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Reifying discrimination on the path to school leadership: Black female principals' experiences of district hiring/promotion practices

Jennie Weiner[1]*, Whitnee Garrett-Walker[2], Taylor Strickland[1] and Laura Burton[1]

[1]Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, United States, [2]Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Using intersectionality as a guiding framework, this qualitative study focuses on the hiring/promotion experiences of 20 Black female principals and explores how their hiring/promotion practices reified and/or interrupted traditional discriminatory pathways to school leadership. We find that gendered racism operated across all facets of the principal recruitment and hiring processes in which these women participated. First, relationships and political connections with those already in power (e.g., predominately White men) seemed to be a key mechanism for entering the applicant pool and, later, accessing leadership opportunities. Opportunities were often explicitly racialized such that considerations for leadership positions were stated as being based on the participants being Black. Second, interview processes were frequently described as more performative than substantive with many of the women highlighting questions and comments that reinforced problematic tropes about Black women. Questions also abounded about whether interview panels were reflective of the community and/or if the questions were standardized to ensure fairness and transparency. Finally, district level hiring decisions were frequently disconnected from the interview process and lacked transparency with superintendents, in particular, who overrode or ignored prior steps in, or recommendation from, the school-based part of the process. In this way, findings suggest a hiring/promotion system desperately in need of revision starting with the most basic design features (e.g., standardized interview questions, transparent performance indicators, process accountability *via* decision-making) and including disrupting discrimination across all facets of the system.

KEYWORDS

principals, gender, race, hiring practices, intersectionality

Introduction

Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it illegal to engage in employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and/or national origin. Since then, additional local and federal reforms and private efforts have worked to enhance the entry and promotion of these groups across various fields, at best to mixed effect (Winston, 1991). Racial, gender and other forms of discrimination in hiring and promotion persist in multiple industries (Kübler et al., 2018; Quillian and Midtbøen, 2021), and in educational leadership specifically (Weiner and Burton, 2016, Weiner et al., 2019).

For example, Black female principals, who, in 2016, represented only 6% of United States principals (Lomotey, 2019), are less likely to be mentored (Peters, 2010) and/or "tapped" for leadership positions (Myung et al., 2011) than their White and/or male colleagues. They are also more likely to be placed in under-resourced schools (Moorosi et al., 2018) and experience harsher performance feedback once in such positions (Rosette and Livingston, 2012). Put simply, they face a host of discriminatory practices and orientations as they attempt to access and thrive in leadership, and these likely include those associated with hiring and promotion.

Indeed, research has long shown that racial, gender and other types of bias influence "meanings of who is worthy of being hired" and subsequently, "guide hiring routines" (Liera, 2020, p. 1955). Hill-Collins (2000) too highlights how "commonsense" or normalized social practices (i.e., job interviews) are hegemonic and serve to uphold White supremacy, heteronormativity and other forms of discrimination and the need for critical feminist intersectional lenses to highlight these systems and practices (Grogan, 1999). And yet, we could only find a small handful of studies looking at discrimination in principal hiring and promotion practices specifically (e.g., Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011; Palmer and Mullooly, 2015; Bailes and Guthery, 2020; Lee and Mao, 2020).

Simultaneously, research outside education (e.g., management studies, behavioral economics) has worked to identify how changes to such policies can shape behavior in ways that dramatically shift who gains access to opportunities. Bohnet (2016), a behavioral economist, for example, tells us, "behavioral design creates better and fairer organizations and societies. It will not solve all our gender [or race]-related problems, but it will move the needle, and often at shockingly low cost and high speed" (p.17). Additionally, and as Bohnet makes clear, our focus on identifying and addressing the everyday practices of hiring/promotion does not suggest that discriminatory systems and bias can be attended to without larger-scale efforts. Rather, a multi-prong approach disrupting problematic everyday actions and fighting larger systems is needed.

To begin this process, and in response to calls by Lee and Mao (2020) for more work on principal hiring practices and their impact on aspirant leaders from minoritized backgrounds, we focus on the hiring/promotion experiences of 20 Black female principals and explore how their hiring/promotion practices reified and/or interrupted traditional discriminatory pathways to school leadership. Our research questions were:

1. How do Black female principals describe their hiring/promotion experiences?
2. To what degree do these experiences reflect a fair and equitable process?

Using intersectionality to guide our analysis, we find that gendered racism (Essed, 1990) operated across all facets of the principal recruitment and hiring processes in which these women participated. First, relationships and political connections with those already in power (e.g., predominately White men) seemed to be a key mechanism for entering the applicant pool and, later, accessing leadership opportunities. Opportunities were often explicitly racialized such that considerations for leadership positions were stated as being based on the participants being Black. Second, interview processes were frequently described as more performative than substantive with many of the women highlighting questions and comments that reinforced problematic tropes about Black women as "enforcers" or "clean up women" (Peters, 2012). Questions also abounded about whether interview panels were reflective of the community and/or if the questions were standardized to ensure fairness and transparency. Finally, district level hiring decisions were frequently disconnected from the interview process and lacked transparency with Superintendents often overriding or ignoring prior steps in, or recommendation from, the school-based part of the process.

Such findings and research on hiring more broadly using critical lenses are important in that they highlight the discriminatory nature of the field's hiring practices across gender and racial identities, and their potential impact. For example, other research, also using an intersectional perspective, has revealed the tremendous psychic energy and time Black female principals must often exert to address ongoing discrimination and in bringing their authentic selves to work once in the position (Burton et al., 2020). A hiring process that told them to keep their full selves under wraps and sent messages that devalued their expertise, would undoubtedly contribute to these struggles as would the lack of attention those in power seemed to pay to these issues. In this way, findings suggest a hiring/promotion system desperately in need of revision starting with the most basic design

features (e.g., standardized interview questions, transparent performance indicators, process accountability *via* decision-making) and including disrupting discrimination across all facets of the system.

Theoretical framework: Intersectionality

As already mentioned, while our focus in this paper is about identifying hiring and promotion practices for principals, we do so from the starting point that patriarchy and White supremacy are intertwined within them. We do not expect that by solely shifting behavior, that we can completely shift institutional oppression or fully mitigate the experiences of those who are multiply oppressed. Instead, we are proposing moving the needle of equity beginning with shifts that we know are possible. We are living in a time where political upheaval and increased racial awareness is imminent. Because of this, we (both the oppressed and co-conspirators) must name and guide what shifts must be made to further breakdown systems and structures of oppression that continue to harm those with historically marginalized identities. With respect to our study, put simply–Black women are in need of such co-conspiratorship to end such negative experiences as they seek school leadership roles (Love, 2019).

To support our understanding of the experiences of the Black women school administrator participants in this research study, we offer the use of two main theoretical frameworks; Black feminist thought (e.g., Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015) and Intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Haynes et al., 2020). Both theoretical frameworks seek to guide and center our contextualized understanding of the experiences of Black women and furthermore, the ways systems and structures of oppression impact their daily lives (Hill-Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought has a particularly long history in asking poignant questions about the humanity of Black women (hooks, 2015). Specifically, scholars and activists have written for over a 100 years about the varied experiences of Black womanhood, and how society continues to refuse even basic respect to Black women, at all levels (i.e., personal, professional, systemic) (Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Taylor, 2017). Given this lack of respect, it produces a cycle of anti-Blackness, anti-Black racism, and gendered racism that makes it virtually impossible for Black women to free themselves and be whole.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, explains the ways multiple forms and varying levels of oppression are experienced by Black women specifically (Crenshaw, 1989). Being Black and women, opens Black women, such as the participants in our study, to gendered racism (Essed, 1990) which has been elevated in our data. Put differently, Black women, because of their racialized and gendered identities, are more vulnerable to various forms of discrimination, including inequitable hiring and firing practices (Dillard, 1995). Like the Black women in our research study, Black women, when interviewing for educational leadership positions, are often placed as "clean up women" in schools that lack resources and are in need of some form of transformation (Peters, 2012). This reinforces the controlling images placed on African women since their enslavement in the United States (Hill-Collins, 2000).

These images, mammy, sapphire, and notions that Black women do not feel pain (emotional, physical psychological, or spiritual), are rooted in the need to control Black women and not allow them to feel or be whole in themselves or in any other area of society (Hill-Collins, 2000; Haynes et al., 2020). There is no doubt that these images are ingrained into the minds of those that hire Black women into school leadership positions to maintain order, "clean up" the school, and usher in transformation. Given the experiences of Black women in the professional world, namely in the field of education, these controlling images still stand and to which Black women do all they can to subvert these controlling images, or become victims to them (Weiner et al., 2022). Again, our goal to aid in this subversion and act as co-conspirators by de-normalizing White supremacy and gender discrimination and thus approach this work in this that manner.

Literature review

Gender discrimination and gendered racism in the education leadership pipeline

Research has long pointed to how gender discrimination (Lad, 2002; Gates et al., 2003; Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2010; Weiner and Burton, 2016) and gendered racism (Palmer and Mullooly, 2015; Davis et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2019; Bailes and Guthery, 2020) shape the pipeline to, and success in, educational leadership. In terms of gender discrimination, researchers such as Apple (1985) and others (e.g., D'Amico, 2017) have highlighted how teaching, as a historically feminized profession (e.g., more women do it and it is less valued because women do it), served to make administration an "old (White) boys' club" (Eckman, 2004). Women, who were, and often continue to be, seen as more caring and nurturing, were positioned as "natural" teachers particularly to young children (Nelson, 1992; Blackmore, 2017). This is in contrast to

men who, understood to have more "agentic traits" (e.g., assertiveness, dominance, confidence, etc.), were positioned as leaders, moved out of teaching to "manage" women and their practice (Apple, 1985; Weiner and Burton, 2016).

While over time more women have been able to ascend to leadership [e.g., in 2017 approximately 54% of principals were female (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019)], stereotypes regarding their suitability for such positions remain. For example, using role incongruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) to guide their inquiry, work by Weiner and Burton (2016) highlights how women in leadership face a double bind. On one hand, they can take on the agentic (i.e., stereotypically male) characteristics that are most often attributed to leadership. However, if they do, they are likely to receive critique for being too aggressive, unfriendly, and not warm. On the other hand, they can act in ways more aligned with female stereotypes and engage as nurturers, caregivers, etc. (i.e., behave communally) and thus be seen as less competent to take on a leadership role (e.g., too soft, emotional, etc.) (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Although some of the women within Weiner and Burton (2016) study identified as women of color, the researchers failed to explicitly attend to how race also played a role in these female aspirant school leaders' experiences. Such an orientation is important as research shows that Black women are punished not for their agentic interpersonal orientation but due to deep-seated racist ideas about Black people's competence and ability to lead (Ispa-Landa and Thomas, 2019). In this way, it is critical that research address not only gender bias as it pertains to hiring/promotion practices in educational leadership, but also race and, in this case, the intersection of race and gender identities.

Intersectionality and school leadership

When applying an intersectional lens, we find that Black women principals experience discrimination across gender and racial dimensions across all facets of their careers including the recruitment and hiring process (i.e., a double jeopardy of gendered racism) (Rosette and Livingston, 2012). For example, Black female teachers often do not receive the same degree of mentoring (Peters, 2010) or "tapping" to help them access leadership or thrive in the role (Myung et al., 2011). "Essentially, seasoned professionals (typically White males) have sought to assist protégés who are younger versions of themselves" (Peters, 2010, p. 112). This type of "in group favoritism" is well-documented as driving hiring and promotion patterns in other industries and toward women and women of color specifically (e.g., Ryan et al., 2007; Hoyt, 2010), and is unlikely to change without direct and meaningful intervention.

Once Black women do enroll in principal preparation programs, they are often hostile places (Weiner et al., 2019, 2022). Researchers find that these programs remain predominantly White spaces with few other students and/or faculty of color (Young and Brooks, 2008; Jean-Marie and Mansfield, 2016). Such programs also tend to take an identity-blind approach to leadership highlighting male and White centric readings and orientations, while claiming that such views are "neutral" and/or simply effective leadership (see Weiner et al., 2022 for a review). Given these realities, many Black women are left to create their own paths to leadership, doing so through additional years of service and greater rates of credentialing (Santamaría and Jean-Marie, 2014; Bailes and Guthery, 2020). For example, the average Black female principal has between 12 and 20 years of experience prior to taking on the role, which is, on average, 5–12 years longer than their White, male colleagues (Peters, 2012).

Additionally, when Black women are considered to fill a principal position, it is often for under-resourced and under-performing schools that enroll more students of color and those in poverty (Bloom and Erlandson, 2003; Moorosi et al., 2018; Lomotey, 2019). The expectation is often that they will serve as change agents (Tillman, 2004), "cleaning up" or acting as "fixers" after others' failed initiatives under tremendously challenging conditions (Peters, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2013). However, at the same time they are meant to exhibit strength in the face of such challenges, and they often do, these traits are also often pathologized in ways that position Black female principals and aspirant principals as an "Angry Black Woman," who lacks the temperament and/or competence to lead (i.e., a lack of "professionalism") (Aaron, 2020).

Given these conditions, it is perhaps not a surprise that despite their desire to lead and the persistence required to access such roles, Black women often leave the principalship at higher rates than their White counterparts (Christman and McClellan, 2008; Peters, 2012). If anything, rather than a reprieve, Black female principals are likely to experience higher levels of scrutiny in their roles regarding their leadership capabilities (Rosette and Livingston, 2012) as well as various forms of institutional and everyday discrimination (Burton et al., 2020). Moreover, and given the lack of attention many districts pay to addressing such issues, these women are further burdened with expending energy to cope with this discrimination in ways that are costly both to their mental health and physical wellbeing (Utsey et al., 2002, 2007; West et al., 2010; Greer, 2011; Lewis et al., 2017).

Together, this research paints a vivid picture of the institutional discrimination Black female aspirant and serving principals face. What is perhaps less clear is how hiring/promotion practices may serve to reify and/or

mitigate such discrimination. This reality and, as we discuss next, the fact that research exists on hiring practices that promote greater equity across multiple lines of identity, suggest we could be doing better if we truly wished to. This possibility motivated this study and is the focus of the following section.

Research on the effective and equitable recruitment and selection of principals

Aligned with Lee and Mao's (2020) systematic review of a number of practices associated with the principal pipeline, we use the terminology "recruitment and selection" to encapsulate the process of hiring in its entirety. As they explain, such an orientation is aligned with the economic theory of supply and demand with recruitment referring to "factors motivating educators to advance or inhibiting them from advancing to principal positions" and selection as "how Superintendents or districts screen, assess and hire the most suitable candidate for principal positions" (p. 2). Below we talk about what we know about current practice and its alignment (or not) with best practice in terms of facilitating equitable access and ensuring the highest caliber of diverse leaders into the role.

Recruitment

As already mentioned, the path to leadership is highly racialized and gendered. For example, most recruitment occurs through informal "tapping" in which those most likely to already hold leadership positions (i.e., White men) groom those with similar backgrounds for leadership (Myung et al., 2011). Additionally, districts tend to promote leaders from within (Bailes and Guthery, 2020), which can create positive continuity but also serve to reinforce current ideas and ways of knowing including who is deemed a "qualified" to be a leader in the space. When more formal recruitment processes do exist, they often use materials (e.g., job postings, advertisements, etc.) with vague and potentially biased criteria (Palmer and Mullooly, 2015). Research too has consistently shown that gendered (Gaucher et al., 2011) and racialized (Pedulla, 2018) language persists in job postings. Such postings also often fail to clearly outline the specific skills, knowledge, and capabilities required for the position (Richardson et al., 2016). As such, and given that women are less likely to apply to masculine stereotyped jobs (Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013), and men are likely to be overconfident in their ability to access for their desired positions

(Cortés et al., 2021), such language can have important implications for who applies and/or gains access to school leadership roles.

In response, researchers such as Palmer and Mullooly (2015) call on districts to cast wide nets to ensure a diverse candidate pool. This would include advertising openings in traditional venues and those that target underrepresented groups (Bhalla, 2019). It might also mean including language in postings that elevates and emphasizes (if more than performative) the school and district's commitment to equity (O'Meara et al., 2020). They may work to preemptively analyze existing materials for racialized or gendered language (Hu et al., 2022) as well as work to emphasize skills rather than "fit" (Palmer and Mullooly, 2015).

Initial screening/interviews

Interviews remain the most popular method of screening prospective candidates for leadership positions (Palmer and Fresno, 2016). This is despite the fact that the criteria used by districts to evaluate candidates are often misaligned with stated goals and/or descriptions of the role (Schlueter and Walker, 2008). Such misalignment includes, as true in job postings, more heavily weighing perceptions of "promise" or "fit" over concrete skills and knowledge (Palmer et al., 2016). Such panels also tend to be quite hierarchical in nature, a reality that may influence underrepresented members' ability to influence decisions (O'Meara et al., 2020).

These realities tend to favor White men who, when compared with their female and Black, Indigenous and People of Color counterparts, have less experience at the point of becoming a principal (Kim and Brunner, 2009; Bailes and Guthery, 2020) and, due to gender bias, seem a more "natural fit" with leadership (Weiner and Burton, 2016). Indeed, research tells that an overreliance on fit within the hiring process tends to negatively impact women and people of color most (Palmer et al., 2016).

As such, to enhance the interviewing process, researchers suggest creating standardized interview processes with questions focused on skills and knowledge rather than affective skills (Palmer and Mullooly, 2015) as well as include a representative group of panelists (Wildy et al., 2011). They further recommend the use of rubrics to evaluate responses (O'Meara et al., 2020) and to train all reviewers and regularly assess issues related to interrater reliability and understanding rubric elements and how they should be assessed (Wildy et al., 2011; Palmer and Mullooly, 2015). Finally, as bias finds a way to seep into even the most well-intentioned processes, it is also essential for all those involved in screening and interviewing processes to engage in implicit bias training to help

ensure these processes support their goal of enhancing equity (Liera, 2020).

Decision making

The final promotion/hiring process—the decision to offer the candidate a position—occurs at the district level. Often this includes an interview with the Superintendent, who, informed by those involved in the earlier stages of the process, decides whether or not to offer the candidate the job. However, as Lee and Mao (2020) point out, there is relatively little research on these decision-making processes or what ultimately informs Superintendents to select one candidate over another. What we do know is that Superintendents tend to be somewhat idiosyncratic regarding their views about the attributes associated with principal selection (Palmer et al., 2016), and are just as likely to hold biases regarding candidate "fit" and/or potential for success as those at the school level (Lee and Mao, 2020). As Lee and Mao explain, "Superintendents rarely have the means to systematically assess these [valued] skills, nor do they know how to determine whether a candidate possesses such talent" (p. 15). Consequently, Superintendents' final decisions also tend to discriminate most against women and people of color (Young and Young, 2010; Fuller et al., 2018).

As we know little about these decisions, so too do we have few tested models for moving forward to enhance equity in the process. However, what is clear is that if more equitable hiring practices are to be deployed, it requires support and action from the top with senior administrators keeping a watchful eye to ensure equitable practices are being used and, if not, to intervene forcefully to address these issues (Liera, 2020).

Materials and methods

We use intersectionality both as a theoretical framework and to ground our methodological approach (see Haynes et al., 2020 for a review). Specifically, we center Black women as the subject of this inquiry and work to foreground the complex intersectional nature of discrimination as manifest in the daily, often considered mundane practices and policies of institutions (i.e., in this case district hiring practices). To facilitate these goals, we required an approach that would deeply explore individuals' perceptions and understandings of an event (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). As such, we use interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Shinebourne, 2012) to illuminate participants' meaning making and to create "thick" descriptions based on their experiences (Ponterotto, 2006). Again, our goal here was to, as described by Mckinnon (as cited in Haynes et al., 2020), "bring the gravity of

intersectional subordination into full view, in a way that forces the trivial and mundane to actually bear weight" (p. 752).

Sample

We used purposeful, criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990) as we were focused on a sample that included solely principals who self-identified as Black and female and who had been in their leadership position for at least 2 years and thus could speak to both their hiring and how it impacted their experiences in the role. Participants ($N = 20$) came from one state in the Northeast and another in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. Participants were identified through referrals and connections *via* the first author's social network. Given the personal and emotional nature of the interviews (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) as well as the interviewers' identities as White women (Seidman, 2006), there was a sensitivity, *via* authors one and four (i.e., the interviewers), to build a sense of trust and rapport with the participants by utilizing pre-existing personal relationships as a starting point as well as through sharing some of themselves and motivations at the start of the study.

More specifically, and following the work of Moorosi et al. (2018), we—the first and fourth authors—engaged in a process of "disclosure" with participants, in which we shared our reasons for engaging in this work and named our Whiteness and its implications relative to this research. So too did we name and speak to the long history of White and, often female, academics using Black women's stories for personal career advancement rather than Black women's uplift and that we understood and honored participants' potential mistrust or hesitancy to share fully with us. With that said, we also acknowledge that, while such disclosure can and did help to build trust, it did not diminish the hurt caused by the long legacy of White Supremacy and Patriarchy in the academy, topics we speak to in our positionality statements below.

Table 1 provides an overview of some of the characteristics of our participants and their schools. This group of women were quite experienced (i.e., averaging 22 years in the field) and credentialed (e.g., more than two-thirds had doctorates). Most led schools serving predominantly Black and Brown children with high percentages receiving free and reduced-price lunch. These school profiles were true even when these women worked in larger, predominately White serving districts with lower proportions of students requiring lunch support or with other additional needs (e.g., special education, English learners, etc.).

Data collection

Aligned with our method, we used phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2006) to collect our data. This three-interview cycle, occurring over the course of the 2019–2020

TABLE 1 Select principal characteristics.

Pseudonym[a]	Years in role	Years in education	School location	School level	FRL status %	Student population[a]	State
Joyce	15	28	Suburban	Prek-6	83%	MSI	1
Mckenzie	2	18	Suburban	K-5	12%	PWI	1
Michele	6	26	Urban	Prek-8	74%	MSI	1
Passionate	6	24	Urban	K-6	37%	MSI	1
Jennifer	8	28	Urban	District	47%	MSI	1
Susan	9	21	Urban	Prek-1	60%	MSI	1
Sarah	10	24	Urban	Elementary	58%	MSI	1
Victorious	4	27	Suburban	Prek-6	54%	MSI	2
Bella	3	22	Urban	Middle	41%	MSI	2
Dr. Jackie	6	28 +	Urban	Prek-5	66%	MSI	2
Valerie	2	18	Suburban	K-5	6%	MSI	2
Liz Garland	4	18	Suburban	Headstart-5	77%	MSI	2
Shawna	2	26	Suburban	Middle	44%	MSI	2
Anne	6	27	Suburban	High	68%	MSI	2
Malea	5	22	Suburban	Prek-5	42%	MSI	2
Robin	5	25	Suburban	Middle	12%	PWI	2
Ramelle	12	27	Suburban	Middle	22%	50/50	2
Rose	3	18	Suburban	Prek-5	19%	PWI	2
Natalie	4	22	Suburban	Prek-6	76%	MSI	2
Kimberly	6	26	Suburban	44,683	24%	MSI	2

PWI, Predominantly white-serving institution; MSI, Predominantly Minority-serving institution.
[a]Participants selected their pseudonyms which are used throughout.

school year, provided opportunities to gain a rich sense of the arc of these women's careers as well as their daily experiences. Data for this study came predominantly from each participant's first and second interview, with the second interview focusing explicitly on recruitment, hiring, and placement and including questions that directly asked about this process (e.g., Can you tell me a bit of how you got hired at this school?; What did the process involve?; To what degree do you feel your identity as a Black woman shaped the hiring process?, etc.).

Interviews lasted anywhere from 1 to 2 h. The first and second interviews were semi-structured while the final interviews took a more constructivist approach (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004; Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012). These interviews included discourse between researchers and participants that was more naturalistic to facilitate participant reflection on how past experience related to current ones and in-depth meaning making regarding how participants identities as Black women shaped their ascension to, and experiences in, their current leadership positions. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and participants were then given their transcripts for review.

Analytic approach

We used thematic coding to analyze our data (Boyatzis, 1998). Specifically, we took a deductive approach, first coding

the interview data by the stage of the hiring process (e.g., recruitment, initial screening, interviewing, decision making). Next, using intersectionality to guide our analysis and specifically "the relationships of power and inequality within a social setting and how these shape individual and group identities" (Tefera et al., 2018, p. xiv), we investigated how and in what ways discrimination and power manifested in each stage of the hiring practices these women experienced using similar codes across the stages. For example, in our analysis of participants experiences with recruitment, we coded for issues such as "favoritism" (e.g., principal candidates are tapped/recruited due to personal relationship with those in power) and "transparency" (e.g., the degree recruitment criteria and processes were clearly communicated and easy to understand). These codes were repeated across the stages of hiring process, with slight modifications per stage to ensure relevance. For example, when coding the decision-making stage, in addition to favoritism, transparency and others, we added "consistency" (e.g., the degree the final decision was consistent with other parts of the hiring process). Finally, there also were codes regarding the degree each these processes were experienced as racialized and/or gendered by participants.

To ensure consistency among the raters, we began our coding by randomly selecting three interviews to code independently. As we each engaged with the data, each of us made meaning through our coding as well as writing memos and reflecting. We then met to discuss our coding to refine

our codes and processes as needed. For example, we nuanced our analysis over time in ways that pushed us to consider how experiences viewed as "neutral" or "just the ways things are" by participants in their hiring experiences belied larger issues of power and inequity. Our conversations also helped us to narrow our findings and to help us, as intersectionality requires, highlight the multi-layered forms of institutional oppression Black women face to engage in deeper and more nuanced counter narratives (Haynes et al., 2020).

Positionality

The lead author identifies as a cis gender heterosexual White woman. The original data collection was conducted by her along with another White, Queer, woman. The third author, who did not participate in data collection also identifies as a Queer, White woman. As White women doing research centering Black women and the discrimination they face, we worked hard to both decenter our Whiteness and interrogate it by engaging in continuous reflexive practice (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019, p. 2). We again acknowledge here the history of White scholars using Black women's experiences as a stepping stone to advance their career while simultaneously reifying damaging stereotypes and tropes. We thus honor the rightful suspicion people, and particularly People of Color may feel at our intentions, and come to this work humbly aiming to use our skills and platform to elevate these women's stories and their meaning-making and not our own.

The final member of the research team identifies as a Black, Indigenous, and Queer cisgender woman. She was asked to join the team due to her expertise in Black feminist thought as well as her lived experience as a Black female administrator and researcher of the experiences of Black women school administrators in the United States and Canada.

Limitations

Before we shift to our findings, we mention some of the study's limitations. First, the sample is small with limited geographic reach. As such, it would be inappropriate to generalize these findings to the experiences of all Black, female principals or those in other contexts. Second, and related, so too would be inappropriate to extend these findings to those with different racialized or other forms of identity. We focused solely on identity issues related to a singular race (Black) and gender (female). Future studies with larger samples with different and/or potentially a broader range of intersecting identities (e.g., ethnicity, ability, language, sexuality) would undoubtedly be important to fully capture the many, unique ways discrimination may operate in principal recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices. Finally, as the interviewers

were of a different race than the participants, it is likely that our racial, if not other, privileges went relatively unchallenged and undoubtedly impacted the study, its effectiveness, and depth.

Findings

Tapping and/or recruitment into school leadership

While all of the women received some kind of "push" to pursue leadership, none mentioned participating in a formal or standard recruitment process. Instead, existing relationships and political connections seemed to be a key mechanism for entering the applicant pool and, later, accessing leadership opportunities. As a result, those women who did not "grow up" professionally in the district where they hoped to be principals, faced particular barriers to entry, including negotiating an unfamiliar human resources system. This was true for Jennifer[1], who found her current school through a Google search. Finding an open position, she pressed the site's "apply here" button, waiting with "fingers crossed" to find out if anyone would look at it. The same was true for Kimberly who voiced frustration that, during the process it was impossible to find a "person that I could contact if I have questions, nobody really returned my phone calls. I just felt like you needed to know someone to really get into the school system."

In lieu of formal recruitment, all said they experienced some form of "tapping" (Myung et al., 2011) in which someone with authority (formal or informal) suggested that they consider, or pushed them to take on, a formal leadership role. This tapping primarily originated from two sources, (1) the school (e.g., peers, principals, coaches) or (2) the district (e.g., an Associate superintendent, the Superintendent), with different impacts by source on how the participants understood why they were tapped as well as how they might respond to these "suggestions."

Tapping at school

When describing tapping incidents at their schools, participants talked about how suggestions to pursue leadership tended to extend from others' noticing their achievements and capabilities. Whether it was Ramelle's principal who, based on observing Ramelle's openness and instructional prowess told her, "You are a leader. You are a natural leader. And we need people like you who will lead with integrity." or Victorious' mentor principal, who said, "Don't doubt yourself. You are enough. You've got the skill set [to be a principal]," virtually all of the women mentioned someone who saw their excellence and encouraged them to become administrators. For some, such encouragement happened at multiple points in their careers (e.g., their school principal telling them to enroll in

a principal preparation program, a professor in that program suggesting they apply for a principal position), the repetition then strengthening their resolve to pursue a principal position.

Tapping from the district

Many of the women also reported receiving what were framed as "suggestions" or "invitations" to apply for principal positions in their districts. We say "framed," as many of the women experienced such recommendations more as mandates than choices. Moreover, and also different from the encouragement they received from other sources, district invitations were often racialized and/or gendered in nature, tending to emphasize their identities as Black women over their tremendous skill sets.

More specifically, at least nine of the women were directed to apply for a particular school in the district. These schools often served more Students of Color, were lower performing, and/or had current principals who, often White, were understood as having difficulty related to the parent community. While the women said they understood such invitations as part of the "political" nature of school leadership, it was also clear that they understood that they were being framed as "clean up women" (Peters, 2012), a positioning often applied to Black women principals. As Passionate explained, her Superintendent asked her to apply to her current school because they needed someone who,

> was gonna be able to come to [school name] and actually effect change. Someone strong. Because prior to me coming, you have to understand, there was a principal here who was here for about. six, maybe 7 years. And things were spiraling down.

Valerie reflected a similar "strategic" decision on the part of her Superintendent. Valerie, the only Black elementary school principal in the district, was "asked" to work at a school that was shifting to enroll more Black and Brown students and thus needed someone, her Superintendent told her, "who can bring some change and diversity." In these ways, it seemed Black women were given opportunities to lead only when schools were identified as being "in crisis" or places where no one else (i.e., other White principals) could be successful.

A principal "Pipeline" program

Six of the women, most of whom worked in the same or adjacent districts, mentioned having participated in a district-run principal pipeline program. The program was for those who had already earned their administrative certification to work as a principal intern. As conveyed to us, the program was perceived

as a requisite for becoming a principal in the district, though participation did not guarantee a job. As Belle explained, "it's very unwritten. They say, 'You don't have to do an internship.' But. And a lot of people ignore that, and they don't get jobs. So I was like, 'Oh, okay. I'll do the internship." Participants revealed that only a small group of individuals were selected to be principal interns, and only a few principal interns were deemed effective enough to be moved into a pool of potential hires for available principal positions.

When asked about the purpose of the program, participants said they believed it was intended to make the hiring process more transparent and fairer. And yet, as we began to ask more questions about the pipeline process, it seemed that, despite the intent, it too was experienced as a gatekeeping mechanism rather than a chance for those traditionally left out of leadership to get a leg up. For example, when, earlier in her career, Ramelle found that she had not been put in the pool of interns, she asked her principal why this was the case.

> And about a week later, he came to me and he said, "I need to have an honest conversation with you as to why you weren't brought to the table to interview." I said, okay. He said, "I think you can handle it." He said, "Because you're an African-American female." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "The sitting principal at [School Name] does not want an African-American female." I said, "He wants a female, but he doesn't want to have." He said, "Exactly. It's going to be a new school. He will have a female. But he told me, I don't want a Black woman as an intern principal in my school."

Although Ramelle was eventually able to access an internship and then a principalship; her path was delayed as a result of these events—events that were never addressed by district personnel in any meaningful way.

While few of the other women reported such explicitly racist experiences regarding their access to an internship site, there was a feeling that the program tended to do more to uphold current structures and the power of those holding leadership positions (e.g., mostly White males) than to create a pathway to ensure a highly skilled and diverse principal cohort. As Liz Garland explained,

> it's almost like you needed a sponsor, so to speak. Um, so you know, that kind of concept of having someone to sponsor you along the way, and if you had the right sponsor, your road is going to be quick, it's going to be, you know, it's going to be expeditious, smooth sailing, right on, come on in to your school that we handpicked for you vs. someone who isn't sponsored.

Moreover, some of the participants mentioned people who were able to "skip over" the AP position and/or were hired

externally without going into the pool. Together such comments suggested a process that may have done more to reproduce inequities than mitigate them.

Screening/initial interviewing processes

As already mentioned, all but 7 of the women were hired as principals in districts where they already worked as teachers or assistant principals, and/or were "invited" to apply to a given principal position. As such, their access to the most frequent next stage of the hiring process, school-based interviews, was based on these direct requests rather than a formal screening process. With that said, some of the women were also invited to interview at schools for which they felt they were not serious candidates. Instead, they believed their being called in was a way for the district to say they had made a good faith effort to recruit diverse applicants.

As Susan explained, after being called to interviews at a few schools but failing to move to the next round, she, "found out that I was the only minority that was interviewed for at least two of those times that I had gone in. Because I think it was three times, that I was interviewed." Victorious told a similar story in which she was told by the district that, despite the high probability that she would be hired as the principal at the school for which she served as the principal intern, she needed to interview for a number of other principal positions in the district. She explained, "they've [the district] implied that I would be here [current school], but I had to interview. I believe it was because I was an African American female, and they wanted to provide a diverse interview, I guess. Candidates [for the other positions]."

District screening

For the few participants who were previously unknown to the district in which they became principals, the screening process was more opaque and often included a first stage interview with district officials rather than one at the school. However, these interviews too were experienced as racialized as officials made clear that these women's Blackness was a key reason for their candidacy. This was true for Jennifer who was positively surprised at receiving an invitation to interview given that she had simply uploaded her information to the district website. However, some of these positive feelings dissipated as her racial identity became a main focus in the interview. As Jennifer recalled, during the interview, the Superintendent, a White man, was talking about why Jennifer had been brought

in and "said something about me being Black." In response, a White woman on the committee quickly responded,

> "Yeah, but you know, we're not bringing her [Jennifer] in because she's Black. She has this and this and she went to [Ivy League School] and she's Black". . .But it was just really weird, I mean, I don't even know this person (laughs). It's just something, I don't know if I'll ever forget that.

This uncomfortable exchange also occurred after a long period of questioning from the Superintendent that seemed to negate Jennifer's expertise and question her potential to succeed in the role. As she explained, "It was like everything seemed like he was like putting down every experience or whatever. Um, I had, I had kind of a mixed experience. I felt like the interview was going okay, but like this guy who is in charge really doesn't seem to like me."

Mackenzie, who was also a district outsider, was recruited by the Superintendent to be the principal in an almost exclusively White serving district. He had been her professor in her principal certification program, and told her that, in addition to her leadership acumen, one of the reasons he was interested in her for the position was her racial identity. She explained,

> He said he wants to be known as the first Superintendent to diversify the district. He's been here for quite some time, it's a part of his vision, and knowing what he knows of me, he thinks that I will be the ideal person to help him to accomplish that.

Rather than feeling put off by this admission, Mackenzie appreciated her Superintendent's candor and was intrigued by the challenge. As she told us,

> I thought about it for me, also, to see then, for him, for being known as the first Superintendent to have diversified the district, and also for me being the first person of color to be hired within the district. That's something remarkable and historic, and it ties right into my vision around equity, and making sure that people are culturally responsive.

Whether felt to be positive or negative, it was clear from the interviews that participants earliest experiences with their supervisors were racialized and served to "other" these women as potential leaders in their districts and schools.

School-based interviews

In contrast, other participants' initial interviews most often occurred at their prospective schools. These interviews were frequently conducted by large panels that seemed to differ in composition school to school ("it was huge!"—Rose). As

Ramelle recalled, "There were 23 people. It took them 5 min just to introduce themselves. And this panel table, twice this size, it was just crazy." Questions too were often described as "all over the place" and/or dependent on who happened to attend the interview that day. Liz Garland, for example, described sitting in an interview with,

> like 30 people around the table. And you go through the show, because the process includes all stakeholders. So there's parents on the interview panel, there's other district leaders, there's school team people. So you have to go through the whole show.

While the panels were large, the presence of other People of Color, and Black people specifically, was minimal at best. Few of the women remembered any person of color in the process, despite, again, many of these schools having large Black and Brown student populations.

For those who, like Michele, had interview panels that included other Black people, their presence provided a sense of connection and comfort. For Michelle, this comfort came when the only other Black woman at the interview would, "smile when I was hitting right what she wanted me to hit. It was hard for her to kind of contain herself. . .And so I felt like, "This is great." Rose too, during her interview, noted that the presence of another Black woman on the panel made all the difference in her interviewing experience.

> I distinctly remember the other person of color at the table. . . was very affirming in her physical presence. So she was nodding a lot and smiling a lot. And so I kept trying not to look over and she was so affirming, (laughs) that I was like, "Oh, she likes me." So that was very encouraging just to have that persona at the table.

Performing black womanhood

In contrast, those without such representation (i.e., all but three of the women), spoke to feeling othered in these interviews and that it felt necessary to perform a version of themselves and often Blackness that matched their mostly White panel's expectations. For example, participants spoke of their need to negotiate the gendered and racialized stereotype of the "angry Black woman" (Aaron, 2020)—working to mitigate fears that they would be "difficult" to work with or less capable in addressing the perceived different needs of White children and families. For example, after her interview to be the first principal of color ever in the district, Mackenzie heard that some on the panel felt that she was, "a little bit too direct, and they questioned.

Um, one comment that was made was that they thought I would be a better Superintendent than a principal, 'cause I seemed more stern, and more protocol-driven and a little bit political."

Other participants (e.g., Belle, Shawna, Susan, Valerie) reported receiving similarly coded feedback questioning their "fit" with the values and norms of White parents. In Shawna's case, this need to "prove" her ability to attend to these values and norms was explicitly addressed in her interview. As she recalled,

> After my third and final interview, the director at the time said to me, "What are you gonna do when your White suburban parents question you about XY and Z?" And I was like, "Well, is this a standard question? Do you ask everyone this question?" You know, because I would have preferred, you know, you came right out and say, "Hey, as a Black woman, what are you gonna do when, you know, your, your families. . ." you know, where the money is. And I said, "It doesn't matter where, we all love our kids and when people know that you love their children and you want the best for them, they don't care what color you are."

While some had to negotiate stereotypes regarding being too strong, others, when interviewed for schools that served mostly students of color, faced an alternative set of stereotypes. In such cases, the women received messages that they were expected to act as an "enforcer" and would need to "deal" with the "challenging work environment" they faced. This was true for Susan who, throughout her interview, felt that the panel was pushing her to behave in a way misaligned with her leadership style,

> I don't come out as abrasive as all. You know, I'm very calm. I go into the interview calm and I talk about how you have to be mild mannered and be able to deal with everyone. So, I guess that was a turn off for somebody who's looking for a principal. . .people just assumed, because I seemed more mild-mannered than they wanted me to be, that I wouldn't be able to handle it. So those types of things, you know, that's why I would say it [the hiring process] wasn't fair.

Over and again, participants spoke to the ways the interview process forced them to behave in ways that felt inauthentic or performative. On one hand, such performances felt familiar to the participants and were seen as necessary to obtain a position. On the other hand, they also served to "lock" the women into these perceptions such that when they went to the school and began to behave in ways misaligned with these stereotypes and more like themselves, they were often punished for doing so and had to go back playing a role. As Valerie, who led a school in a predominantly White area explained,

I have just had to make sure that I'm very clear that I have given those multiple opportunities, before it appears as though I'm just, being harsh or just, you know, things like that. So, I'm just very mindful of anything that I put in writing, just very soft and delicate. And just, I never want it to seem as though I'm too aggressive or too forceful. . .I just always try to use a softer approach so that that can never be used as leverage to say that, and it deflects away from what the real issue may be.

While these women's everyday experiences of racial and gender bias and gendered racism in their role as principals is outside the scope of this paper, such experiences were plentiful and, we argue, are perhaps in part due to a hiring process that often and repeatedly reinforced such biases.

Final hiring decision

With the exception of two of the participants (Passionate and Dr. Jackie who were hired without ever directly engaging with their Superintendent), all said that the final stages of the hiring process included a meeting with their Superintendent and then, in most cases, final school board approval. However, rather than exist as an extension of the school-based processes, in many cases, final hiring decisions often felt to be discrete and based on separate, and often unclear criteria. For example, when asked how the final selection occurred, Valerie said,

I don't really know. No one knows how that process works, like how two names are moved forward, because it's not like the panel of 25 people are submitting a vote for their top two people. So they just ask everyone to share feedback after each person interviews, and the director takes that information and, I guess, makes a decision on the top two people to move forward.

While this lack of clarity was treated by many as a taken-for-granted element of the hiring process, for others it created some very difficult situations. Some of these included keeping them in a holding pattern for a position they felt they had earned based on the school interview and/or being placed at a school in which they had not been interviewed.

The former was true for Victorious, who, as already mentioned, had been told by the district that she was both next in line to be the principal at her existing school and that she would have to interview for all open positions in the district to help ensure "a diverse pool of candidates" for each school. When she finally was able to interview for the position she actually wanted, the Superintendent dragged his feet in telling her the position was hers. She recalled,

That was so frustrating because he [the current principal] said I won the interview. His supervisor was in the interview and [also] said I won the interview, and I had to sit and wait for, like, 2 weeks to find out if. The county was willing to give me that job.

When pressed about why she was put in this position, Victorious said it was rooted in racist ideas about what having a Black principal would mean for the school's reputation and standing. In particular, she explained,

There weren't many African American teachers, but the two people in charge, the two people with authority are African American. And I think they also wonder and worry about there becoming that comfort level. . .it's unfortunate, but I think we all, even myself included, worry that, you know, one person, two people are diverse, brings diversity. Three, four, five or more, a group, tends to be seen as, I guess, using the urban term, "ghetto."

As Victorious explains, she believed the hesitancy of the central office was steeped in racist ideas and the need to ensure that a school's leadership was not "too Black." This pathologizing not only of Black leaders, but also the school community, illustrates how racism can permeate systems even when structures (i.e., school-based hiring) are put in place intending perhaps to make the process fairer and more transparent.

Like Victorious, Joyce too talked about how she understood her Superintendent's final decision regarding her placement to be based on race. However, unlike Victorious who was ultimately placed in her desired role, Joyce was hired to be the principal of a school with which she had no previous experience. She explained that after successfully interviewing at a middle school,

I had a secondary interview with the Superintendent and she decided that, nope, she wanted me at an elementary. . .So I said, "Okay". . ..I then met with, you know, families from [the school name]. But the decision had already been made. Like it was really at that point, just more so a meet and greet. Like, you know, "Hello, this is going to be your new principal."

As Joyce talked more about the difficult position she felt she was put into regarding this switch and being thrust on this community that had not vetted her for the position, we asked about why she thought her Superintendent had put her in this position. Joyce replied,

> I definitely think that it was because I was a candidate of color, and I think my background in my experience having been in [a similarly urban district] was also a factor in hiring me. I had come to find out that she really saw the need for [the district] to diversify its staff in terms of teaching population, administrative population and that she was being very intentional about making sure that happened.

Participants repeatedly told of how, even when they felt they had done everything right and "won the interview" (Victorious), in the end, their pathway to leadership was held by one person—the Superintendent. Thus, the entire process ended up feeling more performative than substantive.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether and to what degree current principal recruitment and hiring processes serve to reify and/or diminish gendered racism in the principal pipeline. In this way, this work also contributes to what we, and others (e.g., Lee and Mao, 2020), argue is the understudied phenomenon of principal recruitment and hiring, particularly as it pertains to those from minoritized backgrounds. Centering the experiences of 20 Black female principals and using an intersectional lens to guide our approach, we find that, such processes normalize racism and gendered racism and thus reflect and reinforce the larger discriminatory nature of schools and school systems.

First, and in contrast to others' studies of principal pipelines (Myung et al., 2011; Bailes and Guthery, 2020), we find that most of the women in this study were "tapped" by someone with authority telling them that they had leadership potential and should pursue an administrative role. However, our findings also provide some nuance to this process. In particular, our intersectional lens allowed us to identify two forms of encouragement with different orientations and outcomes in terms of how they were understood by the Black women who were tapped. First was the encouragement that came from those in close proximity to these women's excellence in their everyday work. This tapping was experienced very positively by the women and often moved them to become administrators and/or helped them persist in this process. While more research is needed to assess whether these women's experiences are reflective of Black female educators more broadly, they do highlight how encouragement by those in more informal positions of authority may provide as much, if not more, support in pursuing leadership.

The second type of tapping came from district leadership. In such cases, this "encouragement" felt like dictates and was often understood as being explicitly driven by participants' racial and gender identity (i.e., a feature of these women's intersectional identities). In this way, the recruitment process tended to essentialize these women and their many gifts into an esoteric Black body for the district to use as it desired. Participants seemed acutely aware of this orientation and how it would shape their access and opportunity to lead.

Moreover, and reflective of other's work on the "Glass Cliff" phenomenon (Ryan et al., 2016), which has been shown to disproportionately impact Black women (Glass and Cook, 2020), district's often used this tapping to place these women in schools that were deemed in crisis, or "too difficult" for those traditionally holding such positions (i.e., White men) to lead effectively. Such moves by the district served to reinforce the gendered and racist trope of the "Strong Black Woman" (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Watson and Hunter, 2016), who is supposed to take care of others, even at the cost of her own health and wellbeing. As such, we find, as so many others have done, that the women in this study were treated as "Black female principals in urban settings who have found themselves appointed as 'clean up women,' charged with changing a negative culture with limited resources and support" (Peters, 2012, p. 35). Again, our intersectional lens allowed us to better understand the unique experiences of these Black women as they moved along the principal hiring process in their respective districts.

The screening and interviewing processes these women faced were generally no better in terms of following best practices or interrupting gendered racism *in situ*. In keeping with existing research (e.g., Palmer et al., 2016), participants reported large and often disorganized panels that lacked diverse representation and/or standardized operating procedures. These interviews were also often performative both in terms of schools calling a diverse pool of applicants whom, as Susan and Victorious saw firsthand, the panel never intended on hiring, as well as in the ways participants understood how they were to behave in front of the panel. Specifically, these performances were to show "fit" with panelists' perceptions of how Black, female leaders should behave and thus were again unique to their intersecting identities. In this way, Black womanhood, seen and demanded through a White gaze (Crenshaw, 1991), both reinforced racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women and sent clear messages to participants about how they would be (or not) permitted to exist as leaders in their buildings. While, once in their positions, many of the women pushed back against such tropes, some with greater success than others, this was an additional and unnecessary unique burden to place on them.

Finally, though these women had to go through what was frequently a long and often demoralizing hiring processes, the true decision regarding whether they would achieve the position was often left to the Superintendent, and what seemed to be their

idiosyncratic views about their suitability. While, in some cases, like McKenzie's, the Superintendent saw part of their role as diversifying the principalship, a hiring/promotion system based on the views of one person is problematic at best, and at worst, indefensible. We must do better.

Implications

Our findings have a number of potential implications for practice and research. To begin, we believe there are lessons for practitioners and policymakers regarding how to enhance practices across the principal hiring pipeline. For example, and given the continued too small numbers of Black women and other People of Color in district leadership (i.e., those who decide who gets to be a principal), and the lack of formal mentoring that occurs for these individuals (Lomotey, 2019), building infrastructure for the type of "lateral" tapping that occurred for our participants (i.e., peer-based encouragement) within their schools, may be a promising path to disrupt current trends. Indeed, research tells us that well-supported networks of Black female school leaders (Flores, 2018) can serve as a powerful resource for these women to share their experiences, draw strength in discriminatory systems, and persist (Nadal et al., 2015). Further research on the impact of such networks as well as other mechanisms for supporting Black women along their leadership pipeline would be helpful to expand the offerings provided to these women as well as to ensure this infrastructure has the necessary and appropriate supports to succeed.

Shifting to our findings regarding the tapping which occurred *via* the district (i.e., mandated placements often in struggling schools), we call for an end for racialized placements including those that would be deemed a "Glass Cliff" (Ryan et al., 2016). With that said, we are aware that the racialized aspects of such actions are often implicit and/or enacted subconsciously (Peterson, 2016). As such, our findings suggest the need for district leaders, and, we would argue, all members of the professional school community, to learn about gender bias and gendered racism and how they are deeply embedded in the policies, structures, and routines of educational leadership specifically. Such work is critical as "second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change" (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 486).

Our findings showing that the screening and interview processes our participants frequently experienced were misaligned with best practice further elevates calls from researchers (e.g., Wildy et al., 2011; Palmer and Mullooly, 2015; Simon et al., 2019) for schools and districts to incorporate information-rich hiring processes (e.g., processes for two-way exchanges of information between the candidate and decision makers, along with performance-based assessment tasks).

Ensuring a diverse set of panelists and training them on implicit bias will also be key to support more equitable hiring, as will be thoughtful questions that provide the panel with a holistic understanding of each candidate's strengths and areas of growth. Research that further explores current hiring practices and their impact on Black women as well as those with other identities and through alternative critical lenses (e.g., Queer Theory, LatCrit, DisCrit, etc.) would help ascertain the ubiquity of these experiences and ensure changes to these systems are truly inclusive and effective.

Finally, while we do not recommend removing the Superintendent's ability to make hiring decisions, we do believe they, like all others in the system, should be held accountable for engaging in a clear and transparent process of decision making that is based on criteria that focuses on the skills and knowledge to do the job and is equity-oriented. With that said, as we did not speak to the Superintendents directly, we cannot speak to their orientation, only how it was experienced by our participants. As such, we also call for future research on how and why Superintendents decide to hire/promote certain individuals to the principalship is clearly needed as is work to understand why particular Superintendents may be more inclined to take an equity stance over others.

Conclusion

Taken together, this study points to a hiring/promotion system in desperate need of reform and an area of research that requires more attention and diverse perspectives. As such, we conclude by calling on practitioners, policy makers, and researchers alike to elevate hiring and promotion practices as an important lever for institutional change particularly as it pertains to diversity, equity and inclusion efforts so many claim to embrace. Doing so would mean not simply investigating their local practices, but also advocating for change to make them more equitable and just and measures and adjusting to reach this goal.

Data availability statement

The de-identified data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by UConn IRB. The

patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

JW engaged in all facets of this research study, including data collection, analysis and writing. WG-W and TS focused on analysis and writing. LB was part of the original data collection team. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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