culture. According to Adams (2015), "Heider makes a case for the value of cultural members telling their stories" (p. 464). This allows for opening opportunities to view things from a different viewpoint. Boylorn & Orbe (2021) explain, "autoethnography give opportunity to have cultural critique and add my personal dimension" (p. 5). As Wall (2008) describes:

> Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method. Emerging from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated, autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding. (p. 38)

Autoethnography gives the writer the opportunity to share lived experiences and relate them to current events happening in the world. This qualitative research method allows the author flexibility to craft the story in personalized voice.

According to Chang (2008 as cited in Neuenswander, 2018), "As a methodology, autoethnography has been used in the field of education in various was since it is a method that engages the researcher in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 19). This creates opportunity for the writer to share firsthand accounts and viewpoints of personal experiences. Stubblefield (2022) wrote, "unlike other forms of qualitative research where the researcher is expected to keep personal bias from the writing, autoethnography is written in first person voice" (p. 100). This form of writing has allowed freedom to express my story without watering down my writing to fit an acceptable mold of the majority. This is a unique opportunity to share part of your life and relate it to your reality or view of the world. Neuenswander (2018) further explains how:

> This methodology introduced [him] to languages in research and writing that were unfamiliar to [him], such as describing and analyzing, the use of personal experience, understanding culture, being critically reflexive, engaging in narrative storytelling, showing instead of telling, consideration of diverse audiences and perspectives, and truths that emerge from situated lived experiences. (p. 28)

In other words, autoethnography allows me to express my inner voice in the form of letters, poetry, and other forms of storytelling intertwined into this dissertation. Stubblefield (2022) expanded, "The first-person accounts provide richness in the descriptions of significant events, people and cultural norms" (p. 100). Ellis et al. (2011) wrote that:

> Autoethnography felt perfect to me because it combined my interests in ethnography, social psychology of the self and role-taking, subjectivity and emotionality, face-to-face communication, and interaction, writing as inquiry and for evocation, storytelling, and my social work orientation toward social justice and giving back to the community. (p. 17)

This unique form of writing connects and engages a more diverse audience. Autoethnography provides the opportunity to provide compelling narratives to share my unique story. Without using autoethnography my study wouldn't have the same impact. It helped me really connect to my experience as a minority leader and my experience with redesign. However, as Scott (2023) writes, choosing autoethnography can be viewed as "selfish or navel-gazing" (p. 20).

This critical autoethnography also uses Creative Analytic Project (CAP) ethnography and writing as method, which really helps with my creative mind. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) discuss four criteria for Creative Analytic Projects (CAP):

1. Substantive contribution: Focused on if the piece contributed to understanding of social life, a deeply grounded perspective, and a credible account of the cultural perspective.
2. Aesthetic merit: Focused on the creative analytical practices within the text, the writings interpretive responses, and if it was text is artistically shaped.
3. Reflexivity: Focused on the author's subjectivity, self-awareness, and self-exposed enough to make judgments about the point of view.
4. Impact: Focuses on its effect on the reader emotionally or intellectually. (p. 964)

Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) explained, CAP ethnographies "can include new work, future work, or older work- wherever the author has moved outside conventional social scientific writing" (p. 962). Important to this method, this writing will include creative writing in the forms of letters while *merging process and product*. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) expanded, "CAP ethnography displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged" (p. 962). As a person of color, I have found that I have viewed the world in different ways compared to my colleagues. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) discussed science and creative arts as two lenses to looking into things. This statement really resonated with me during this process. According to Richardson & St. Pierre (2005), "students from diverse social backgrounds and marginalized cultures are attracted to seeing the social world through two lenses" (p. 964).

## Critical Autoethnography and Counter-Storytelling

Critical autoethnography has given me the opportunity to examine my own personal experience in education as a minority leader. *This has certainly taken me out of my comfort zone.* I have really been known as a private person when it comes to personal stories and many times don't share my believes in public settings. While educational research has historically been dominated by White male leaders in education, critical autoethnography allows the focus to be on personal lived experience and perspectives historically marginalized groups. Using critical autoethnography allows the opportunity to give first-hand accounts and communicate cultural viewpoints that have been missing. According to Adams (2017, as cited in Boylorn & Orbe, 2021),

> Critical autoethnography concentrates on representing the ways marginalized people experience marginalization on the margins with an emphasis on social injustices, a

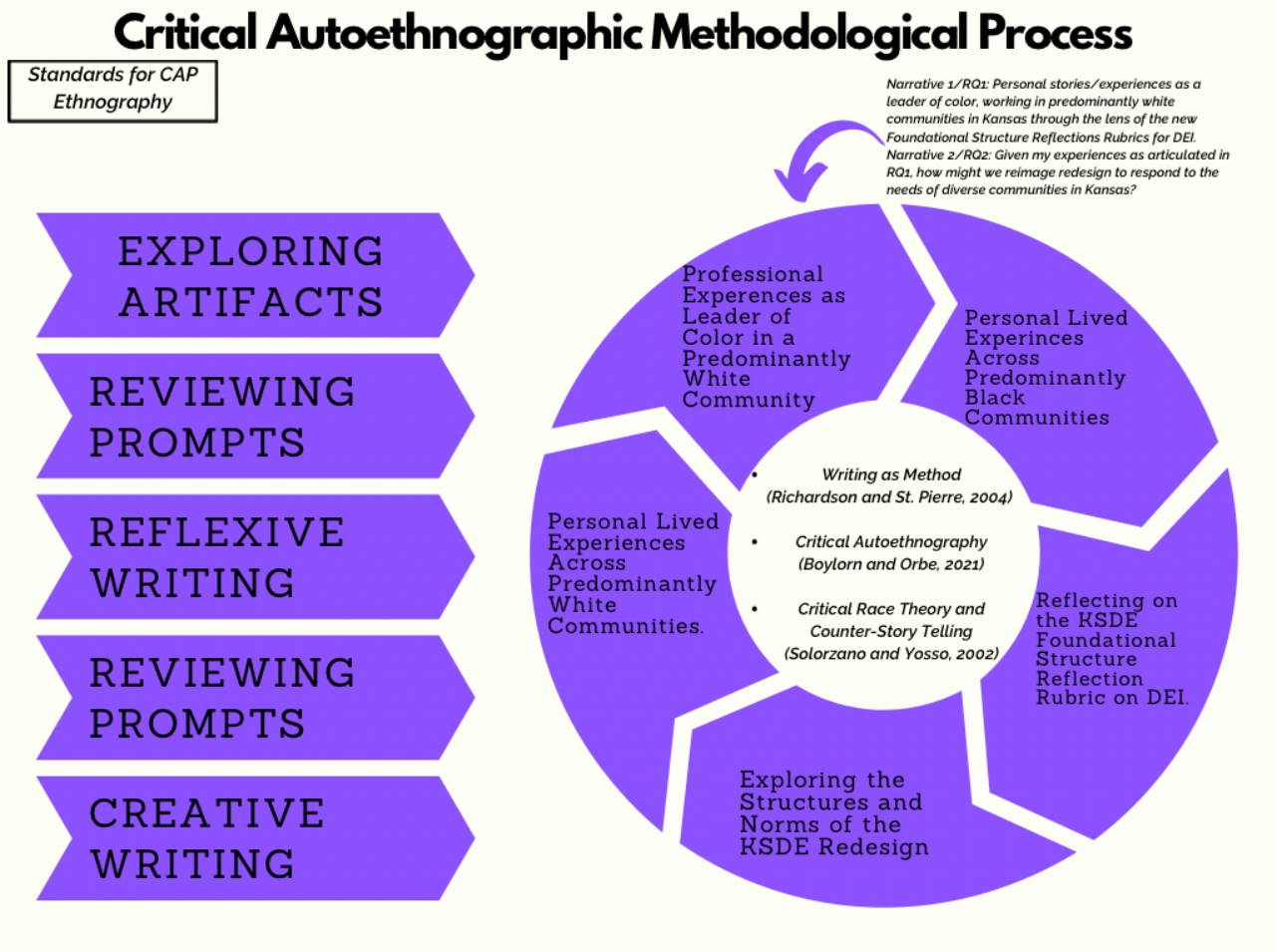
> reliance on criticality, and a commitment to improving cultural conditions through critique. (p. 6)

This gives the educator a different perspective and engages conversations around the educational system that hasn't always addressed concerns of minorities. RedCorn (2017) elaborated:

> With critical autoethnography's prioritization of marginalized and intersectional stories, it is also important to acknowledge the political nature of this work, and the reality that these projects are inherently tied to praxis in social justice politics. (p. 52)

Having new voices can potentially get us closer to educational equity. As Stubblefield (2022) wrote, "My lived experience as a Black male leader in this environment can provide insight and authenticity to the real difficulties of maneuvering through this hegemonic system" (p. 102). While reading Stubblefield's (2022) autoethnographic dissertation, I found a lot of similarities in my journey which gave me affirmation and confidence about my lived experiences, which is of value when doing this work. As Toliver (2022) explained, "when I say Black stories lives are ignored in research, I mean the unique storytelling traditions of Black people, those synthesizing Black values and cultural practice, are often disregarded" (p. xv). Using critical autoethnography allows me the opportunity to engage in critical analysis while sharing my personal narrative and interpretation by using counter-storytelling. Selecting counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), allowed me the opportunity to voice my personal cultural experience without feeling as I have no voice. Here I outline my methodological process (see Figure 3) for this critical autoethnography, which I will further explain in the remainder of this chapter.

**Figure 3.** ***Critical Autoethnographic Methodological Process***




*Note.* Critical Autoethnographic Methodological Process for dissertation.

## Arts Based Methodology

Arts Based Methodology (ABR) also informs this autoethnography. I was able to find my voice by expanding the way that I communicated my lived experiences. Expanding my communication style gave me confidence to tell my story my way. I was able to express my perspective during the research process. According to Leavy (2019),

> The term "arts-based research" was coined by Eisner in the early 1990s and has since developed into a major methodological genre. However, larger shifts occurring in prior decades set the stage for ABR. Specifically, the development of creative arts therapies,

> advances in the study of arts and learning (especially in neuroscience), and development in qualitative research have all influenced the emergence of ABR at this historical moment. (p. 6)

Arts based allows me to offer my insight as an African American Male in education. Wall (2008) explained:

> A better reason for doing arts-based research may be this: to the extent that an arts based research project effectively employs aesthetic dimensions in both its inquiry and representational phases, to that extent the work may provide an important public service that may be otherwise unavailable. (p. 13)

Using ABR also allows for a unique opportunity to share a perspective that in many ways would have been silenced without using this methodology. Barone (2012) gave more information:

> Arts based research is an effort to extend beyond the limiting constrains of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable. Indeed, an examination of the forms of communication employed in the culture at large reveals a level of diversity of forms that is enough to dazzle the eye, delight the ear and tempt the tongue. (p. 1)

There are many ways that this could be represented. The decision was made to ensure that the opportunity to share the story in a creative way. This is something that I considered when determining to write letters as arts-based methodology, and also informs my use of poetry, in an effort to do what Leavy (2019) asserts when she states that ABR should "challenge dominate ideologies" and "include marginalized voices and perspectives" (p. 10). This methodology gave me a sense of freedom to express myself, and often felt more in line with my communication style.

## Outlining my Analysis of the Self: Autoethnographic Writing Prompts

Throughout this autoethnography, I will share some of my personal experiences as a building leader and highlight experiences as a classroom teacher centered arounds the KSDE foundational reflection rubrics for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). I went through a process of systematic self-reflection and analysis on several key components in the rubric by using autoethnographic writing prompts through the lens of the KSDE Foundational Reflection Rubrics. Specifically, I have broken down the parts of the rubric that are most relevant to my professional lived experiences, including my work in redesign and working in predominantly White communities, and these prompts centered around 1) Mission and Vision, 2) Professional Development and Resources, 3) Monitoring Effectiveness, 4) Social Emotional Learning, 5) Special Populations, and 6) Differentiated Instruction as you will see moving forward. The prompts listed below drove the process of self-analysis and discovery, and provided the building blocks that became the narratives in the remaining chapters.

**Narrative 1/RQ 1:** What are my personal experiences as a leader of color, working in predominantly White communities in Kansas as it relates to new KSDE Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

**List of Prompts:**

1. Mission and Vision: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to mission and vision?
2. Professional Development and Resources: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to professional development?
3. Monitoring Effectiveness: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to monitoring effectiveness?

4. Socioemotional Learning: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to social emotional learning?
5. Special Populations: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to special populations?
6. Differentiated instruction: What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to differentiated instruction?

The response to the research questions and the narrative prompts was based on my lived experiences as a professional educator related to the past, present, and future.

**Narrative 2/RQ 2:** Given my experiences as articulated in RQ1, how might we reimagine redesign to respond to the needs of diverse communities in Kansas?

**Autoethnographic Writing Prompts through the lens of the KSDE Foundational Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:**

1. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to physically and emotional safe climate/culture?
2. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to involving diverse stakeholders' participation?
3. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to elevating and incorporating student voice?
4. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to monitoring and adjusting policy/practices based on climate and culture data?
5. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to monitoring and adjusting policy/practices based on leadership and educator capacity building?

6. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to mission and vision?
7. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to professional development?
8. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to monitoring effectiveness?
9. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to social emotional learning?
10. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to special populations.
11. What were my stories and interactions (and affiliated data and/or artifacts) as it relates to differentiated instruction?

## Ethics in Autoethnography

My personal interest in autoethnography impacted my approach during the process of identifying ethical decisions that needed to be considered. According to Lapadat (2017, as cited in Muncey, 2010),

> Autoethnography arose as a natural evolution of reflexivity in qualitative research writing (Muncey, 2010), as qualitative researchers began writing themselves into their research and looked to other writing traditions, such as autobiography, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, as well as to performative traditions such as theater, for strategies for telling their personal stories and making sense of their lives. (p. 592)

This approach allows for lived experiences to be shared and address ethical decisions that arose during the process. Throughout the process I faced many ethical decisions which included some

internal struggles which Wall (2008) described as “experiencing persistent anxiety” (p. 41). I can recall feeling unsure about the entire process. I remain in constant worry of whether educational leaders would take offense of the critical view that I was seeing, and I wanted to ensure that the work done was meaningful and not cause tension or unwarranted attacks.

When I started reviewing the ethics in this autoethnography I found some similarities in others’ work. According to Stubblefield (2022), “the first is procedural ethics, the kind mandated by Institutional Review Boards (IRB) committees to ensure procedures adequately deal with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm” (p. 121). During my process I submitted IRB and followed the mandated procedure. Another ethical consideration is that this will “governed by traditional research ethics approval process in academic settings” (Wall, 2008, p. 49). I will not name people during this writing to protect the identity of the people involved unless they were directly involved, cited in previous work, or the person gave me permission to use their name. Wall (2008) explained:

> Questions about ethics in autoethnography have scarcely been raised, and there is little guidance in the autoethnography literature for dealing with these issues. Personal experience methods, such as autoethnography, justify themselves by observing that individuals do not exist apart from their social context, and for this reason personal experience can be the foundation for further sociological understanding. (p. 49)

I will use pseudonyms to protect identities and, in some cases, change genders.

Relational ethics are also an important factor that I considered for this work. Relational ethics impacted me considering the decision to write personal letters and some of the interpersonal ties that I have with many the people I interacted with during the process. Something that really impacted this process was the influence of the political climate

surrounding CRT, which as you read on was one of the key areas of focus as the politics shifted over the process of my dissertation and doctoral program. Stubblefield (2022) also expressed anxiety around this and explained how CRT could have an impact on his "career aspirations of becoming a future superintendent" (p. 105). This is something that really influenced my writing and ensure that the writing protected local communities. Wall (2008) captured this idea, "theoretical ideas about autoethnography as counter discourse take on new meaning when those who are situated in different places within a contested or complex field come face to face" (p. 50).

## Chapter 4 - Moving Between Silence and Safety in DEIB Leadership: A Dream Deferred

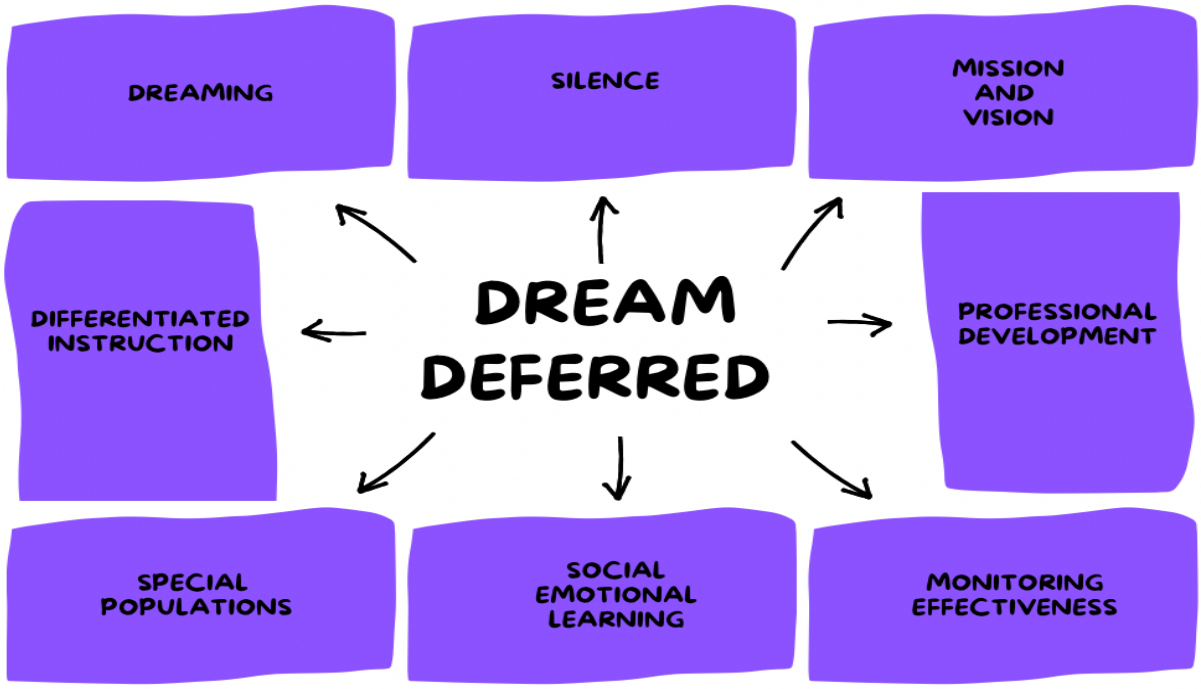
In Chapter 4 you will see the first layer of my narrative which grew out of what I found out about myself during the autoethnographic process. During this process I found that telling my story in the form of letters and poems gave me a sense of safety and security. I am a dreamer that believes that the American education system can improve for all students, and I have remained silent on many issues out of fear of repercussions. Here you will read how that unfolded in my life.

Moving forward, I will share some of my personal experiences as a building leader and highlight experiences as a classroom teacher centered arounds the KSDE foundational reflection rubrics for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. I reflected on some key components of the rubrics by using autoethnographic writing prompts through the lens of the KSDE Foundational Reflection Rubrics. Specifically, I have broken down the parts of the rubric that are most relevant to my professional lived experiences. Specifically, I outline my thoughts about 1) Mission and Vision, 2) Professional Development and Resources, 3) Monitoring Effectiveness, 4) Social Emotional Learning, 5) Special Populations, and 6) Differentiated Instruction. The narratives that were developed from these prompts are centered around those respective topics as they intersect with research question one.

Overall, as you will see in Figure 4, how I discovered through the autoethnographic process that I was wrestling with various educational leadership topics related to educational leadership, which are reaffirmed in the KSDE rubric. However, a central story line that emerged through the autoethnographic process was that I am constantly wrestling with important personal decisions about remaining silent, or considering the safety level of various leadership contexts,

while wrestling with topics related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging - all while trying to continue to dream.

**Figure 4.** ***Dream Deferred***




*Note.* Overview of Life of a DEIB Leader.

**Afraid**

**A**fraid of the backlash of telling my story.

**F**earful of losing the opportunity to dream of a better educational experience for Black students.

**R**eluctant to say too much about the issues that I see in the educational system.

**A**dvocate for the generations of educational leaders that have been silenced.

**I**ntegrating my lived experiences as safely as I can.

**D**reaming of making improvement in education for all students.

Why am I afraid?

**Dear Silence,**

When presenting topics related to DEI in the present political environment of the world, it seems unfortunate that people don't want to discuss race and diversity. According to Bahl (2022):

> The controversy over how issue of race and diversity are being handled in Kansas schools has been the subject of numerous legislative hearings, local school board meetings and online fist fights in recent months. (para.1)

A few years ago, I was tasked to present DEI information to the staff at my school. At the time, I was excited and confident that this would be some great information to share with my peers. I remember scanning across the room trying to get a sense of how the feeling in the room was. It was interesting; it seemed that no one showed much emotion, but internally I was dreading the unexpected questions that the staff could potentially ask as I was presenting, especially with the backdrop of how various media outlets covered topics such as diversity, CRT, stereotypes, and bias. I was excited, but nervous.

I once shared a video about why NFL star Colin Kaepernick started taking a knee to protest police brutality in America during a training. It was interesting, none of the staff knew retired Army Green Beret Nate Boyer was the man that introduced the concept to him. Originally Colin Kaepernick was sitting down during the national anthem, and it was Nate Boyer that introduced the concept of taking a knee as a sign of respect. At the end of the presentation, one person came and said, "thank you, I never knew that information", and she said that it gave her something to think about regarding student athletes that may not want to participate in the national anthem. However, some staff seemed uneasy and concerned that a minority leader focused on a DEI initiative was forcing this conversation on them. I received feedback from an

employee implying that this was a waste of time, They said, *"I will quit my job if the district begins to focus on DEI for the 1%."*

**Now Or Never**

Do I address years of ignored issues?

Now or Later…

Do I bring up the issues that are relevant in the educational system?

Now or Later…

Do you not see the problems in the world?

Now or Later...

Do you not care about the minority groups in the educational system?

Now or Later…

Now are the times to create a system that truly represents the demographics.

Later is too late.

Now is the time to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

Later will never happen if we continue to ignore the problems.

Now is the time to fix the leaks of the past.

Later will become the future and continue in the past.

Now or Later…

This is the choice that you have.

Now or Later…

Will you allow the next generation to have the same problems?

Now or later…

Make a choice that makes the educational system better.

Now or later…

You do something now or wait until later.

**Dear Elders,**

I appreciate your dedication and the example that you have shown me over the years, as I watched how you interacted with leadership. You set the example of how to become acceptable in society. When you dressed in your suits and talked the same language, I witnessed you sit at the table with people of power. I saw how you used education to continue to move up the ladder. I followed your model and feel I am finding some success. One thing that I learned was the importance of respect and appreciation for those that have come before me. Your lessons have taught me the importance of making conscious decisions before making important decisions that could impact the trajectory of my career. I admire your professionalism, bravery, and willingness to pave the way for the next generation. Please continue to mentor and seek opportunities to improve education.

Over the years I have utilized data to make informed decisions about the adjusting policies and practices. A Black superintendent once told me, "*Make all decisions based on integrity*." This has impacted the decisions that I make each day. Looking at discipline, attendance, and dropout data to help make informed decisions is what is expected of educational leaders. Research in Kansas (and beyond) has shown the educational disparity for minority groups compared to their White counterparts. Specifically, the African American four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates have been lower than White students, and annual drop rates for African Americans have been higher than White students. Specifically, according to (KSDE, 2018) the 5-year graduation rate for African American students in 2018 was 79.9% and White students were 90.1%.

Why did this never make it into our conversations about redesign in Kansas? Thinking back on the comment left in my feedback after my presentation to staff, I'm left wondering why we cannot discuss this, and the socio-cultural and political contexts surrounding it. It is time to review data surrounding DEI issues in the educational system and be honest about it, and make this normal everywhere? How come all schools don't have a strategic system to implement DEI frameworks that can be used to make positive change in schools?

Here I offer the following for educational leaders and state representatives to consider when making decisions that will impact the students related to the Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and when considering school reform in Kansas. This rubric can become an important guide for districts to improve a focus on DEI, and the concepts embedded in the rubric are needed on all levels to have a positive impact on education. Quite honestly, this rubric isn't very visible or emphasized in the spaces where I work. Throughout the next couple chapters of this dissertation, I articulate some of realities that are found in the actual implementation of those foundational structures, all through the eyes of an African American male leader trying to work in and across predominantly White contexts. In trying to convey these experiences, I have included poems and letters on my lived and/or lack of experiences related to each topic included in the foundational rubrics. The push back is real. I have experienced many awkward feelings when I've entered the room, or when I read feedback after engaging in a conversation that others don't want to hear.

**I Am**

I am the man that sees the American educational system.

I am the only person of color at the table.

But I am to remain silent.

And I am still allowed to sit at the table,

And I can continue to learn and become more educated.

I am a highly educated African American with a doctorate.

I am not ashamed of my history, of my story, nor do I worry about what they will say.

I am part of the educational system.

They don't invite me in the executive session.

When policies are threatening the status quo,

They don't dare say to me,

"You have the right to remain silent." Then,

I realize it's time to right the wrong.

**Dear Mission and Vision,**

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards, along with the KSDE foundational rubric for DEI, emphasize core skills and dispositions expected of building leaders: fostering a shared vision and mission are part of that, and represent key concepts and jargon in the field of educational leadership. Unfortunately, from my vantage point it seems as though these standards aren't holding educational institutions accountable when it comes to DEI. In many cases it may seem educational stakeholders are ignoring the standards due to the political climate of the United States. But as most leaders know, each educational institution should have a mission and vision. The mission and vision should guide and lead the institution in a direction to lead change and continual improvement of student success. According to the building level National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018), "program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to collaboratively evaluate,

develop, and communicate a school mission and vision designed to reflect a core set of values and priorities that include data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community" (p. 12).

As seen emphasized here by national educational leadership standards, it is imperative to ensure that the mission and vision includes information that can be used to promote a culture of inclusion. As an example, the vision statement for KSDE is Kansas leads the world in the success of *each* student. The mission is we are an agency of Kansans inspiring, coaching, and leading to create the conditions for *each* student's success. Yet, I personally struggle with the culture wars attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many states are working to remove funding for DEI and creating laws removing any DEI themed initiatives. According to Lieberman & Pendharkar (2023):

> Some of the largest school districts in Oklahoma have defied a new state mandate to report their spending last school year on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Others that complied with the directive, meanwhile, worry that reporting their DEI spending could lead the state to revoke their accreditation, as happened recently in several districts with DEI initiatives. (para. 1)

State level leadership is critical in protecting our diversity efforts, and while this rubric seems to assert this important leadership emphasis, there seems to be a lack of accountability to our various vision and mission statements which emphasize meeting the needs of "every student". Identifying ways to connect accountability reports to the KSDE Foundational Structure Reflections Rubric for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion would be a way to start the process. Incorporating standards of excellence in DEI work would be a great way to get districts to show implementation and alignment of mission and vision. The Kansas Education System

Foundational Structures include diversity, equity, and inclusion. KESA requirements mention diversity and equity in the foundational structures. Currently it doesn't appear to have any district accountability to ensure implementation of mission and vision that includes DEI.

**Hidden In Plain Sight**

I see you in the shadows.

Diversity

The foundational structures list you.

Equity

It's hidden in plain sight.

Inclusion

I see you included with other subgroups.

Diversity

Ethnic minority groups we want you grouped with other subgroups.

Equity

Don't worry doing this will ensure that you are included.

Inclusion.

Hidden in plain sight without any accountability.

Many times, I have remained silent about implementation of DEI ideas. As a minority leader, I can't be alone in the desire to ensure that all students feel safe and secure in schools across the United States. A minority leader shouldn't have to worry, "If I bring this problem up will it cause them to be black balled?" This has been an issue that educational leaders have faced. Becoming an advocate for students is an important job for educators, and it's one of their central responsibilities. Unfortunately, our society has become so politicized, it becomes difficult to

address many issues that we face in the educational system. Many times, we have issues that are never brought to the attention of leaders due to the potential resistance to addressing or acknowledging there are issues related to DEI. People of color operate with a sense of fear, and from my vantage point, especially African Americans. One minority superintendent made the following statement, "*If we make one mistake it can cost us our job."* This statement has stuck with me during my career as an administrator. I recently had a conversation with this leader, a mentor of mine, and he warned me: "Choose your battles." He told me how this impacted the direction of his career. He explained, "You really need to be watchful of what issues to address … especially centered around race and equity". He contacted me to visit with him about future aspirations I may have for my career. We met for lunch to discuss next steps. He stated, "Well Brandon, you got to be careful, and you are still young and have the opportunity to do somethings that I couldn't do." The tone of his voice was of genuine compassion and concern. He wanted me to know that I can make it as long as I stay focused.

For me, staying focused means to ensure that I go along with the status quo. Ultimately, addressing decisions around race can impact your career. Minority leaders must be aware that all decisions must have the support of district office and board of education, at least that's the idea in theory. Too often, many issues don't get addressed unless it is causing negative publicity, or a reaction to something that happened. I have seen countless issues over my career related to race that the African American community felt was unjust, yet nothing was addressed, and nothing changes. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics, they end up intentionally being swept under the rug.

I must say that I have talked to minority students about their concerns related to the lack of empathy that staff and administration has regarding racial issues. Many students of color have

stated they “don’t understand”, and they “don’t care about what is going on.” Being one of the only minorities in multiple districts over the years, many times I have remained silent because I didn’t feel the issues would be addressed, or it might make my involvement unwanted.

My mentor expressed the fact that he never addressed some issues because it would be career suicide from his viewpoint. He indicated that one potential mistake he made was not staying at a more diverse school district, and that he felt that he had the potential for more career advancement if he would have stayed in that district. From my mentor’s perspective, those choices allowed him to work district office jobs, but he never got the opportunity to become a superintendent. Our conversation ended with him expressing how he is getting close to retirement, and I have an opportunity to do some positive change, but also learn from some of his mistakes.

I have taken time and reflected on the many times that I refused to speak out due to fear of being persecuted, ignored, or fired for lack of support. During my coursework while obtaining my building and district leadership license, I remember a guest speaker say, *“When deciding what to fight for, are you willing to get fired if the board won’t support it.”* As a building leader, when issues surrounding race come up, one of the first things a minority leader must do is contact district office leadership to decide on the best way to proceed. There is a feeling of panic regarding how this will impact the school or even my career, yet my entire career when identifying issues surrounding race it has been difficult to bring up with leadership. I have felt that when I bring up the topic of race as a minority, it can put a target on my back. Many people of color seem to be viewed as a difficult employee when they bring to the forefront issues surrounding race.

Mission and vision statements, and strategic plans, should all have a DEI focus. It is sad that social justice issues are being lumped into a generic branding of critical race theory. Mission and vision statements that are properly implemented can change the outcomes of race related issues and change our systems for the better as we move forward into the future. I have endured multiple race related issues that have had me question how we can move forward with this work. I remember dealing with a parent that was angry and upset about the punishment their child received for their actions. The guardian was yelling and screaming at me in my office and cussing at me. I was just doing my job. To this parent, I was an outsider coming in and had no right to make any decisions regarding his child. I remember staying calm and politely asked if they needed a break. Then the parent got even more angry and walked out of my office. I called the superintendent at the time. The superintendent stated, "I believe I know what you are calling about, the person is in the office waiting to visit with me now". I gave a summary of what happened. I was assistant principal at the time, so I reported everything to my supervisors. Then I waited for a follow-up call, that I never received.

Let me add a little context. The student had made racist comments in our school, which caused him to be suspended. The student was calling other students the n-word and saying, "send them back to Mexico". It is important to note that the district at the time didn't seem to have a vision statement or any goals tied to DEI work. The father admitted that he made statements like this at home to the principal at the time. Was that the right decision for me not to have to interact with the parent due to racist comments being made? Should it have been a meeting with me to discuss next steps to address any issues surrounding race? It was ironic that another issue happened, and I had to work with the parent, and I feel that we ended up having a positive relationship. It was agreed that we both wanted to make decisions that was best for the student

and work past issues in the past. This was a decision that I made and put pride aside. It just made me pause and wonder if the parent was ever told that the statements made about me were not acceptable and wouldn't be tolerated. Regardless – having the conversation allowed us to move forward.

It seems that schools across the nations aren't making all decision with DEI as the focus. From my experiences, since there seems to be a lack of accountability around DEI work when it intersects with school vision, mission, and goals, I would like to see more action to embed DEI into the system and align the policies and procedures to ensure that growth is being made. Considering the important role of mission and vision statements to ensure that they come to fruition will ensure that professional development is presented to staff members.

The school district's goals at the time included a focus on "improving relationships with staff, families, and the community". I felt that this didn't apply to me during this altercation. My principal at the time came and said that moving forward I wouldn't have to work with the student or parent. If the mission and vision emphasized making progress regarding DEI in connection to the district goal above, I wonder if the outcome would have been different, or if there would be some need for some accountability. When I questioned the conversation that took place, the district leader said, *"I believe he was racist."* This made me really begin to think: Did I want to stay in this position? If I wouldn't have asked any questions, I would have never known that the person made any racist statements, or that this was my leaders' interpretation. Simply put, I was told that the best thing to be done was for me not to interact with the person anymore. Behind those closed doors I can only imagine what words were used to describe me: the African American principal, the outsider. Was I part of the "community" stated in the district goals?

When community and relationships were being harmed, we're we going to do anything about it? I'm only left to wonder.

**Silent Struggle**

Do you really want to know?

The fear that I feel by calling you out in meetings.

Do you really want to know?

The discriminatory practices that I see each day.

Do you really want to know?

The words that I want to articulate regarding my silent struggle.

Do you really want to know?

The issues I have when you only seek my opinion during the difficult times.

Do you really want to know?

The times that you are culturally sensitive.

Do you really want to know?

The best approach to make positive change.

Do you really want to know?

If I have a true sense of belonging.

**Dear Professional Development Leader,**

Professional development is an instrumental part of ensuring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in education. According to building level *National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration 2018):

> Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to build the school's professional capacity, engage staff in the development of a collaborative professional culture, and improve systems of staff supervision, evaluation, support, and professional learning. (p. 27)

I remember the time that district leadership wanted to focus on anti-racism training and ensure that all building and district leaders attend the anti-racism training first. The first step was easy to implement. If you assign the training during district and building level contract hours, it's easy to get them to attend. As one of the few people of color in my district, I was asked to attend multiple antiracism trainings due to the company wanting a diverse group of attendees. One thing I have found as an African American leader is that leadership wants your lived experiences when it's convenient for them, but I have also felt ignored at times during professional development when my minority perspectives didn't agree with the consensus of the group. Many times, over the years, I have been asked to participate in trainings or professional developments when they want diversity in the room, this was on par with that norm.

The next stage was to get the school resource officers to attend. I don't know how much of the rest of the district attended this training; I do know that approximately 5% of my building attended at the time. The trainings were offered voluntarily to other staff that wasn't in leadership. I recall that building administration was told that they had so many slots for staff to attend and emails would be sent out to the staff. However, the focus to have staff attend these trainings ended when leadership changed, with corresponding changes in school boards and superintendents after elections. According to Singleton (2015), "engaging, sustaining, and

deepening dialogue about race and its influence on schooling at the overall district level is the essential catalyst for systemic racial equity transformation" (p. 266). I agree, and I thought things were headed in the right direction. Yet, the effort completely came to an end as school board elections happened, and the dynamics and direction of the board changed. The original goal was for all board and district office staff to attend the training, and at this point in my career participating in a training as a minority leader was something that I never experienced in the past. I remember thinking, *this is a great opportunity to open the discussion and dialogue around systemic issues that plagued the educational system for decades*. Yet, politics of school board elections trickled into our professional development plans as it came to a halt.

However, the training still sparked a lot of discussion around equity issues and racial issues, something that wasn't occurring previously. As an example, after the training a White colleague of mine contacted me privately to say: *"I had never met someone – a person of color – who shared these actual experiences with me."* I felt as though he meant, *"I've heard these stories before, but never felt as though I had to take them seriously until I heard from you – a real person in my life."* It was almost as if he had never actually interacted with an African American man, and therefore was never forced to think about the experiences of his Black students, or his teachers' skill sets in working with them. Therefore, the professional development we engaged in – *together* – was a productive endeavor in opening space for some much-needed dialogue and interaction. Conversations even continued when interacting with other administrators who reached out to me about advice dealing with some issues and concerns with their students of color. Prior to the training, I didn't get very many inquiries about my viewpoints and advice regarding issues centered around race, and while that labor fell on me, I

was encouraged that the conversations were happening. Maybe this was a small sign of a professional development effort causing a slight shift in school culture relevant to DEI?

Race and ethnicity aren't always straightforward, and making space for those conversations tends to open the opportunity for dialogue over fear. As an example, one principal brought forward an issue regarding a student who aimed a racial slur towards an African American student. Apparently, the student that made the slur stated that permission was given by another minority student, and from my perspective, based on observations of other colleagues following that training, it seemed that the person got enough courage to visit with me because of the training. After some dialogue, it seemed that the White administrator didn't want to come off as racist and wanted another opinion from an educator of color on how to handle the situation. Again, even though the PD was halted, I witnessed some of the shifts in our ability to dialogue around tough topics, even if small steps towards a much bigger goal.

The training information shared was helpful in beginning dialogue. Some of the stories and perspectives I brought forward in those sessions I had never had the opportunity to share in a safe environment. According to Lomotey (2022), "both principals and teachers must understand that it is necessary to adopt practices that do more than replica the status quo of education (schooling)" (p. 178). For most of my career, I have remained silent about my feelings on DEI initiatives. Lomotey (2022) further explains, "regardless of the measures employed (e.g., standardized achievement tests, high school completion rates, suspension rates, special education placement, etc.) on average, African American students fare poorly to their European-American peers" (p. 31). So, as we continue to see the research that demonstrates equity disparities between White and non-White students, the ability to talk about that research and data becomes a key issue As Singleton (2015) emphasizes, "I believe that a primary and essential way of

addressing these gaps is to create a culture and provide structures that encourage ALL educators to discuss race openly, honestly, and as safely as possible in the school environment" (p .3). Based on my observations and experiences, I agree with this sentiment. However, I have always felt a sense of danger in speaking out, leaving me to guard my feelings and avoid verbalizing them. My thought process is, if I share too much it will lead to an argument or broken relationships. Yet, I know the conversations can lead to productive collaborative progress as educators. But I know I'm also received and read differently than others.

I recall a time when a colleague commented that I "looked like a gangster" because I was wearing a snapback hat and shades on the weekend. These are defining moments of my life, with stereotypes following me around, and I know if I get angry and respond a certain way that I suddenly become the angry Black man. I'm not an angry Black man, I'm a calm and collected school and church leader, and a community role model. I really wanted to say something, but worried about the repercussions. I knew it wouldn't be received the same way as my White male peers who also wear hats and sunglasses on the weekends. The stereotypes don't seem to apply to them.

During my educational career in predominantly White communities, many times I never felt a sense of belonging or acceptance for the person that I purposefully adapted by changing my norms to match the predominantly White community surrounding me. Ongoing trainings and professional development could have impacted the future of the district focusing efforts centered around DEI. Unfortunately, the national pandemic stopped a lot of the work and direction of educating people around DEI and it undoubtedly slowed the process and movement following what seemed to be a national movement for equity. Never did I imagine the impact that COVID would have on the progress of antiracism training and other DEI initiatives. A missed

opportunity. Following the end of the pandemic there were a lot of challenges in education that took up our collective attention spans. Due to mental health concerns and educators' stress levels, it seemed that it was time to focus on other things. I do agree that it was substantial work that needed to be done because of the impact of COVID, but we shouldn't ignore the students of color that have had ongoing trauma related to issues related to race.

**Dear Monitoring Effectiveness,**

I have been struggling with the notion that we can monitor the effectiveness of this work when it seems that so much work is being ignored. It seems that in my experience that some of the best work that have been done has now been discontinued. The reason the training ended was very simple. When the heat comes many people from the local, state, and national levels will shy away from tough topics. I have realized that any positive work put in motion can be halted at the end of a local school board election and building administrators or superintendents can't risk their career. If enough parents or community create enough opposition to stop the work. Who is willing to step up and take a stand? It seems that it takes a massive movement or event in history to cause change. Some bad press or legislative action can change the direction of a school system. This is also emphasized as a standard way of operating in educational leadership through NELP standard 3. According to *National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards Building Level* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018):

> Candidates who successfully complete a building-level educational leadership preparation program understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult by applying the knowledge,

> skills, and commitments necessary to develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive school culture. (p. 15)

This is clearly making connections to the importance of monitoring effectiveness of a district. Every decision made should be data driven to ensure that that monitoring effectiveness is going in the right direction, instead of following the hot topics in the news. Data needs to be collected from all stakeholders. I recall completing surveys that were connected to staff, students, and parents, and there was a specific intention to gather information that was tied to diverse subgroups. This information was analyzed by building and district leadership to help make some positive changes to the district and help all staff feel a sense of belonging.

I was sitting quietly at the table with leaders at a retreat, looking at this new survey data broken down by demographics. It was amazing, the data was good overall. This meeting was like others that I have been in, where I was the only minority at the table. It started to become clear, my analysis of the data was different than my peers. I noticed one specific minority group that showed results weren't improving from the previous year. Immediately I felt discomfort about reviewing the data. It was another defining moment in my leadership growth. It felt like a taking a step of faith, because you never know how you will be viewed when you point out something that impacts issues relating to minority groups when you are the only minority leader at the table. I did hesitate to speak up right away. I worried how I would be perceived when the overall discussion was positive.

**Silence**

This is how I have continued to survive.

Silence

If you are unsure of the overall group perspective.

Silence

When you are afraid if speaking up will have a negative impact on your career.

Silence

Many times, you are invited to the table.

Silence

If you speak ensure your tone is acceptable.

Silence

This is a constant struggle as a minority leader.

So, I spoke up and I pointed out the data that reflected a negative impact on African Americans. I finally decided it was the time and place to speak out. I have so many times remained silence about situations out of fear of backlash, and it is not clear to me if I did this because I was writing my dissertation and feeling empowered, or if I felt safe with the group I was with.

**Dear Socioemotional Learning,**

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is something that is going to continue to impact education in the future. The aspect that we need to ensure that we are reflecting on is the impact that it has on marginalized groups in the educational system. Being aware of specific data that building, and district leaders can review to ensure that address SEL concerns connected to DEI. Some districts have decided not to conduct certain surveys connected to SEL due to previously discussed House Bill 2513. The bill required school districts to obtain parent consent prior to taking certain test, questionnaires, and surveys. The bill could potentially impact certain things that was meant to help students. SEL can really have positive impact on students, especially with the impact that COVID has had on student's emotional state. It is becoming more discouraging in education with the attacks on education, and with SEL becoming yet another target for

political gain. But many of those politicians tend to not truly understand what SEL is, and likely won't argue that a student being able to manage emotions and behaviors is something that will help students be successful in life and school setting. Overall, it feels as though many people in politics and the public don't understand what SEL is.

When it comes to any educational reform movement this is something that I feel has a tremendous impact on each student's life. Understanding that it's a lot of things that can trigger and impact a person's social emotional state, even our adults in our systems. For example, I recall walking into a library and seeing the filing system to return books by using letters in the alphabet. As I walked, I got to a section that used the letters KK and close by was another K. Reflecting, I remember not wanting to even say anything about the thoughts that flooding my mind. Every time that I see three letter Ks in a row, I think of all the pain and suffering this White supremacist group has caused in America. I tell you this to let you know the effect that seemingly small things can have on people of color, even as an adult. That trauma lives on in our everyday lived experiences.

Socio-emotional impact on students of color is something that should be a focus with any redesign, reform, or school improvement effort. I must say that this impacts all students regardless of race. I was surprised when attacks began to happen, and many people were trying to tie it critical race theory. I found myself facing this dilemma even as an administrator when a community activist group started asking questions about the importance of SEL and if it was harmful. The discussion was good, and I agree that you should ask critical questions. Unfortunately, some of the discussions were rooted in misinformation shared in media outlets. The main outcome I strive to accomplish with SEL is helping students cope and function in

school. The attacks on SEL seemed to be related to CRT complaints, and there were concerns about too much focus on children's identities and that this could cause problems for the youth.

I still honestly don't understand the connection that has been made between SEL and CRT. The focus of SEL is to help students manage emotions and understand how to control them. Additionally, many of the things that are being worked on in our classrooms center around relationships, cooperation, responsibility, and self-control. As an administrator my focus is to help students recognize emotions, express them verbally in a calm manner, and identify strategies to regulate themselves. Unfortunately, with our political climate in America, it seems as though all it takes is for a political group to start classifying key terms as related to CRT and a push to combat these concepts will start. Some of the terms that are under attack that are related to SEL are social emotional, culturally responsive, and self-awareness. When did these terms mean hate?

**Hate**

**H**elping students learn to self-regulate.

**A**lmost seems too good to be true.

**T**ruly working to ensure students understand self-awareness.

**E**veryone must vote to ensure that the right people are at the table.

I know if you are reading this you are wondering how any of these things would be harmful to the education of a student. After the national pandemic we have students that didn't get the opportunity to attend preschool and childcare facilities. This has left many students lacking skill they would have learn if they would have been given the opportunity to attend. Overall, students struggle to understand emotions and they are missing social skills. It was surprising how many lessons students learned just interacting with others learning to share and

interacting with peers. I am pleased to see these learning opportunities in our schools as part of improvement and reform goals, but the politics are creating unnecessary tension in practice.

**Dear Special Populations,**

Personally, I honestly feel that this is a weakness of mine – an opportunity to grow. According to the rubrics it includes monitoring both curricular and extracurricular activities to ensure opportunities for all students. To truly gain inclusion for all students in every subgroup this must become a priority from the whole systems. As an educator teaching and coaching I strived extremely hard to overcome equity and inclusion issues. When I was in the classroom, I strived to make connections with students to ensure that they felt included and felt a sense of belonging. I loved the lessons about culture and gave the students opportunity to discover more information about their heritage and embrace family traditions.

One of the biggest things that happened related to impacting the special populations as an administrator happened while working with the Kansas Learning Network (KLN). KLN is contract funded by the Department of Education. The work centered around root cause analysis, data analysis, and improve student outcomes. My school was on improvement and designated to work with KLN. This included several meetings prior to conducting a root cause analysis. During the process in preparing for a leadership team meeting I received an email to complete some pre-work modules on the topic of improving the whole school. One of the biggest things that stuck out to me during a KLN presentation was that they referenced and focused on multicultural education distinctions of equity from Zaretta Hammond.

According to Hammond (2021), "… equity is about making sure every student is a powerful learner—that's the equity goal we should be shooting for" (para. 1). The distinctions of equity focused on celebrating diversity, privileged students, positive social interaction, and

reflection. The presenter discussed helping students of color see themselves in the literature and teaching privileged students about diverse perspectives. The presenter also gave some examples that she used in the classroom, and it took me back to the variety of things I have done to help students as an educator. I tried to ensure that I sent home letters to parents in their first language to help connect with them. I also worked to make connections with students by assigning cultural projects where the students were able to embrace their heritage. According to Hammond (2020):

> When people define equity as if it had only one dimension, it's akin to the parable of the six blind men describing an elephant. As each man describes the one part of the animal that he is touching—a tail, an ear, a trunk, a leg, and so on—each arrives at a significantly different description of what an elephant is. Each man is accurately describing the part he's touching, and yet each description on its own is incomplete and even misleading. To make progress in educational equity, we need leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to understand the different aspects of equity and how, when put together, they create more equitable outcomes for children. (p. 1)

This was a great experience, and I always felt the unit captured the attention of the students. It was a lot of discussion about educational equity, and I was amazed about how it stressed the importance of it. But what this revealed about myself, as an African American male, is that my lived experiences are still only that: mine.

There are so many more layers of diversity in this world, I'll speak more on this in Chapter 5, which means there are so many opportunities to continue my leadership growth as an ongoing learner. I have taken classes for multilingual learning and special education, but when it comes to many these related topics, I must reach out to people that are more

knowledgeable…just like folks who were reaching out to me after leading professional development about diversity.

**Dear Differentiated Instruction,**

I am really concerned about the direction that differentiated instruction is taking. The political state we are in with attacks on curriculum and the fight against staying "woke" agenda. This is something that needs to be watched, and it has a direct impact on how I experience my job and how I do my work as an instructional leader – which is an important expectation in the work of educational leaders. Currently the fight is against teaching about race in schools is extremely alarming to me, but it has also impacted me since I had done considerable historical research in my schooling and family studies. I found a lot of connection to these readings and lessons from my family over my life. Yet, I recall a social studies teacher contacting me regarding a specific event that happened in the community when learning about teaching a history lesson about Kansas History. The teacher specifically asked about information regarding a race riot. Part of me got extremely excited about the opportunity to share a story about an event in history, but then I paused and thought about "How could this impact my professional career?" In the end, I declined speaking about or sharing primary source documents, I didn't want to deal with the backlash if the lesson went bad. I just can't trust these situations, so I chose silence.

As a teacher, however, I recall creating lessons about the impact of the Civil Rights Movement, Brown vs. Board of Education, and my own personal struggles with race in America. When I was in the classroom and able to have more control of the narrative I felt more in control. I had the unique experience of learning about things that impacted history from my family stories and respected community leaders that visited with me. I gathered artifacts of all Black magazines, and even had newspaper clippings from my undergraduate dissertation about the

process of school desegregation, and I was able to show primary source documents and make connections to real world experiences. I recall the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death and working with the other social studies teachers to have rotations to ensure that all the students got to hear my unique personal perspective of being the only African American male teacher at the school. So, I had the opportunity to have my students write essays and posters around the "The Color of Unity", show students the 1968 *JET* magazine that my grandmother Susie McCraw had, and share stories of my great-grandfather, Morgan Wright, who in October 1958 was one of the first African Americans to vote in Fayette County, Tennessee according to a local newspaper at the time, the *Tri-State Defender*. It was amazing to share a story about how my family member not only voted but brought four others to vote with him, although one was turned away for not being able to read or write.

Unfortunately, I feel that teaching that same lesson today has the potential to be published in the newspaper and to turn into a political nightmare. I am unsure if I would have the courage to teach that same lesson, even though I feel it had a positive impact for the students. We were able to discuss the struggles and embrace how much progress we made. Now, I have my doubts, but I've also been inspired by hope before. I began to make connections to how differentiated instruction could capture the diverse voices and perspectives that could help all students learn. Differentiated instruction is something that needs to considered not only to reach students' academic ability, but also meet the needs diverse needs and worldviews of the students. I think it is interesting that diversity covers a broad variety of areas, and it isn't specifically about race. All students can learn about topics that can improve the overall educational experience. A diverse staff will offer new insight and perspectives to the instruction. With the diverse students we have in the classes we need to think about new approaches to reach all students – *each*

student. We have issues surrounding class, power, and social economic status, and race. So differentiated instruction can connect students and meet the diverse perceptions of the diverse students that we serve.

**Dear Dream Continued,**

Dr. King's dream is still in the shadows of America, and I am excited that I can share my dream for American education. Over 50 years ago we had the historic landmark supreme court case *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, and it happened just down the highway from where I live now. This case was to end racial segregation in America in public schools. Even today we have problems achieving total equality in education. According to Singleton (2015), "our assumption is that most educators enter the profession believing that every child has the right to learn, whatever the child's race, culture, or economic class" (p. 9). We are still in a state of education filled with conditions and systemic issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. We must realize the impact that leadership decisions can have on the education of so many in America's future. I have a dream that the world will take a stand against anti DEI movements. We need ongoing change that will improve the educational experience for all students regardless of skin color or ethnic background. We have the power to ensure that mission and vision statements that address issues that students of color face. We must ensure that we are monitoring effectiveness for all students to ensure equity. I am still dreaming of the day that we will eliminate microaggressions and discrimination in schools across the nation. We need a vision that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, and emphasizes that all students – *each* student – gets to feel a sense of belonging! I have a dream that all communities will be fully funded regardless of zip code or area code. I have a dream that we will never be satisfied with leaving out the history of our ancestors.

Educators must believe that all students have the right to learn and have faith that they can. According to Cobb (2017), "the achievement gap most frequently refers to the disparity between racial groups in performance on standardized test" (p. 47). Every child has the right to receive a quality education in America. State assessments have shown equity issues with the overall comparison to people of color, and we know that this is a systemic problem that places fault on our systems, and not just our students. America has failed to find equitable opportunities to provide quality education for all students. With equity issues in education, it is time to take a stand. We must not continue to accept these inequalities in education.

Inspired by Kansas' willingness to rethink education, and school reform, I still believe that we can come together and include all stakeholders to improve the American education system. Reform is possible, and we know we can continue to do it better. It is time for all stakeholders to come together and address the issues because we have students that are depending on us. The year 2024 is not the end of searching for ways to improve education. We need to get to the point where we are not afraid to address issues related to diversity. We must right the wrongs that have impacted so many students and communities.

I have a dream from the Coast of California to the white sand beaches in Florida that we will be able to share the important historical events in America to educate future generations and ensure that we don't repeat some of the same mistakes. I have a dream that from coast to coast that every discussion about education will be based on data. I have a dream that we will stop turning education into political weapons to get votes. I still have hope and faith that communities, educators, minorities, elected officials, and families can work together to improve educational institutions in America. I many times wondered if I could continue to dream.

**Is it a Dream Deferred?**

What happened to the dream?

Is it still deferred?

Did it dissolve in the political storms?

Is it still deferred?

Does it vanish behind the American flag?

Is it still deferred?

Does it sink in the sand of political debate?

Is it still deferred?

Does it disappear after each election?

Maybe the dream is deferred.

Is it still deferred?

Maybe the load is just too heavy to carry.

Is it still deferred?

I often reference still having a dream.

Is it still deferred?

I will share my final stories from my reflections.

Is it still deferred?

I still believe that we can make positive changes in education.

Is it still deferred?

Everyone must take ownership to make positive change.

Is it still deferred?

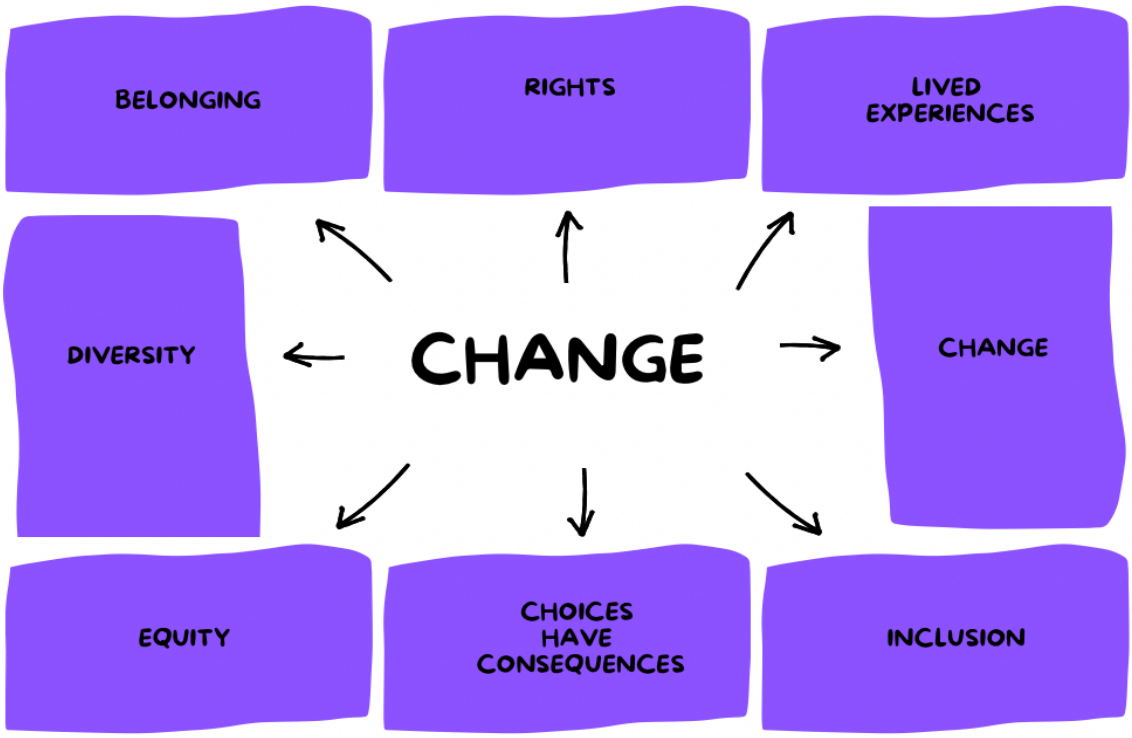
Take time to reflect on your organization.

## Chapter 5 - Choices, Consequences, and Change

The narratives you find in this chapter grew out of a focus on research question 2. The response to the research questions is based on my lived experiences as a professional related to the past, present, and future. The final narratives shifted into various forms to get full impact of my personal stories in forms of letters, and speeches inspired by historical figures. During this process I found myself having an internal struggle of explicitly sharing the lived experiences that I have faced. The narratives developed were centered around my personal lived experiences as a Black male educator as they intersect with research question two.

Overall, as you will see in Figure 5, I discovered through the autoethnographic process that I was wrestling with various educational leadership topics related to educational leadership, which are reaffirmed in the KSDE rubric and KSDE social studies standards. However, a central story line that emerged through the autoethnographic process that resonated during this process was finding a sense of belonging and struggling with the current process of educational change. It has been an internal struggle considering the impact of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging – and determining where African American leadership fits into the process of educational reform efforts. African American leaders face many choices, consequences, and many times experience a lot of changes in education. Make decisions that will make a positive change in the world and stand up and make a decision that will help with the DEI effort in the world. This is the way that real change happens. It takes leaders to make conscious decisions that will impact the world. Educational leaders are one of the most important leaders in the world.

**Figure 5.** ***Change Leadership***




*Note.* Overview of Chapter 5

## Past

I feel that it is time for me to take you back to when I was an educator in the classroom, and I am proud to say that I was a middle school history teacher. It was a wonderful time in my career teaching the standards under the direction of the Kansas State Department of Education. Let's not forget that history is about sharing information from the past and learning from it. We would reflect on CNN student news each week about historical events happening in the world, I taught students the importance of voting in the local, state, and federal elections. I also taught students about having respectful dialogue and supporting points of view with evidence from historical documents. This was part of preparing students for state assessments.

It was interesting as I tried to teach students about being respectful and having them watch segments of the presidential debates. The students were so intellectually engaged when we

discussed the issues that were important to them. I recall having them focus on the issues and not the political party that they wanted to support. I wanted to support…*critical*…independent, evidence based, and logical thinking while respectfully engaging with people who may disagree.

One goal of (KSDE, n.d.) was for the students to be "*thoughtful and engaged citizens"*. Historians take evidence from the past to make decisions to what happened and the reason behind it. Many bills like House Bill 2236 have the potential to impact many changes to the curriculum being taught. This bill would give parents' right to direct the education of their children. This could impact the educational material that was being taught if they found it to be harmful or not appropriate. It is an interesting concept to think about when we look across the United States and the elimination of curriculums which remove slavery. According to Mipro (2023), "parents who don't believe their children should be taught about slavery could potentially ignore history, one lawmaker argued in opposition to a wide-ranging parental rights bill" (para. 1). Reviewing primary source documents was essential to understanding historical accounts. I think about the importance of not only sharing first-hand accounts of information, but we also would look at the secondary sources. Identifying the varying perspectives and understanding through sharing and reflecting on diverse points of view. As per KSDE standards, it was important for the students to understand why people would carry biases based on personal beliefs and values. The goal was to examine the different perspectives and create your own personal conclusions. I was carrying the message from KSDE to our students in that we were expected to teach them to be critical thinkers to make logical decisions and conclusions about their viewpoints.

Here, I offer a review of the History, Government and Social Studies (HGSS) Standards as it relates to our current political environment. Of note, I was a member of the Kansas HGSS

Standards Revision Committee, and I was the only African American selected to serve on the committee – but I engaged in respectful dialogue with others as we deliberated and made decisions.

**Choices Have Consequences**

One of my favorite standards teaching History was discussing how choices have consequences. This is something that I felt was important to helping all students as a life-skill, as well as helping them understand some of the individual and collective social actions that impacted historical events. At the same time, choices having consequences in this political environment lurks behind this writing, as I have altered details of many stories for ethical reasons, but I also need to keep in mind how it may impact my career ambitions. This has been a real struggle when speaking to many future educators of color. I strive to "keep it real" with them about the struggles I have faced being a leader of color. I have made choices to ensure that I continue to have the opportunity to help others. I have remained silent and held back on many of my personal stories and my true feelings about my life experiences. This included refusing to speak up about certain injustices that I have seen in the world.

I realize that the choices that I make can have multiple outcomes. Do you tell a coworker that you may have only recognized the issue in the hallway due to the students being minorities or remain silent knowing that you will be targeted as racist? I recall attending a training watching a YouTube video clip about bias. When you sit down and watch a video about the bias that many people have that is your reality it really impacts you. According to Stubblefield (2022),

> Calling out every issue that occurred with an African American student as being rooted in racism would have immediately disengaged my faculty in any productive conversations and professional learning about racial bias. (p. 39)

Watching the YouTube clip, I felt that I was watching my autobiography. When you see a video that shows people grabbing their purse close just because of the color of your skin and people pulling over a man driving a nice car it hurts when it's your lived experience. Many people won't admit bias or stereotypes that they have in public.

I continue to be seen as the acceptable Black man. I have adapted to my surroundings to get an opportunity to sit at the table. I have seen multiple times how different people have treated me when they see me on the weekend not wearing my suit. Imagine seeing someone looking at you like you are a criminal when you enter a gym. Then when they see their kid running up to you to get a hug the body language change. The choice I must make in that moment is one that I have made many times before. The choices that we make all come back full circle. Many times, in education you won't see the impact for many years. The choices that we make we will have to live with the consequences, and I've had to deal with that on a personal level as a code-switching African American male navigating predominantly White educational environment.

**Individuals have Rights and Responsibilities**

Each person in the United States was born with certain inalienable rights which is a key foundational part of our political culture. Unfortunately, these rights were not intended for people of color at the time. Teaching students about the rights that they have as a United States citizen was a great joy. Unfortunately, looking in the eyes of the students I saw the same thing young future leaders in the world. At the same time, I realized that not everyone in the world would see that, but they would see the shades of their skin color. Who determines who counts as a citizen?

Sitting in a master's class discussing critical conversations about race I heard others share some of their personal stories dealing with race. According to Singleton, (2015), "we will never

eliminate racial achievement disparities unless we have conversations about race" (p. 4). I was the only African American male in the class and found myself leading discussions about my personal lived experiences. It was multiple colleagues that shared stories of privileges that they didn't realize until they had family members that were people of color. Hearing stories about the issues that people were facing dealing with interracial marriage. They could now relate with negative interactions with police due to having first-hand experiences of being pulled over and questioned for no real cause. Hearing my lived experiences as an African American male really moved many of my classmates.

Sharing my personal reflection with my colleagues was empowering. In the past people had often tried to make me feel as if I was crazy and imaging the problems that I had simply based on the color of my skin. It was really eye opening that they seemed to want to hear about my lived experiences. Many seemed to be surprised of the stories that I shared. It was hard for them to comprehend that someone that they respected was treated like this. Many of my colleagues started crying and were filled with uncontrollable emotions.

Another story shared by a classmate was about how store employees were watching two children. One of this person's children was a biological White child and the other was an adopted Black child, and this parent discussed how she saw one kid being followed in the store and the other greeted without any problems. In this moment, I felt compelled – or safe enough - to share my worries for my son and how we had to have "the talk". When you grow up and you have experienced so many negative things in this world simply because of the color of your skin, you worry. As a result, I have taught my son the appropriate way to interact with police while being pulled over and to keep hands out of his pockets when going into stores.

**Why Does it Matter?**

I hope that it mattered because I am a human being.

Why does it matter?

I hope it wasn't just because you knew me.

Why does it matter?

I hope that you understand that many of your students face these same issues.

Why does it matter?

Without including the lived experiences of students of color we may never change.

Why does it matter?

Silence doesn't help the world change.

Why does it matter?

Everyone should have certain inalienable rights.

Why does it matter?

We all have a responsibility to make this world a better place.

**Societies are Shaped by Identities, Beliefs, and Practices of Individuals and Groups**

The United States was historically viewed as a melting pot due to a variety of cultures, immigrants, and beliefs that came to America. We live in a society that was shaped by a term that I taught to my students, the melting pot. Even though deemed as problematic in current contexts focused on adapting and assimilating to the dominant culture, I recall teaching my students the process of Native Americans being forced to live on reservations. I taught about the process of forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, and how they were forced to conform to the White American lifestyle with schools being weaponized against them. My students didn't realize that during those lessons I saw reflections of my life. By no means do I want to be

disrespectful to the tragic history of the Native Americans during this process, but I saw nonassertive assimilation in my own thoughts, experiences, and decisions.

While struggling to find my voice I realized that I was struggling with terminologies to use to express my thoughts. I received a journal article that discussed traditionally muted groups. Orbe (1998) explained, "Co-cultural approach to communication reflects a theoretical advance where those traditionally without societal power describe the ways in which they communicate within oppressive dominant structures" (p. 1). Communication has always seemed to be important in educational systems. During this process I have strived to communicate my struggle with being a minority leader and not offend the dominate structures. During this process I considered simply saying that I have adapted to fit in. Eventually, I realized that this was more than adapting, but it was some form of assimilation that I began to research more about the topic. According to Orbe (1998):

> Assimilation involves attempts to eliminate cultural differences, including the loss of any distinctive characteristics, in order to fit in with dominant society. Co-cultural group members work to "adopt the culture of the mainstream" (Triandis, 1976). The reasoning behind the assimilation perspective is simple: in order to effectively participate in dominate society, you must conform to the structure of mainstream organizations. (p. 10)

I continued to strive for ways to fit in and to identify ways to become more acceptable to many of my peers. I have seen many people that seemed to be outcast that refused to conform to the structure in place. Orbe (1998) further explained, "The reasoning behind the assimilation perspective is simple: In order to effectively participate in dominant society, you must conform to the structures of mainstream organizations" (p. 10). I found myself conforming to the

mainstream culture during my professional career. Understanding the best approach to working with the dominant culture in my mind helped me to continue to survive. Orbe (1998) gave examples of various types of assimilation. The list included nonassertive assimilation, assertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, nonassertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive separation, assertive separation, and aggressive separation. I found myself relating to nonassertive assimilation. This is the term that I focused on and replaced the term assimilation in the appropriate areas of this dissertation. It took many hours of reflection and self-discovery to determine the best form of communicating from my perspective. According to Orbe (1998),

> For those co-cultural group members using this primary communication orientation, physical avoidance is implemented whenever possible. However, when some interaction with dominant group members is unavoidable, co-cultural group members find themselves fulfilling existing expectations placed on them by dominant society. (p. 18)

Or rather, adapting to my surroundings while seeking ways to survive professionally. But again, I want to emphasize how learning about the cultures of others is important to me, as I am an ongoing learner. As an example, I learned from my major professor that if you are talking about Indigenous peoples, it is often preferred that you focus on their "tribal affiliations" to help maintain the individual and local identities of each Native Nation. In other words, I have my own blind spots and I am socially aware and cognizant enough to know that I still have room to learn. My leadership style, and my emphasis on engaging diverse stakeholders when pursuing school improvement and reform, stems from the value I place on continuing to learn and grow as a professional, and as a larger institution.

**Learning**

**L**earning about other's beliefs is important in education.

**E**veryday should be an opportunity to grow and seek opportunities to learn.

**A**ll students deserve the same dignity and respect.

**R**eflect on all interactions and seek ways to do better.

**N**ever think that you know it all.

**I**nteraction with other cultures should be one of respect.

**N**ot knowing isn't an excuse once you learn to do better.

**G**rowing each day should be a goal.

I am simply trying to express that I felt the power of the melting pot in my own life, as I had to adapt to give myself an opportunity to stay in a career that I valued as much as I did. Adapting was my way to have my own personal power, navigating so I could pursue my own American Dream - an opportunity of hope to be successful in the world. I presented myself in the most acceptable form of African American male that society could accept. I hid some of my inner blackness to ensure others were comfortable. I don't disregard many of my decisions that helped me gain the opportunity to get leadership opportunities. Living a life that reflected more of Carlton Banks, Martin Luther King Jr., Colin Powell, or Barack Obama was the way to continue to move up the ladder. I will continue to strive to make improvements to educational system until the world see my contributions. Many times, I struggle to find my voice. When writing poetry, I found the opportunity to share my thoughts. It seems at the end of the day my question centers around one thought. Do you see me? I feel many people don't understand the impact being a minority leader has. Sitting in a room knowing that you are the only one that has darker skin but sit in silence feeling that if you speak no one will accept or hear your thoughts.

**Do You See Me?**

I am the dark skin brother in the suit.

Do you see me?

I am the man that ensures that you feel safe.

Do you see me?

I am the one that speaks your language.

Do you see me?

I have learned your ways.

Do you see me?

I ensured that you could accept me.

Do you see me?

I don't allow you to know my thoughts.

Do you see me?

I don't give you a reason to be afraid.

Do you see me?

I ensured that you saw shades of my darkness.

Do you see me?

I have some of the same blood.

Do you see me?

Check my DNA!

Do you see me?

I allow you to see what I want you to see.

**Societies Experience Continuity and Change Over Time**

Societies continue to experience change over time. Explaining this concept to students was something that I strived to do to highlight the positive things in the world. Many things have changed over the time that has impacted the world. Technology, civil rights, educational system, and health care are some things that continue to evolve. Overall, while American history has continued to evolve and change over time, the story of "progress" seems to lean towards the Eurocentric narrative. I have seen changes from segregation to integration, and separation to isolation. Things have been becoming more complicated with the attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, making it more difficult to have critical conversations.

I want to say that the dreams that I have for American public education will happen one day. However, this won't happen until we close the achievement and equity gaps and have a more inclusive system. The achievement gaps seem to continue to widen between people of color and White students. According to Evans (2005),

> THE achievement gap, the persistent disparity between the performance of African American and Hispanic students and that of White and Asian American students, is perhaps the most stubborn, perplexing issue confronting American schools today. Closing the gap is widely seen as important not just for our education system but ultimately for our economy, our social stability, and our moral health as a nation. (para. 2)

I am truly hopeful that one day we will be able to make some decisions and steps to have a positive impact on helping to overcome the barriers that are having negative impacts on students of color. My heart feels for the students that are being harmed by decisions being made at the local, district, state, and federal level.

**Heartbeat**

**H**ard for me to understand that I matter to you.

**E**ach day you see me in your class.

**A**lmost every time I seem to be the problem.

**R**eading your book and looking at the pictures on the wall I don't see any connections.

**T**each me something that I can relate to.

**B**e myself unless it offends you.

**E**very day I struggle to belong in a system that wasn't designed for me.

**A**dapting is the best way to survive.

**T**wenty-first century learning versus twenty-first century teaching needs to be developed.

My heart feels that someday we will see changes in the education system that will truly embrace diversity. I see brief moments in time when the world stops and reflects on some injustices happening. This often happens in school districts, and schools are vehicles for preparing future citizens to be thoughtful and…*critical*…thinkers. You see this in the process of school desegregation. If you take time to review social media post over the last month, I am sure that you will find events that impacted a school in a negative way.

I recently attended a training and the presenter stated, "my consultant company offers DEI training, but people only seem interested after a negative event happens." I thought that it seemed a few years ago people were seeking opportunities to attend training due to the aftermath of various events that involved social justice issues. When the tragedy of the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery occurred, DEI efforts seemed to be acceptable. However, just a few years later it seems that many have forgot the impact that it had on our nation.

**Backwards Change**

Many things that have changed.

Unfortunately, many things have gone backwards.

Talk about change.

From affirmative action, women's rights, and diversity trainings has all gone backwards.

Attacking educations over myths of CRT isn't change.

Removing accurate historical facts is moving backwards.

Education continues to go backwards.

Struggling to understand if reform is really change.

Diversity efforts constantly going backwards.

Many efforts are negativity impacting change.

**Relationships Among People, Places, Ideas and Environments are Dynamic**

We are living in a divided nation that has conflicts and agreements over a variety of views in the world, and this has even been embedded in the American education system as well. Stakeholder groups must come together to discuss educational topics with a goal of making the best decision for all students and subgroups. Dialogue must be thoughtful, respectful, logical, and focused on substance when engaged in civil discourse. According to Singleton (2015), "speaking your truth means being absolutely honest about your thoughts, feelings, and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear" (p. 72). Productive dialogues don't mean that everyone will agree on everything. The focus would be to collaboratively build on a culture where diverse stakeholders voices are heard and welcomed at the table. Can educational leaders and stakeholder groups listen, reflect, and be responsive to alternative life experiences that each person brings to the table?

**Unity**

**U**ltimately

one of the hardest things is this world centers around unity.

**N**o one

democrats, republicans, nor independents

**I**s willing

to put aside personal interests

**T**o work together without it being all about

making decisions that include the students of color in the equation.

**Y**OU can make a difference!

For the sake of the children that we serve can we come together to make the best decision for all students? We must care about the social and emotional safety of all students. We must be intentional about including diverse stakeholder groups at all levels of the educational system to help accomplish this. Education shouldn't be about allowing a political party to dictate all the ideas for the perfect educational system. I taught students for many years the importance of the relationships that can impact the world and decisions that are made. Advocacy groups lobby at school board meetings, legislative sessions, and social media. To have unity we must have communication that is productive and allows for all voices to be heard. Each person must have value regardless of the title before or after their name.

I recall attending many trainings that discussed the importance of this. These trainings were centered around conflict resolution. Many times, people meet and discuss issues without considering other prospective of groups of students that will be impacted by the decisions determined. Recently I attended a training that mentioned the importance of having advocacy

groups at the table to discuss important issues. The people at the table must determine what the specific groups that need representation will be. Stakeholders at the table, even if not experts about the group, should select groups to advocate for. This will help to ensure that every group has a voice at the table, and this takes some dedication and ensuring that everyone is making ethical decisions. I wonder how different board of education meetings, educational committees, and school districts would take this approach to ensure that we have all stakeholder groups considered during decision making processes.

As an educator I was able to speak up about a variety of topics that impacted students. I had the discussions about how we incorporate teaching history and including the contributions of people of color more than just during Black history month (BHM) every February. I learned about BHM when I was a child from my family. I really can't recall the first time that it was recognized at school. I was a social studies teacher for many years and realized that many people still don't understand that BHM is recognized in the month of February. I want it to be documented due the number of educators that I have encountered over the years that were unaware of BHM and how to celebrate it. It is the shortest month of the year. Many people don't know it was founded by Dr. Carter G. Woodson in 1926. These were moments that I had to take a step back and politely agree to disagree. People may mention that it should be year-round and limiting it to one month many times can limit the contributions that many African Americans have made. The truth is that the contributions of African Americans aren't taught year-round. If you look at the textbooks across the nation you will see a lack of diversity found in them. I have participated in multiple textbook adoptions and saw firsthand the lack of history that included people of color.

Ultimately, the goal is to have diversity, equity, and inclusion in education for each student to have a positive experience in school. In the future the goal would be identifying how to include diverse stakeholder groups to gain perspectives that haven't been included in previous stakeholder groups. Striving to find equity in education should be a priority at the local, state, and national levels. Identifying ways to ensure that stakeholder groups include diversity should become a priority. When you bring different perspectives and mindsets to the table this can open new ideas to diversify educational perspectives. Increasing the voice of historically marginalized groups can help with understanding the diverse perspectives of education. Including the analysis of those groups can help bridge the gap. When you have people at the table to express and reflect on things that have impacted them in education based on their lived experiences will give a new perspective that can help us confront social justice issues in education. So, reflecting on the fact that social studies standards are asking that all students learn these core concepts, I struggle to see why leadership and policy makers across our state doesn't always consider how these concepts are alive in our decision making and stakeholder engagement processes for educational systems.

## Present

The goal of KSDE is to ensure that school districts are modeling diversity, equity, and inclusion. This states that the mission and vision should specifically address DEI in the school system. This seems to be a challenge if many of the stakeholders who represent diverse perspectives were not part of the development of the districts vision, mission, and goals during the redesign discussions. When thinking about Kansans Can School Redesign efforts the KSDE foundational reflection rubric for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion wasn't created at the start of the education reform. In this portion, I engaged in autoethnographic reflections and analysis

related to the KSDE Redesign Success Rubric. According to (KSDE, n.d.), KSDE Redesign Success Rubric four principles centered around 1) Student Success Skills, 2) Family, Business, and Community Partnerships, 3) Personalized Learning, and 4) Real World Application. When reviewing, however, I noticed a lack of connection between the KSDE Redesign and DEI rubrics - both created to improve the educational system in Kansas. According to KSDE (2021), the foundational structure rubric, focused on "*establishing culturally responsive environments" and "embrace diversity and inclusive environments"* (p. 1). This rubric focused on a wide range of diversity not specific to racial and ethnic diversity.

**Dear School District Leader,**

I reflect on my time as a building leader, and I have always been taught to follow the overall mission, goal, and vision that the district and board of education sets for the district. Any goal to include diversity, equity and inclusion in any work would have to follow the leadership from district office. When a school district that I once worked in explicitly had goals related to diversity, equity, and inclusion I was ecstatic. Unfortunately, I quickly realized that it wasn't embedded into the district's mission and vision, or it was hidden in coded language that the status quo doesn't have to unpack. For example, I explored the vision/mission statements and/or strategic plans of a few districts with involvement in Kansas Redesign. Here are some of those statements that I found that seem to be coded language that could be tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion: *lifelong learners, unified culture, belonging, community partnerships,* and *unity*. I included some questions that immediately came to mind as I read the statement. I will summarize each of these statements in hope to spark discussions for future improvements in the education system and any future educational reform movement.

*Lifelong Learners*

If we expect lifelong learning from our students, what about placing value in our teachers being lifelong learners? Being a leader of ongoing professional development for teachers is an essential expectation of educational leaders, and every year we are expected to learn new things that will have a positive impact on the students. As an ongoing learner myself, I reflect on how important it was for me to take classes to help my English language learner students, and how the population of Kansas continue to change as our students' populations are slowly becoming more diverse. According to the Irwin et al. (2021), the White student enrollment percentage was 75.9% in 2004, 65.4% in 2014, and 62.7% in 2021. This is an example of how educators need to continue to grow in their learning with diverse perspectives, as well as students, as it is also important for educators to learn about other cultures to ensure that they can more appropriately adapt to increasingly diverse student needs. Many times, I have dealt with educators making comments about students' hairstyles or touching the hair of students coming from non-White ethnic backgrounds. This can be offensive in some instances. Teachers should also be aware that some students shouldn't get water in their hair, or it will cause them to have to get it redone. These are just small examples that illustrate how ongoing education is needed for educators and the district should support and take the lead in ensuring that they are lifelong learners, alongside their students. In other words, we all could benefit from ongoing learning about our increasingly diverse students and families.

*Unified Culture*

Unified culture is something that I struggle with. Does this assume assimilating to the dominant culture? Thinking with positive intent it is something that would be wonderful, everyone accepts everyone's culture, and we can all become unified. The other thought process is: Does this mean assimilation is the goal? Whose culture is everyone expected to adapt to?

From my experiences, I see that there are fewer problems in school if the minority follows the lead of the majority. I regularly choose to act more like Carlton Banks than Will Smith. I have evolved into Uncle Phil. I have mastered assimilating by adapting to the White world around me. I continue to talk in a manner to ensure that people I interact with in the educational setting don't feel threatened. Many people have described this as being politically correct. These times are limited to ensure that I don't rock the boat too much, so I won't be thrown overboard. Yet, I have seen so many opportunities to improve our schools, and I failed to speak up. I have seen a variety of pep rallies and spirit weeks that don't take cultural differences into account. On numerous accounts I have seen staff getting in trouble for donning controversial costumes., including staff members dressing up as if they were border walls mocking Mexican immigration – something that is clearly inappropriate for all schools, especially schools with children from Mexican families. It is time for us to strive to unify cultures and embrace other cultures.

*Unity*

Statements such as "unity" and "belonging" are often found in mission and vision statements. There are coded words and phrases that represent a need for us to focus on diversity, but they aren't necessarily explicitly saying it. Who are we uniting? For example, they say we need to develop *productive responsible citizens in a changing society.* Another way to think about this phrase is "our White kids are going to need to be prepared to interact with a growing population of Black and Brown kids". If we can't explicitly talk about it, how will we become productive citizens in a changing society? As I mentioned previously examining some data related to belonging and the trend improved from the previous year in all categories except the African American subgroup. I just watched and waited to see if anyone would find the same issue that I saw when reviewing the data. When examining closely the African American

subgroup, I saw that is was still low and had been the lowest in all the years of the survey. Although, it wasn't always the easiest thing to do I finally spoke up and asked the question *Why?*

There were some awkward discussions after I pointed it out. One of my colleagues said, "you are right, I appreciate you for pointing that out." Another comment left me in shock when a colleague said, "that's my favorite group of kids." Honestly, when I hear statements like this it makes me feel that the person is uncomfortable and trying hard not to say the wrong thing, indicating this person doesn't have much practice engaging in this type of conversation. In other words, it's not a normal part of the institutional culture, which is a strong indicator that we still have work to do as professionals, and leaders. I have made many attempts to unify the culture as a building leader. I recall a time that I ensured that our welcome program at my school represented the ethnic make-up of my school. We made sure to have a diverse group of students speaking to start the program and allowing one student to greet the staff in her native language. The students we selected were African American, White, and Hispanic. This group represented the demographic makeup of the school. Any school redesign, reform, or school improvement effort should ensure that a variety of cultures are embedded in the organization. Unity is needed in all organizations to ensure that we are moving forward together and have collective efficacy.

*Civic Engagement, Equity, and Diversity*

Civic engagement, equity, and diversity are all important. Why does equity and diversity have to be lumped together? Many districts and the Kansas Redesign want to engage students in education and a strong push for community involvement. This ties well with the redesign. I think that being engaged in a manner that respects students of diverse backgrounds is very important. Ensuring that students of all social and economic backgrounds get opportunities that students in more affluent neighborhoods get is also important. It is interesting that civic engagement is

combined with equity and diversity, and it makes me wonder if this was done intentionally to hide the fact that they want to promote equity and diversity. My recommendation is that in the future it names specific ways that these things work hand and hand or separate into different areas of focus. Civic engagement doesn't seem to match the current political environment that we are in. It seems that voting is an important factor in being civilly engaged, but it also seems that voting rights are under attack. Petitioning and public speaking are things that could be considered as another way to be engaged, but it seems that many people of color are being silenced when they speak up. Individuals have the right to improve communities by staying civically engaged.

**Civic Engagement**

**C**an I vote?

**I**t's important vote.

**V**oting rights matter.

**I**s it a problem for me to vote because of my different perspectives?

**C**an't believe that you tried to stop me.

**E**ngaging in activist groups that understand me is something I seek.

**N**ever did I think you would seek ways to silence me.

**G**oing to continue to speak up.

**A**lways get out and vote.

**G**o and volunteer for community service.

**E**ven with your attempts to stop me.

**M**aybe one day I can influence public policy.

**E**ngaging in things that matter is important to me.

**N**ot going to give up on solving the problems in education.

**T**ogether we can make a difference.

*Belonging*

If students and family feel a sense of belonging it can have a major impact on student achievement and wellbeing. What does it take for minority students to feel a sense of belonging? I recently attended a visual learning training, and the presenter discussed the impact students having a sense of belonging had on student success. I listened to Hattie (2023) discuss during a presentation to Kansas educators how his research showed the impact of belonging, identities, and equity for students' educational journey. It seems that belonging is a distant cousin to DEI. I feel that belonging is the safe way to say that you want DEI embedded into your system, but I constantly find myself having to be careful about which words I'm using.

I have witnessed open records requests surrounding key words that are being associated with critical race theory, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Community stakeholders are increasingly searching for evidence of critical race theory (CRT) being taught in schools, and it dramatically impacts my ability to do my job. I felt worried about if I ever used specific words and phrases found in the open records requests, particularly since the media and politicians have started attacking DEI. I see people twist words to create a narrative that really isn't consistent with the point that was being made. It really changed me and impacted my thoughts and leadership decisions moving forward. It is interesting process to search emails to print off for these requests. During this process I felt hopeless and worried that this could become a big problem and dictate the way the district could make decisions in the future. I felt that what if I could have been spending my time on creating professional development over diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). I felt that I was looking for evidence against myself and any

work that I could be doing to promote a better sense of belonging. According to some district leaders I have talked to they are seeing these requests more and more.

This has been a challenge in education when you want to ensure that you are fostering a school culture that ensures everyone, adults and students, feels a sense of belonging. All our collective work towards this goal becomes at risk when these words and records requests are used as weapons in a broader political war. I recall sitting at a community meeting, and questions were being asked about the belonging book that was part of a staff book study. I ensured that stakeholders knew that my focus was simple: we want everyone to feel that they are a part of our school.

**You Belong**

Regardless of background race or gender.

You Belong

Regardless of shade of your skin

You Belong

If your family has two parents or a single parent

You Belong

If you are the only minority in the class

You Belong

It seems that it should be simple

You Belong

It seems that many people struggle to have that feeling

You Belong

When you are the only person of color

You Belong

When you have a different opinion than the majority

You Belong

Many people don't know that feeling.

They are struggling to belong

Many students have expressed that they have so many issues in school

They are struggling to belong

When I emphasize belonging, this includes families, students, staff, and the community, and we host a belonging night to foster that into our building culture. I have modeled belonging in many ways, such as ensuring at our belonging night that we had cultural foods from many of the students represented in the building. With diversity and equity becoming politicized, it seems as though belonging is a safer word that doesn't offend people, yet. Belonging is something that it's okay for minorities to identify with. My worry comes when I feel that adapting is what some may consider belonging, instead of someone being their authentic self. For example, you can center discussions around sense of belonging and possibly get high quality dialogue. Yet, if you mention something about DEI, many people get offended and think you are implying they may be racist.

I recently visited with a district leader that told me the impact that being a White female had on her in a system that has predominantly White male leaders. The district leader stated, "I feel like a unicorn, and they don't hear me. They are living in the good ole boy system and it doesn't seem that they hear anything that I have to say, so I just detach and stay to myself." I immediately told my story of feeling like a chameleon and how many times I have remained

silent since I wasn't in a setting that I felt I truly belonged. This makes me wonder if people truly are committed to having a sense of belonging in districts across the United States.

**Belonging**

**B**elieving that I matter.

**E**nvisioning a psychologically safe place for all.

**L**onging to be accepted.

**O**ur identity is welcomed and accepted.

**N**ot excluding others based on differences.

**G**iving everyone opportunities to be authentic selves.

**I**nteracting with others without prejudice or bias.

**N**orms that accept all including people of color.

**G**iving a voice to marginalized groups and hearing their concerns.

*Community Partnerships*

Does this mean the district will intentionally seek a diverse group of community partners? It seems that the redesign movement in Kansas had a major focus on partnerships and involving stakeholders. This can truly impact schools in a positive manner. Community partnerships can allow students to have new opportunities. The thing that many schools miss is ensuring that you get a diverse groups of community partnerships. I recall partnering with a local coffee shop that would provide snacks and tutoring after school for the students. It was an opportunity that was good for students to interact with a small business owner. Ensuring that when community partnerships are formed that it includes a variety of stakeholder groups. Community partnerships seem to have been a big part of the redesign. I believe that I was

successful at building strong community partnerships, but realized it takes an intentional effort to find diverse community partnerships.

A building that I served planned to establish a diverse community partnership with a local college. Unfortunately, the opportunity never came to fruition due to me leaving. The college athletics programs many times had high numbers of minorities. Ensuring that students get the opportunity to see positive role models that look like them would be an amazing story.

**Dear Future Redesign,**

Moving forward we must ensure that we are being more intentional about ensuring that we are embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion at all stages of redesign, reform, and school improvement. Regardless of the political climate and controversies we need to ensure that decisions made are what is truly best for all students. This inclusion of *all* was a key part of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s I *Have a Dream* speech, as he emphasized that he wanted all students to be together (King, 1963). We have come too far in education to not continue moving forward with his dream.

We need to review the redesign success rubric and ensure this work is being done, and make sure we keep the focus on the right stuff. It seems that KSDE is on the right track with the Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric focused on DEI, but it seems that districts are not embracing them all together. Thinking back on my personal experiences with redesign, I don't remember ever being presented information regarding the rubrics as something to focus on for school improvement and redesign. I think there should be an expectation to have civil dialogue surrounding DEI. It should include discussions between White and people of color regardless of opposing perspectives. Thinking back on the core principals outlined in the HGSS standards, if

we have those expectations for our students, we should expect the same from the leaders and professionals working in our systems as they try to improve them.

**Dear Educational Institutions,**

As I reflect over my entire career, I have realized that I often feel alone in many educational settings. The journey began with my decision to become a teacher. From the first day I entered a class I was one of the only African Americans in my educator prep classes. I recall having two other people of color that were in the education program. Unfortunately, along the journey one of them dropped out of the program. I know that a grant funded program called *Project Diversity* helped connect me with other minority educators in the school district. This program was specifically geared towards people of color that were education majors. The partnership was with the school district and included mentoring with administrators. Many of the administrators were people of color, and this was empowering. It gave me hope that I could have a powerful impact in this world. This was my first experience in college that I truly felt that diversity was valued, and it changed me in a good way. The program expanded to middle and high school mentoring, and it was a great experience talking to the younger students about my experience and how I was looking forward to being a teacher. It also helped me build relationships that helped me as I completed early field experiences and student teaching. Like many other things that I have seen that had a positive impact on students of color, the funding was eliminated. This was really something that encouraged me and changed my life, as it gave me some lifelong mentors that included an African American administrator who still gives me advice today.

*Project Diversity* in many ways was like the *Call Me Mister* program at Kansas State University. The program at Kansas State University is focused on minority males in education. I

have the opportunity each year to speak on a panel discussion to future minority male educators about my experience as a minority leader. It is always one of highlights of my school year. When asked, I never hesitate to say yes, because I recall the importance of the minority administrators that I had the opportunity to meet when I was an undergraduate student. I still get the opportunity to reach out to those minority leaders today. This led to me getting an opportunity to invite the current Misters to come tour my school.

Freire (2000) stated the need to "overcome[e] a false perception of reality" (p. 86). At some point we need to acknowledge that continuous improvement of the mission and vision of each educational institution is a norm in educational leadership that isn't going away, and diversity and equity are inherently attached to those conversations. According to Heifetz et al. (2009) "there is a myth that drives many change initiatives into the ground: that the organization needs to change because it is broken" (p. 17). Society needs to overcome this mindset. Covey et al. (2020) conveyed, "Proactive people base their behavior own conscious choice based on values, rather than a product of their conditions, based on feelings" (p. 78). This is the mentality needed to have an impact on the educational system. The mission and vision statements must be a lived vision and not just something that sounds good without any action items. It is time to question the status quo and make determinations to what needs to be changed, and this is what is expected of us as leaders. We have had so many struggles over the years in the fight for social justice.

All educational leaders should strive for continuous improvements in the educational system. I agreed with Heifetz et al. (2009), "no one who tries to name or address the dysfunction in an organization will be popular" (p. 17). The job of educational leaders is to make decisions that have positive impact on students. The goal is for students to learn and have continuous

growth. It seems that we expect those results, but the rules change when it comes to discussion about race, DEI, and SEL. It is time that someone takes a stand for the marginalized groups and keeps considerations of the struggles they face in education due to policies in place. Reflecting on all the various stakeholder groups that impact social justice in education it will take a targeted approach to make change. Each stakeholder group has different perspectives and motives for being in the educational system. It is time for stakeholder groups to put aside differences and have collaboration that makes decisions based on what's best for all students. We must seek more effective ways to improve the education system.

Literature supports that seeking participation from all stakeholder groups would help improve the educational system. According to Adams & Bell (2016), "the goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 3). This is an awareness that all groups of people are important during any educational reform movement. Including diverse stakeholder groups will help create change for the well-being of all. However, the literature failed to show any intentional inclusion of all ethnic groups or included diverse populations during the educational reform movements. Understanding the intersectionality between social justice and diversity is extremely important to ensuring that external stakeholder groups have diverse representation. According to Adams et al. (2023), "without addressing intersecting issues of injustice in all its forms, we cannot truly value diversity" (p. 4). Taking the time to listen and understand how policies may impact a marginalized group of people would be extremely important during the planning and implementation process. Embracing diversity can have a tremendous impact on educational reform. Realizing that many people don't recognize things that impact their life is important to consider when not including diverse stakeholder groups. Challenges won't be

overcome if you never address issues that could impact minority groups. Seeking ways to ensure that each of the stakeholder groups include diverse groups will be something that can have a tremendous impact on future educational reform movements. However, this work isn't going to be easy with the current attack on the educational systems involving anything with DEI.

The importance of social justice in education seems to continue to be an ongoing debate. Recently, the Supreme Court had a court case regarding affirmative action in college admissions that could tremendously impact students (Najarro et al., 2023). This decision centered around race. This is a decision that will affect higher education diversity. This was a tool that helped with injustices overtime related with discrimination against people of color. I watched the news and heard Former President Barack Obama say in a statement following the affirmative action ruling:

> Like any policy, affirmative action wasn't perfect. But it allowed generations of students like Michelle and me to prove we belonged. Now it's up to all of us to give young people the opportunities they deserve—and help students everywhere benefit from new perspectives. (Vakil, 2023, para. 2)

The problem with addressing social justice issues is that everything has become political. We have race conscious policies that have caused issues between majority and minority ethnic groups. It seems that we don't search for compromises or have dialogue that helps address concerns. Many discussions related to social justice issues lead to arguments. Experiencing denied opportunities or rights shouldn't be up for debate. Sometimes people just need to come together and work on resolutions. It will take dedication to prevent and eliminate discrimination in education. In my experience this work needs to be done with multiple stakeholders at the table working side by side.

**Dear Diversity Partner,**

I recall being in a training and the presenter asked each participant to find clock partners. I remember sitting in the room glancing around and not seeing much diversity in the room. I counted three African American and five Hispanic educators from the four elementary schools represented in the room from my district. There were close to two hundred educators in the room. I followed the presenters' directions and found a partner to share responses to prompts. The presenter placed a timer on the wall and directed everyone to continue to rotate after we shared information with someone. I happened to get in a group with one of the other minorities in the room. It was amazing that the other partners during the day and got similar responses during the discussions. Until I got in the group with the other minority and the response given was amazing. The educator discussed the prospective that was taken to ensure that minorities felt welcomed in the classroom and students were able to connect with the curriculum. The educator awareness that all the students in the class came from both ethnic and social economic backgrounds.

It really had me thinking about seeing bulletin boards in hallways across many districts that lacked representation; simple things like different ensuring that you have multiple ethnic groups represented. I have been successful over the years to implement belonging walls that student, staff, and family members could submit to be on a school bulletin board. I felt this was one of the most diverse boards that we had in the school and really represented our school. I have noticed classrooms that have no diversity representation on the walls. I truly feel that have diversity representation on classroom walls can have a positive impact on students. Unfortunately, I have remained silent so many times in fear of the repercussions. Many times, I didn't feel that I had allies at the table, so I just remained silent. As an African American male, it

seems that so many people will feel as if you are calling them racist if you point out things that help with diversifying the school and help students feel a sense of belonging. The future is full of possibilities and potential for improving future educational reform movements to address the lack of diverse stakeholder groups.

**Do I Count?**

I count the number of times I have been confronted with hate.

Do I count?

It seems to change due to the color of my skin.

Do I count?

My shadows of emotional stress caused by the lights.

Do I count?

Simply because of the constitution.

Do I count?

The seat at the table is available unless I break my silence on the injustices of the world.

Do I count?

Everyone has rights in this world.

Do I count?

What is my value in the eyes of the oppressor?

Do I count?

What is my responsibility?

Do I count?

I must continue to overcome the struggles.

Do I count?

This struggle is real!

Do I count?

I do if I code-switch, remain silent, and adapt and assimilate to Eurocentric views.

Do I count?

I am still finding my place to make a change.

Do I count?

This is my final ballot of hope.

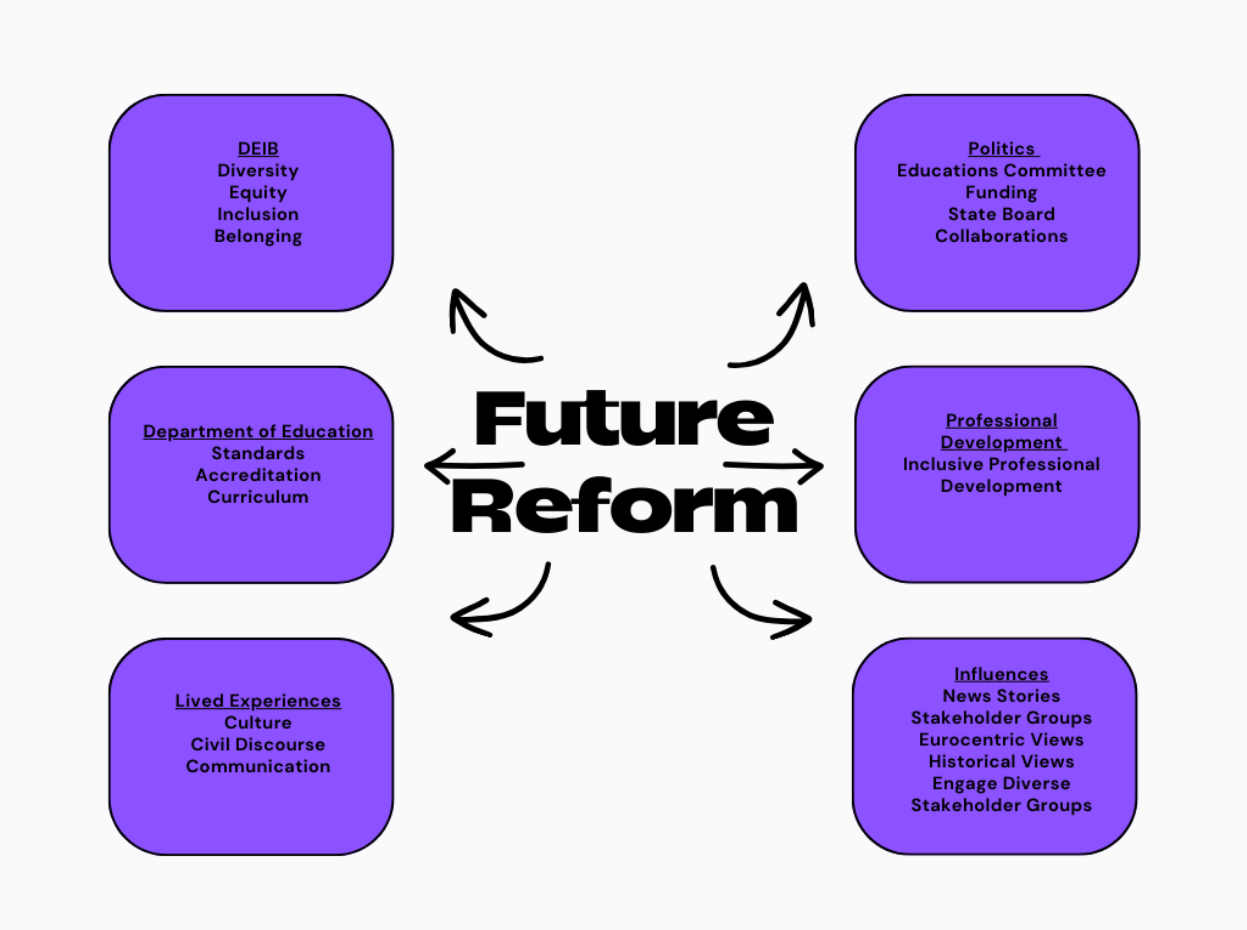
## Future

**Dear State Board of Education,**

I am writing to request that you continue to work to improve the educational system for students. During the process of researching educational reform, I have seen foundational structure rubrics that mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion. I have yet to identify the impact the rubric has had on school districts across the state. My request would be to revisit the rubric and identify ways that districts could potentially gain recognition in work surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Please seek ways that DEIB is included in the accreditation process. Moving forward for any reform movement identify ways to ensure that you strive to get not only diverse stakeholder groups, but also people of color. During this journey I also found that work around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become something that has caused division when brought into discussion in education. This has impacted many school districts across the United States. Over time the topic changed to add belonging into the DEI approach. I found that diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging has become a more common approach. I saw tension between DEI and DEIB during my dissertation process. I then realized that during my leadership tenure I have shifted my focus on belonging due to the

political impact DEI and DEIB work was having. It seems that belonging is more acceptable and less threatening to the status quo. It is imperative that students find a sense of belonging in schools. In conclusion, any future efforts in educational reform, redesign, and school improvement have important things to consider when making decisions about change in education. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is something that should be embedded into any redesign project. I wonder what Dr. King's dream would be today. See figure 6 for more information regarding future redesign.

**Figure 6.** ***Future Reform***




*Note*. The future hope for educational reform.

I have a dream of a school redesign that will embrace, implement, and be intentional about diversity, equity, and inclusion even while the path to include DEI into educational reform may

seem to be unattainable at this moment in time. With many states working to cut DEI funding in education and eliminate curriculum that focuses on including historically silenced perspectives in historical events, this is a tough time, particularly in predominantly White educational environments. I understand that things may be uncomfortable when discussing these things. Honestly, this has been one of the hardest things for me to write.

The internal struggle of sharing my story to the world is life. A war is raging. I honestly feel that I have been a bird in a cage waiting patiently to be freed. When company comes over, they want me to come out. I have continued to see a trend, when major situations related to race happen, I have been called to help find solutions. Yet, when things are calm it's time to return to the cage. This has happened on multiple levels of the educational systems in which I have worked. It has been a common theme that I have seen in education to be reactive when events unfold surrounding race. I have purposely omitted the details of my story. Many people refuse to recognize, or may not recognize, the impact of DEI not only on students, but on minority educational leaders.

One of the most recent events was George Floyd's death at the hands of a police officer. It created a big push in educational settings to discuss race, and how it impacts the world. It was a time in education that I was getting the opportunity to share my life experiences, my personal encounters with racism over the course of my life. I attended antiracism trainings and engaged in new conversations about diversity. It was a time in my life that I was able to share my life experience without feeling a sense of rejection, and this happened at both the K-12 and university levels. Sharing and pointing out equity issues at the time seemed welcomed. It seemed that people wanted to have a better educational experience. People wanted positive change and seemed open to it.

Overtime, I began to feel as if people didn't really want to see changes in the world, and it was too much to ask for systemic change; maybe folks just felt a brief sense of remorse for the public attention given to George Floyd's death. After the dust settled, the headlines changed from Floyd to anti-CRT and removal of diversity training. Then I slowly began to see the removal of discussion surrounding race and diversity initiatives. Fear set in. People I know, know it's the right thing to do, but refuse to fight for doing the right thing. This is how I have started to feel. I do understand that people don't want to lose their jobs over diversity training; as I have made clear throughout this dissertation, I share a fear and have continued to code-switch as a Carlton Banks evolving into Uncle Phil.

Here are some of my lasting words to future educational leaders. Please consider the importance of professional development that will allow the system to have both long- and short-term goals surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, and don't be afraid of the value it brings to internal relationship building and adult learning in your schools. It is so important to embrace a culture of change and ongoing improvements. It will take brave educational leaders to take on the task. Many leaders remain silent due to fear. This opens future opportunities for professional learning and growth for the entire organization. It will take someone that has courage and desire to truly make an impact. I have recognized my fear over the years to speak about every issue and concern that I face. I continue to search for my role and determine if it is safe enough to take on the task. This is why I my reflections continue to remember my last interaction. Many times, I just revert to total survival.

## Chapter 6 - "Am I One of Them Ones?"

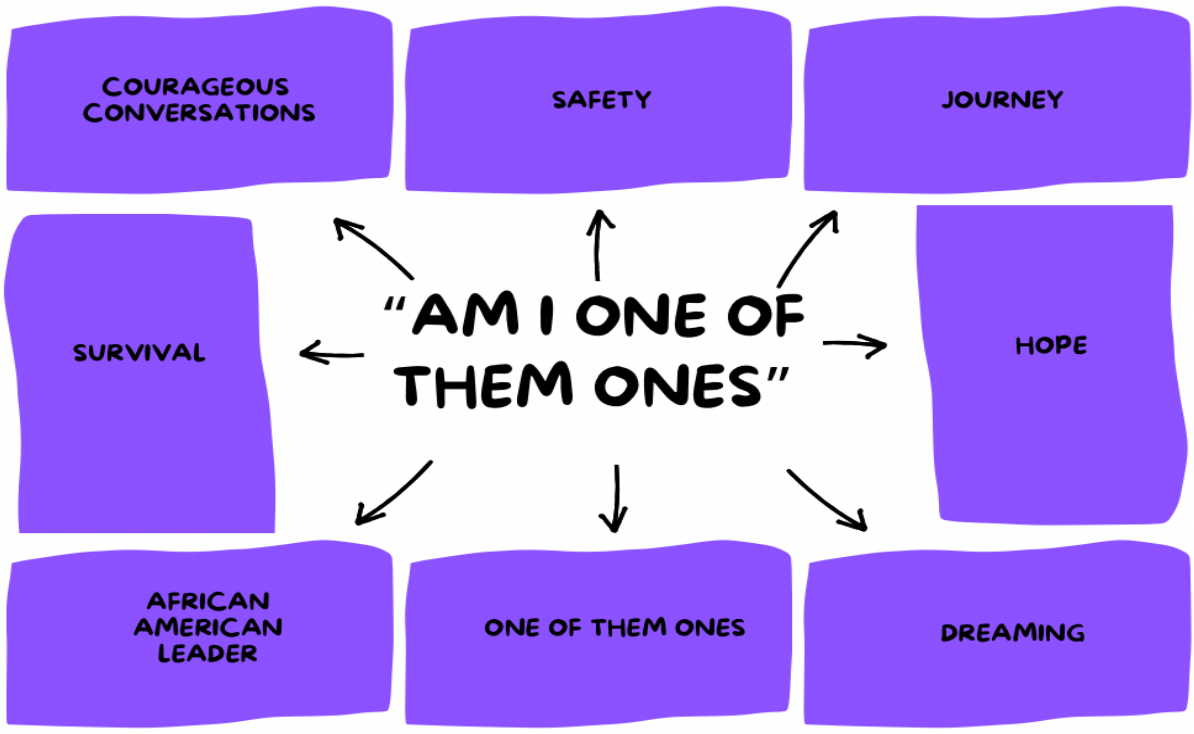
Having the courage to discuss the journey of my survival hasn't been easy. Many people in the world haven't experienced how being a minority impacts your career. They haven't experienced how pointing out too many flaws in the system can be risky. When I voice concerns as a minority, I must be aware that many people may get offended or feel that I'm calling them racist. As an example, I once had a colleague make a statement about something being *ghetto* – a clear trigger word for African American stereotypes. I took the liberty to send an email expressing my distaste for talking about a student like that. It took less than 24 hours for that person to confront me and say that I was calling them racist and that my email offended them. In other words, their initial reaction seemed to be more about being defensive, instead of reflective. I have been in situations like this so many times in my career - it is exhausting. Another person playing victim. When you are a person of color it's difficult to bring forward conversations on issues surrounding race.

I feel that I have made decisions based on survival, decisions that ensured that I wouldn't interrupt the status quo, all while assessing my safety. The safety aspect is an ongoing internal battle based on me trying to stay true to my core values, and simultaneously assimilating and code-switching to ensure that I am accepted by other educational professionals. Throughout this autoethnography I've taken my time to figure out the best way to communicate my innermost thoughts – battling that same balance. I finally found the courage to share my story of searching for a safe way to express my lived experiences as an African American male Leader, and my dream remains: To ensure that all students will get opportunity to have equitable educational experience. This has been my opportunity to have a courageous conversation and break my years of silence on some important issues in education. I have no regrets with my choice to adapt,

code-switch, and find my sense of belonging, but I'm finding out about myself through this process, as well as how to articulate it.

Overall, as you will see in Figure 7, I discovered through the autoethnographic process that I was struggling with staying safe and learning survival techniques. I learned a lot during this process about myself and educational leadership that is centered around my lived experiences as it relates to DEI. I realized that DEI was listed in the foundational structure rubric, but belonging was not included. When I started this journey, the focus was on DEI until political attacks started happening. It appears by adding belonging to DEI it is a more acceptable approach.

**Figure 7.** ***"Am I One of Them Ones"***




Note. Overview of my final chapter.

**I Have Feelings**

I have feelings.

I can express my displeasure.

I have feelings.

I have a voice and can communicate my feelings.

I have feelings.

I am determined to speak up to about things impacting the students.

I have feelings.

Many times, I am sitting in my thoughts.

I have feelings.

My silence many times is due to thinking about the impact that it can have on my family.

I have feelings.

You aren't going to stop me from making an impact.

I have feelings.

Stop coming to me only when you need to solve race issues.

I have feelings.

I am not the token.

I have feelings.

When you make references that the job is a lock since I'm a Black man.

I have feelings.

I am a qualified candidate.

I have feelings.

I just struggle to communicate them to someone that doesn't have empathy towards me.

This reminds me of the time that I took Civil Discourse training which was focused on communication that was acceptable. I realized that it was training me according to the majority. How many times would you speak up? If you knew that once you offend someone this information could spread, and people stop talking to you in fear that you will call out comments that they say. Well, that's how I personally feel. I am hopeful that someday someone will read this and have the feeling that "someone finally relates to me." This has been my journey during the dissertation process. What started as a focus on Kansas Redesign and diverse stakeholder engagement evolved into self-identifying my survival techniques and finding ways to name them in literature, which has really been empowering. I have been inspired by the Temptations hit song *Just My Imagination* (running away from me).

**Just My Imagination**

You made me wonder if I was going crazy.

It was not my imagination.

I told you my struggles and shared my story.

You told me it was just my imagination.

I saw the headlines about social justice issues.

It was not my imagination.

I personally experienced some interactions that I questioned.

You told me it was just my imagination.

I entered the doctoral program and took classes that related to me.

It was not my imagination.

I told you that it's some issues regarding race in the educational system.

You told me it was just my imagination.

I attended educational conferences with diverse representation.

It was not my imagination.

As an African American school administrator, it seems that part of my success has been tied to my ability to dress nice and adapt to the dominant culture. Adapting is an important part of survival of an African American. African American leaders must realize how to communicate in a manner that make others feel safe. I have been invited to attend training for how to have civil discourse. Now please don't take it as something that I feel is a negative. I have realized how many times my passion has been confused for being an angry Black man. I recall discussing my internal struggles with my uncle. I was facing the feeling that I constantly must adapt or assimilate to my surroundings. He encouraged me and emphasized that that there was "nothing wrong with assimilating." The point that he made was that you must do things to have better opportunities. It took me by surprise, but it did make sense that if I am assimilating for a purpose in life then there is nothing wrong with it. I mean, if Uncle Phil did it, why shouldn't I listen to mine.

Early in my career it was very exhausting to repetitively explain to people, "No, I am not mad, but I do have the right to speak out against things." I recall a time that I felt misunderstood with a parent. I made a discipline decision about a student and the parents were extremely upset with the outcome. The student broke a rule according to the handbook and refused to discuss the matter with administration. This resulted in the student getting a detention and referral. I was new to the district, and I could feel that the parent had some status in the community. I called the parent and discussed the concern and the mother decided to come to the school. When they left my office, I thought that the interaction was positive, until a staff member contacted me and said:

"I think you made them upset." I quickly asked, "why do you say that?" Then I was shown a Facebook post. The parent's post was a totally different version of the story. It detailed how the new Black principal was disrespectful and rude. Now I was angry and upset. I realized that I had to communicate calmly to try and resolve the conflict. I picked up the phone and offered an apology if the parent felt that I was disrespectful. Inside I was really upset because my confidence was misunderstood. I was not angry. It was interesting that when we discussed the situation, we were able to work out the misunderstanding and the parent apologized to me later in the school year. Fortunately, the parent was willing to visit about the concerns that she had and removed the post. I feel that I need to take time to determine the best form of communication to use and best way to present myself to others. This is more than just leadership skills when you are a leader of color – it comes with some extra layers of consciousness decision making.

**Safety vs. Survival**

**Safety** won't challenge the status quo.

**Survival** is the decisions that you must make to determine if you have a long career.

**Safety** is putting aside your sense of belonging to ensure that others are safe.

**Survival** is making decisions to ensure that you will be able to make an impact on future POC.

**Safety** is a dream that may never become a reality in today's political climate.

**Survival** is code-switching and ignoring comments to ensure that you have a seat at the table.

My survival has been dependent on the art of code-switching. Many times, in my life I have depended on code-switching to ensure that I was respected among my peers. Overtime, I feel that I have lived a double life with my different roles during the week. On Sunday morning I can be seen as an ordained minister of the gospel. Communication with the congregation is one filled of faith inspired sermons and bible teaching. I can walk into a setting each Sunday that has

African American leadership. When I look around the room, I am not the minority, but a part of the majority. I communicate by illustrating Bible stories into inspirational messages. Knowing the call and response for the traditional black services is must.

"God is good all the time God is good' and "Let the church say Amen."

It is hilarious to think that it's certain things that you should know and do in a traditional Black congregation. I included this to ensure that everyone is aware that regardless of the location it is some form of code switching that happens.

**Come Sunday**

I present myself to the world so you will be comfortable.

Come Sunday, I allow myself to be free.

I talk your language so you will accept me.

Come Sunday, I don't worry about you.

I dress professional so you will see me.

Come Sunday, I don't have to change.

Monday thru Friday I can be seen in my suit and speaking a language that has allowed me to move up the ladder. My unique skill set of speaking the acceptable language and dress has allowed me the opportunity to have many leadership opportunities. I moved to a town in Kansas and quickly was able to be accepted to serve on multiple boards in the community. It was a great honor to be able to say that I was one of the first African Americans to serve on certain boards. Yet, a staff member made statements about certain minority groups that made me uncomfortable. They referred to how they didn't feel safe due to the parent or student actions. They expected everyone to have the same type of expression and voice tone. In many cases it was due to the tone that the parent was talking in that really influenced the thought process of the staff. During

this moment I remember thinking how I didn't feel the same way in many of the situations I experienced. I will be honest to say that I have witnessed parents, staff, and leaders in some discussions that the tones were very inappropriate across all cultures.

I specifically remember one situation in which I felt the parent was just upset and passionate about getting help for her child that was struggling with academics. While staff member saw it as a parent in rage and felt unsafe. The staff members even approached me telling me that maybe I should reach out to another building principal for advice. In my eyes I saw a parent advocating for her child about getting changes to the plan. They saw an angry and aggressive woman. I paused and wondered why the staff member would make that comment. Soon the person expanded and mentioned that the other principal called the police on someone with a similar experience. These moments make me reflect on the impact that I can have on peoples' perspective for African Americans.

The weekend is another story. Coaching and watching sporting events will have you seeing a different side of Mr. Cheeks. This includes raising my voice for the player to hear and encouraging them with fiery speeches. My life as a coach has left me with some great moments and some that have left me upset. Once I was coaching a young girls' team and was yelling at one of my White players and a parent from the other team started yelling at me. It was an interesting scenario, because the other coach was yelling at their girls a lot more than I was. The only difference was that I was a Black coach yelling at a White player. I immediately turned to the parent of the young lady and asked, "are you okay with me yelling at your daughter?" The parent who was normally quiet and yelled with a loud voice replied, "yes you can!" I was simply trying to encourage the young lady not to be afraid to shoot the ball.

When you are going to the gym or basketball court, I have a different language. ~~I started laughing, as I began to write about the trash talk that you talk on the court would not be acceptable to many people.~~ It is funny to see television shows that I watched growing up that had episodes in which the African Americans code-switched. Some of the shows were The Jeffersons, Fresh Prince, and Family Matters. It was embedded into so many television shows that I thought it something that you were expected to do. The more I begin to think about it this is how society has taught people how to act, talk, and dress based on their zip code or profession. This made me think about if African Americans have a place in the current educational system.

**Do we?**

Do We

Truly have an educational system that represents all students.

Do We

Express that students are important.

Do We

Show students that they truly matter.

Do We

Give students opportunity to feel a sense of belonging.

Do We

Work to ensure that students see a reflection of themselves in schools across America.

**Dear Leader of Color,**

My journey as an educational leader has been unique working in predominantly White schools. My stories of my journey have been completely different from most the people I've been surrounded by. I have felt discouraged at times that things won't change. It seems that

every conference, professional development opportunity, and leadership meeting that I attend lack people of color in the room. I'm not trying to say that the people in the room aren't capable of being in the positions that they are in, or that they are not loving and caring educators operating from their own lived experiences and training. I just find it hard to believe that we don't have other people of color that can get the opportunity to have leadership roles. We have a systemic issue. According to Love (2023), "the field of education saw a resurgence in calls for anti-racism and equity in the spring of 2020 when the world watched George Floyd die at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin" (p. 214). Following that tragic event, more African Americans were killed, gaining more national attention. Love (2023) found "school districts and colleges rushed to tap diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders to form task forces, committees, and working groups to tackle the issue of racism" (p. 214). Maybe that surge will lead to more leaders of color? My dreams for educational equity for students seem even more distant when we don't have representation in classrooms and leadership roles in education. I have shared snapshots of some of my experiences as a leader. During this process of writing my dissertation I have heard from my major professor and committee that "*You aren't telling the entire story*" and "*You seem to be holding back*".

## Representation

Recently, I attended a state sponsored conference that would provide supports for school. When I arrived at the conference immediately, I glanced and saw very few people of color in the audience. To my surprise an African American from a larger school district approached me to introduce himself. He told me that he needed to meet me because there aren't very many people of color working in the state of Kansas in leadership. I immediately laughed as he explained that he told a colleague that is one of the first things that he does when he goes to conferences. I

knew exactly the feeling that he was describing. I began to wonder why? According to Will (2022):

> Scholars say that the current lack of Black educators in the profession can be traced to the aftermath of the *Brown* decision. Prior to *Brown*, Black principals and teachers comprised 35 percent to 50 percent of the educator workforce in the 17 states with segregated school systems. Today, no state has anywhere close to those percentages, and nationally, just 7 percent of teachers, and about 11 percent of principals, are Black. (para. 9)

Every room that I walk into I always look around to see if other people of color are in the room. Many of my colleagues don't understand the reason that I naturally do this, but I feel it's due to the fact they aren't one of the only people in the room with the same skin color. Many people may not see the value of having diverse staff teaching the students. According to Anderson et al., (2022), "Exposure to other backgrounds and cultures prepares students to live, work and serve in a culturally diverse society. Diversifying classrooms benefits students cognitively, emotionally, and socially" (para. 7). I always remember growing up as a child and the lessons of Brown vs. the Board of Education were celebrated. The counter story would be the impact it had on the African American educators immediately following the decision and the impact it's still having today.

## Part of the Journey

I find myself as the creators of the clothing brand "*Fubu"* that was popular in the 90s. They created a brand for the people who wore it, and I remember I wore the brand many times growing up. I say this because I feel that education should be tailored to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging and connected to learning environment. It may sound silly, but I did feel a sense of empowerment knowing that the brand of clothes that I was wearing was made by,

and for, African American men. Even today one of my favorite suit companies is Black owned. It gives me a feeling that I can do it. I hope that one day future leaders of color can look and see the courage it has taken me to speak up about my personal life experiences. I hope they will be able to realize that someone else gets it. According to Love (2023), "the insidious nature of educational reform lies in the masquerade of seemingly benign and benevolent policies that are, in fact, deeply anti-black" (p. 258). The topic is how we make a change in the educational system to overcome structural problems in the educational system. Love (2023) discussed the concept of "educational reparations" to overcome structural issues (p. 259). We must acknowledge we have some system issues that need to change. Love (2023) expanded, "Educational reparations are not about creating a better education system that will benefit only Black children. Instead, all children benefit from an abundantly funded public education system" (p. 263).

This dissertation is a letter not only to future educational institutions that can help guide school reform, but for future minority leaders to understand the navigating and forces that ask us to adapt and assimilate to get a seat at the table. I am unsure if it's the correct way to handle things or even saying that you must do it the same way I have, but you must consider the cost. And right or wrong, I've become more cognizant of code-switching as my reality. Code-switching becomes natural the more you climb the ladder. However, I have also realized that my legacy will not be remembered by the process it took me to get to where I am in life, but the impact that I made when given the opportunity. It is important to take the time to ensure that students of color are represented. This includes being intentional in having representation at schoolwide assemblies and ensuring that bulletin boards and posters on the wall show the diversity of the school. According to Love (2023), "every child would benefit from hiring and retaining of an overrepresentation of Black teachers and teacher of color" (p. 263). Ensuring you

have hiring practices that give minorities a chance. I certainly feel that we lost a great deal after the Brown vs. the Board of Education landmark case in terms of the number of administrators that we lost out of the profession. As Mizelle (2023) discussed,

> Nearly 40,000 teaching positions held by Black teachers in 17 southern and border states would be lost in the ensuring years according to Samuel B. Ethridge, a National Education Association official who was a leader in the movement to integrate teacher organizations during the civil rights movement. (para. 5)

As DuBois (2001) asks, "are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideals of our own" (p. 193)? The history of American education systems has had many flaws before and after the landmark supreme court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Educational reform must confront the structural problems in education.

Currently, it appears that minority leaders must adapt to survive in leadership positions. Adaption in my mind was what DuBois (2001) was discussing when he wrote, "this would mean that we would cease to be Negroes as such and become White in action if not completely in color" (p. 194). Many times, I have struggled with how I survive in the current educational system. According to DuBois (2001), "We would take on the culture of White Americans doing as they do and thinking as they think" (p.194). Regardless of the approach I have been determined not to forget the history that has been associated with African Americans. I know that a lot of positive things happened after the desegregation of schools but I feel that it was a counter story that may not be told. I want people of color to be included in any thought processes for future reform movements and to have representation at the table to ensure that all things are considered. Understand that my perspective as an African American male education in a

predominantly White school district has been unique and has its own challenges! All I can do is present my lived experiences and counter-storytelling to ensure that my story is shared. I have adapted over time to ensure that I have a voice that one day can impact and influence the future educational system. This is a story of who I am as an African American administrator.

**This is Me!**

This is Me!

The only one at the table.

This is Me!

The only advocate for the people of color.

This is Me!

The only African American principal in your district.

This is Me!

The master of code-switching.

This is Me!

The man that is concerned about the future of education.

This is Me!

The man searching to implement change.

This is Me!

The man with so much to say.

This is Me!

The man that choses to remain silent.

This is Me!

The man that can't truly express himself.

This is Me!

The man that understands the struggles of being Black.

This is Me!

A 14th amendment citizen.

**Please Show Don't Tell**

While this started as a project about school redesign and reform, this process has been a struggle when trying to articulate and share my lived experiences. During this process it has been an internal struggle in determining what is safe and unsafe to say, and what would be acceptable in the eyes of society. As mentioned above, during this process I have received communication from my committee and major professor about expanding on my lived experiences that I have faced in my struggle as an African American leader. The tension I face with operating in an educational and political environment that I must be careful of pushing my personal ideas too hard. This process has been stressful trying to balance life and future endeavors in the field post dissertation. As I worked through this process, I got this email from my Major Professor that he allowed me to share.

**Dear Brandon,**

As you continue to reflexively write on your experiences, I want to be clear that I know there is a boundary that you're trying to walk when it comes to doing "critical" work. That word, "critical", can be dangerous for folks in the practitioner world of educational leadership. I'm not trying to indoctrinate you to ascribe to something you're uncomfortable with, but I want to acknowledge that I get to operate in academic spaces where the "critical" work is more acceptable. The politics surrounding you as a Black man (oh wait - you prefer African American, right?) …an African American male, is something that I cannot pretend to fully understand. I'm

simply trying to let you know, this is a safe place to speak your truth, but in the end, I know we'll have to upload it to ProQuest and the world can see it. So, I hesitate to push you too hard, since I don't [have] to live with the potential consequences.

My primary goal is to make sure you feel supported in saying what you need to say, how you want to say it. Throughout this whole process, I've had to watch myself when giving your feedback and advice. Frequently, I've thought: "Am I stereotyping Brandon in trying to push him to find his voice and say things a certain way? Is it because I'm used to people of color in academic spaces speaking with a certain confidence and vigor, because they are in a place where critical thought is safer (but not entirely safe) from the anti-CRT political thicket? Am I stereotyping Brandon because he's a spiritual man with strong connections to his church and faith, and lurking in my feedback is some sort of "Energetic Pastor" at a "Black Church" sort of vibe in my head as I read his words and offer suggestions?

In other words, I need to be constantly asking: Where are my blind spots? What are my ethical obligations to helping you speak your truth, but also continue work in politically tense practitioner spaces as an educational leader? All I can say is: I admire your courage, and the delicate balance you seek. You are driven by your faith, and a desire to help ALL of your students simply feel like they belong. You want them to feel welcome, and happy. I've woken up in the middle of the night before reflecting on how someone might slap a CRT label on you without ever understanding the level of respect for others that you bring to each personal interaction. All I hear and see is strong personal work ethic with a commitment to family and community, and modeling high standards through the pursuit of this doctorate.

Early morning emails, late night writing sessions.

"Yes Sir", "No, Sir", "God Bless, and have a wonderful day"

All smiles, full of hope, but with a healthy concern for the future, and student's feelings of self-worth and belonging in a divisive political environment. Again, my primary goal is to help you say what needs to be said, to speak your truth, on your terms. And I will respect the boundaries of me not having to live your life as a practitioner when you are done, and the blind spots I carry in doing this work with you.

Dr. RedCorn (2023)

**Dear Major Professor,**

I appreciate your concern and willingness to push me to tell my story. I felt the same tension when the committee encouraged me to share more during the proposal process. Honestly, I even struggled with sharing my story with you until I felt more comfortable with you. There have been so many personal struggles I have faced in ensuring that I felt safe and a sense of belonging in an educational environment across the state of Kansas due to being one of the only African Americans in the room. I have finally realized that I adapted, assimilated, and code-switched to feel a sense of belonging. Writing this dissertation has caused me tears and many sleepless nights. I have struggled with striving to make a difference, being a role model, and having a positive impact for all students. I feel that I must stay true to my core values while adapting to ensure that I continue to have a voice in an educational system that wasn't set up for an African American male from inner city Memphis to be successful. I have watched multiple generations of my family overcome stereotypes and have successful careers. I look at history and worry if I will continue to overcome the odds if I speak out to address the concerns that many people of color have faced due to educational reform movements. I have discussed the impact of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* landmark case on African American teachers and

administrators. It's time for us to open our eyes and have courage to address an educational system that has areas that need to continue to improve.

I realized it's not a problem to point out the problems that have been ignored. Educational value should be more than a test score. One area to focus on is creating a safe learning environment for all students…and when I say all, I mean it. I have been searching for a way to encourage an educational reform movement that includes input from all people, including people of color. I want to feel the way that I have at the conferences I've recently attended with people that when I looked in the mirror, I saw reflections of myself. I want to be able to have civil dialogue without judgement to discuss things that can positively impact students. I have been having difficulty sharing my truth. I have hidden many of my feelings to ensure that I can stay in my position. I am striving to make a difference the best way that I can. I will try in the next poem to express what I have been hiding from the world.

**You Want My Truth**

You want my truth?

My heart is filled with hopelessness.

You want my truth?

I still shed tears that future generations will continue to have the same struggles.

You want my truth?

I know that you want articulation in the form of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

You want my truth?

I heard social and radical change from hip hop music.

You want my truth?

My faith and the word sustained me during the difficult times.

You want my truth?

I understand that you really want my silence and compliance.

You want my truth?

Malcom, Garvey, Evers, Lewis, and Bond echoes are in my heartbeat.

You want my truth?

The seas of despair and hopelessness are still in my rearview.

You want my truth?

My struggle is daily and seems to never end.

You want my truth?

Even when I express myself, I hide my full struggle.

You want my truth?

I am still afraid to make too much noise.

You want my truth?

I am contemplating what is necessary to voice my concerns.

You want my truth?

What needs to be heard is considered trouble.

You want my truth?

John Lewis explained it best! "*Necessary Trouble*"

You want my truth?

You want to attack me and expect me to stay friendly.

You want my truth?

It is difficult to lead while Black.

You want my truth?

I hear that you want my truth, but I feel that the world isn't ready.

You want my truth?

At least, not in many communities I've visited.

You want my truth?

**Leading During Difficult Times**

It's a problem to be considered woke. I am going to focus on the definition in the Black community. Being woke is being educated to the point that you are aware of the injustices and social justice issues in the world that impact you daily. It is saddening me that many people don't want my kids to learn about the experiences of their ancestors in America, or somehow spin slavery as being beneficial to African Americans. It's sad that given the opportunity to discuss my feelings, they end up in a dissertation that many people will never see. It was not until I had the opportunity to take graduate level classes that I began to truly find literature that I could relate to my feelings.

Well, this is my opportunity to tell you, my story. Throughout my life I really didn't enjoy school since I was often learning about things that I felt didn't relate to me. I will again give credit to my family for instilling the importance of education. Without that I wouldn't be where I am today. I don't recall reading any books or seeing very many examples of people of color in my textbooks. I remember at a young age learning about Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Anne Frank. Doing my own questionnaire and asking my own children, they named some of the same people and expressed, "we don't learn about Black people". They are blessed to have learned about African American history and know the whole story. I recall learning more about slavery and the civil rights movement from my family, as well. It came from storytelling and discussions growing up. As a family we watched the movie

Roots and Malcom X. I remember thinking as a child that I never learned about this in school. Even learning about the Civil Rights Movement, I feel that within schools we learned about the Civil Rights Act, Jim Crow laws, Brown vs. Board of Education, and Dr. King's speeches. I recall thinking while driving how my kids would respond if I asked what they learned about African American history. I will list some of the responses that they gave.

"I guess learning about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

"They talked about slavery"

"Daddy you know they don't teach us about that."

I quickly began to think is this acceptable to the woke agenda. Dr. King is what I believe that America would say is the acceptable Black man. I see many similarities in the approach I take in my life to ensure that I have been able to have a successful career.

**Reflections of the Man in the Mirror**

Reflections of the man in the mirror

I enjoyed teaching students to think critically in the classroom.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

It was a time that I felt that educators were valued and appreciated.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

Teaching students to value and respect human beings regardless of skin color.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

Leaving the classroom was a difficult decision.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

I understood that many students would never experience having a Black teacher.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

It was some difficult days I faced due to the stereotype that I was only a coach.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

It was in many teacher lounge and department meetings that negative comments were made.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

Many people would try and convince me things weren't racist.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

I recall a lot of educators telling me they don't see color.

Reflections of the man in the mirror

**The Ballot of Hope**

You must understand I am writing as a man, educator, and African American. The importance of voting is essential to improving the American education system. You must vote in local, state, and federal elections to have true impact on the educational system in America. If we want equality and to ensure diverse perspectives, you must get to the ballots. Don't let anyone tell you that your vote doesn't matter. If you want power, it was given to you on the ballot. This isn't about Democrats, Republican, or Independents. I ask that when you vote you consider the importance of education and the policies of the candidates surrounding education. At some point we must take a stand against the attacks on the American education system. If we don't our kids and grandkids will look back and question, why we didn't do more to. If we want legislation to do more surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion then we must vote to show them the importance of it. We must hold elected officials accountable for decisions that they make that impact the educational quality our kids will receive. At some point I am hopeful that American voters will truly value the importance of diverse perspectives.

During my journey in education, I have learned about having positive intent. This has been extremely difficult to have when I see the decisions that are made and the negative impact they can have on people of color. Many people don't realize the thoughts of children of color in schools across America. It hurts my heart to think about the number of students of color that automatically feel that people don't care about teaching about people of color's contributions in the world. I recall trying to implement opportunities to include lessons about African Americans' contributions during Black history month. I loved sharing the story of a boy name Theo. It was a story of a young boy that asked his mother about what life would be like without Black people. The mom shared a story that included all the contributions of African Americans that impact the things that he used daily. We can still have hope. I do.

**Dear Male Leaders of Color,**

I have so many to think about over the years. I have been so blessed to interact with so many great professional leaders of color across the state of Kansas. I never got the opportunity to meet Stubblefield (2022), but I am thankful for the stories that he shared in his dissertation. I have previously mentioned a powerful statement that a Black leader told me – to make "*decisions based on integrity"*. Another Black leader, Mr. Terrell Davis, has taken the time to have a positive impact on my life. His words of encouragement were much needed during my journey. I will never forget the time that he told me, "There is greatness in you and the struggle is a part of the process to bring it out of you and into life. Embrace the struggle. Lift someone else as you climb and then push them further than you are." At the time I was preparing to present my proposal to my committee. It was the right time to hear a superintendent tell me it's all a part of the struggle. Another person I met on this journey was a Hispanic leader, Dr. Mike Dominguez, who let me know, "*Brown and Black students need to see people like them wearing suits and being the CEO of businesses."* I am

thankful that he had the courage to let me know that students of color need to see me walking the halls of the school. I appreciate all these men of color that have shared parts of their lived experiences in education.

One of the most influential people that that had an impact on my life was Dr. David L. Griffin Sr. I remember walking onto the Kansas State University campus as an undergraduate student to take a class that wasn't being offered at Kansas Wesleyan to ensure that I graduated on time. I walked into the classroom and felt like I was in a dream. I was sitting in the classroom and my professor was an African American male. I was in shock; this was the first teacher of color that I had since leaving Memphis, Tennessee. I later learned that he was the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Director of the Center for Student Success and Professional Services in the College of Education. He took the time to visit with me and stayed in touch with me over the years. He is a strong advocate for equity and social justice for all individuals. He once told me something that has still impacted me to this day. Dr. Griffin said:

> *"Brandon, Once you begin your journey toward your goal, finish it. Let nothing or anyone stand in your way of reaching that goal. It may not always be smooth sailing but keep sailing! Remember, IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME!"*

I finally understand the power of this statement and realize that I must keep striving to achieve equity in education.

**Recognize the FEAR**

I recognize my **F**ear.

To speak up so you can hear it in your **E**ar.

Almost as if I am **A**fraid.

That you may **R**etaliate.

**Change is Gonna Come**

Change is gonna come.

I have hope for future generations.

Change is gonna come.

I want to see the education system change.

Change is gonna come.

I want them to learn all history.

Change is gonna come.

I want the opportunity for students to feel a sense of belonging.

Change is gonna come.

I want society to focus on improving all schools regardless of zip code.

Change is gonna come.

I want all children to get the opportunity to learn about our history.

Change is gonna come.

I want people of color to have the courage to take a stand against injustices in education.

Change is gonna come.

I hope that I get the opportunity to see that change.

Change is gonna come.

I pray that the Lord will allow me to see it.

Change is gonna come.

I will strive to do my part to help improve the education system.

Change is gonna come.

I will no longer be silent or be silenced due to fear.

Change is gonna come.

I will not give up on the potential of positive change.

**Still Dreaming**

My educational career has opened my eyes to a variety of things that have caused to me to wonder about my future. I recall getting to this point of my dissertation and career and feeling hopeless about being able to make changes to a system that seems unchangeable. I have considered walking away to start another career. It is extremely hard to feel that you have a dream for educational systems that may never change, and I see three generations that seem to not have changed the narrative from my conversations with my relatives. My personal responsibility as an educator is to make a difference in the lives of students. I have tried to tell my story and realized that I just can't overcome the internal struggles I am facing.

I literally recall reading the overview of a survey that referred to my leadership position. Looking back on the story I told earlier regarding feedback I received while leading professional development around DEI, I had an employee who was upset due to me asking the staff to do some work around DEI. The staff member stated, "I *would leave the district if an emphasis was placed on DEI"*. References were made, such as, "*why is he making us focus on the 1% when the 99% don't have a problem. Does he think I'm racist? Who's judging who?"* I don't know how some people think, but this makes it a difficult place to work in. Do I continue to fight for what is right or give up? How many of my coworkers feel the same way? My dreams seem to continue to be deferred. Many factors have played a part in the lack of DEI work across the nation.

As I've described throughout this dissertation, the anti-CRT and anti-woke movements have had a direct impact on my ability to do my job. I have been in book studies, community meetings, and been on the receiving end of a phone calls concerning these things. Yet, I have

been fascinated during this dissertation process with how I have studied the KSDE Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric, where there still seems to be a broad focus on implementing and improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in the schools. This seems totally different from efforts of elected officials that seem to be putting together bans on things centered around DEI. The gap between politicians and practitioners is something that we still need to continue to unpack.

There is so much dissonance being created in this gap, with so many different viewpoints. As an example, the governor created a taskforce to focus on racial equity and justice. The co-chairs of the *Governor's Commission on Racial Equity and Justice* (Governor of the State of Kansas, 2021) report said, "it's hard to believe that it's been a year since Governor Kelly formed the Commission on Racial Equity and Justice" (p. 4). Yet, the state legislature voted to remove funding for all DEI work in higher education last year, and KSDE has lauded redesign and reform efforts across the state because we know that change is inherently part of the educational leadership process – change is gonna come. This dissertation represents how I have had to navigate through the dissonance, yet also allow me to express my hope for the future and continue to dream. I am hopeful that in the future regardless of political disagreements and opposing views that diversity, equity, and inclusion is something that is taken seriously. Without DEI initiatives it will be extremely hard to have social justice in education. According to Adams & Bell (2016), "The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 3). With all the doubt and concerns that I have faced about the future of educational reform I have found some hope while attending some conferences that discussed diversity, equity, inclusion, and

belonging! In all my dreaming of a better and more inclusive educational system. I still have hope that change is going to happen.

## Hope

The hope I found was attending two conferences in 2023 that will have a lasting impact on my life, both occurred while I was writing my autoethnographic reflections and prompts described in Chapter 3. This is the first moment in my life that I felt so alive in a professional conference. I stood looking around, and it was one of the first times that I didn't try and count how many other minorities were in the room. Walking into this room I immediately felt happiness and unexplainable joy just seeing other professionals of color sitting in the room. When I looked to my left and right, I felt paralyzed not even being able to comprehend what I saw before my eyes. I was overjoyed with this tremendous opportunity to learn from minority leaders. Honestly, I never thought I would ever have an opportunity like this. I felt comfortable in this setting. It reminded me of when I was in a high school that was predominantly African American.

Conferences motivated me to have a greater impact in this world. The first conference I attended was a Courageous Conversations conference, which represents a line of leadership philosophy in DEI work by founder and CEO Glenn Singleton. It didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't in a professional conference in Kansas. This was the first conference that I attended where most of the presenters, attendees, and leadership were people of color. This was eye opening, and I felt that I wasn't the minority and that I could potentially share my opinions without judgement. I felt safe. The conference started with a liberation ceremony that mentioned some important people that fought for equality. Some of the names mentioned were Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Malcom X. This was the first time that I

attended a professional conference that mentioned Malcom X as a freedom fighter. I felt it was okay to wrestle with my Martin and Malcom complex. This gave me tremors of hope in my soul. I can continue fighting and strive for equity in school.

The other opportunity to attend a diverse conference was the University Council for Educational Administration (UECA). I was blessed to receive an opportunity to participate in the Jackson Scholars program, a part of UCEA. Kansas State University nominated me to attend a two-year program for graduate students of color. This gave me an opportunity to network with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) educational leaders and doctoral students. I was able to discuss the unique challenges that I face as an African American in educational administration, in a safe way that most folks in the room could relate to. This gave me understanding of the importance of the networking, mentoring, and the impact that it can have on increasing diversity in education. One thing that I appreciated was the acknowledgment that without the Jackson Scholar program that conference would lack diversity in their representation. Many people don't understand the importance of offering support and opportunities for people of color that wouldn't happen at this level without intentionality. Being in this environment gave me hope and empowered me to become a bigger advocate for social justice and positive change around diversity.

The highlight of the conference was when I got to meet and hear Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2023) speak about "*Are You 'One of Them Ones'?*": *Leading the Education Reset in a Post-Pandemic Era*. This message inspired me to understand the importance to learn from history and seek ways to lead in ways that transform the world by the people that I interact with daily. The opportunity to be in a room with scholars, doctoral students, and professors who were all African American males was a moment that I will remember for a lifetime. In that room I

heard my story in the stories that they shared. I learned about a historically Black college that had a grant funded program to recruit people of color to seek master's and doctoral degrees. It was amazing to see that the group had over twenty doctoral students attend the conference. They represented many more counter-stories, such as mine, that push back against the stereotypes that dominate the narratives of African American men like me. They shared the sad but true statement that societies and institutions weren't created for people of color, and our overrepresentation in prison systems along with our underrepresentation among educators in the world. We are living in survival mode daily. When we are code-switching and not figuring out how to thrive, we are simple trying to survive.

In conclusion, from my lived experiences it seemed that by code-switching and adapting that I have overcome some societal norms. Understanding the norms and identifying the right times to speak up about issues has helped me survive as a African American leader. After many years of struggling with interacting with coworkers I can proudly say that I am not ashamed of my Blackness or thought process. I feel that I have all the tools to be successful in society. Stanley (2024) explained, "Black people are already enough, capable, and worthy of living in the fullness of their humanity and recognizing, even dreaming about, what is possible" (p. 1). With the current racial and social awareness surrounding African Americans, I have developed the courage to discuss challenges I have faced as a minority leader. I would challenge the leaders to overcome the fear of political attacks and have courageous conversations about DEIB that include people of color. According to Singleton (2015), "courageous conversations can at time be difficult, but it also can be rewarding" (p. 76). Some questions should be centered around compromising, comply vs. obey, and the difference between growth and compromise. Identify ways that mentoring can help in the social justice fight. I would challenge any educational leader

to ensure that you are doing your part to make a positive impact for all students. I would offer some things to consider for future educational reform movements that include some of the key components of this dissertation. The most fitting way to end this critical autoethnography is to focus on the question the Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings (2023) presented, "*Am I One of Them Ones*?" My answer to this question is found in my final poetic tribute. This artistic piece is inspired by the speech that inspired me to finish my dissertation journey. My journey to become "One of Them Ones" has included faith, family, grit, courage, and education.

**Am I One of Them Ones?**

**Am I** the person that can impact changes in the educational system?

**Am I** able to help find the solution to some of the most difficult problems?

**Am I** able to uncover the unique mysteries of the unwritten rules of education?

**Am I** the person that can advance the cause for liberation?

**Am I** the brother that can raise the controversial discussions at the table to spark dialogue?

**One of** the only African Americans at the table.

**One of** them people seeking change.

**One of** the few African American male leaders in Kansas

**One of** the successful code-switching males

**One of** them person trying to make real change in the world.

**Of them ones** that have lived experiences of adapting to his surroundings

**Of them ones** that is seeking social justice in education

**Of them ones** that strives for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in education.

**Of them ones** that is searching for answers to the problems in our educational system

**Of them ones** that continues to learn each day.

**Am I one of Them Ones?** Not afraid to speak up in fear of losing his job.

**Am You one of Them Ones**? Not going to give in to peer pressure.

**Am I one of Them Ones?** That will do whatever it takes to improve the educational system.

**Am YOU one of Them Ones?** That will speak out against injustices in education.

**Am I one of Them Ones?** Identify the problems and come up with solutions.

**Am YOU one of Them Ones?** Willing to seek opportunities to help all student.

**Am I One of Them Ones?** Willing to make decision to make a positive impact in this world.

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