CHASING EQUITY: A STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK LEADERS ON FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY-MAKING

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A DISSERTATION

in

Educational and Organizational Leadership

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor in Education

2018

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DEDICATION

Rise up this morning,
Smile at the rising sun...
Three little birds,
Were by my doorstep...
Singing sweet songs,
A melody pure and true –
This is my message to you...
Don’t worry,
About a thing...
Because every little thing,
Is going to be alright...

For Jordyn, Jamison and Kendall
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to acknowledge the sacrifices of the many souls whose legacy of perseverance, tenacity and unabashed love of their people affords me the strength to step forward in this work without apology. I am grateful for the support, encouragement and grace of my dissertation committee – Drs. Vivian Gadsden, Andre Perry and Rand Quinn, with a special offering of thanks to my advisor and committee chair Dr. Annie McKee. Dr. McKee provided the space to explore a topic deeply woven into my life’s purpose without allowing the work to hold me back from forward progress. Finally, and with a special moment of pause for my daughters and mother, I bid to my friends, colleagues, family and classmates, whose encouragement small and large also kept me progressing forward - I say thank you.
ABSTRACT

CHASING EQUITY: A STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK PEOPLE ON FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY-MAKING

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Black students are persistently underserved by public education and have had significant gaps in performance, as compared to their white counterparts, on established assessments and measures of educational attainment regardless of socio-economical background (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; P. Noguera, 2013; Steele, 1992). A great deal of education policy-making at the national level in the United States is aimed at decreasing gaps in achievement between students of color and white students (Barton & Coley, 2010; Berlak, 2001; Carter, 2009; Gardner, 2007). The federal government adopted this role with the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1964 and was codified through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965¹.

Education reforms embedded in and promoted by federal policies are, at times, both embraced and shunned by members of the Black community (Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Scott, 2011; Warren, 2005), whose children are most readily affected² based on the demographics of urban, rural and low-income communities. To cultivate equity in inputs and lasting, sustainable improvement in outcomes,

¹ § 20 U.S.C. ch. 70
² See National Assessment for Educational Progress for historical data http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/
members of those communities and leaders from those communities seeking to represent the voices of their community members should be involved at critical decision-making points in creating and implementing policies (Beabout & Perry, 2013; Leonardo, 2003; Warren, 2005).

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Dixson & Lynn, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006) I set out to conduct a qualitative study targeted at identifying opportunities for Black people to have effective levels of influence in national education policy-making which heavily impacts their communities. I interviewed leaders active in the national education reform socio-political landscape in order to gauge their perspectives on leverage points in the process of federal education policy-making and the presence of Black voice and leadership at those critical points in the process.

CRT calls for exploration of phenomenon to the extent it can illuminate strategies to improve the conditions of a race of people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Identifying ways in which race impacts education policy-making through examination of the narratives of those doing the work to influence those policies, can shed a light on gaps and opportunities for developing more thoughtful policies. Through inductive thematic analysis, this study mines strategies from the information shared by study participants, highlighting ways in which members of the Black community can be most effective at influencing federal education policies.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background of the Study

For the last thirty years or more the schools-alone strategy has been pursued by educational policy makers. Billions of dollars have been spent on plans to revamp school curriculum, retrain teachers, introduce new technology, and make schools smaller, but none of these costly measures have had the impact on academic and developmental outcomes of the most disadvantaged children that was expected or hoped for. The history of failure in past school reform efforts has made it clear that a strategy based on a more holistic framework that explicitly tackles inequality is the only way sustainable progress in public education will be achieved. – (P. Noguera, 2013)

Black leaders from the earliest Black communities in America, able to break the bonds of enslavement, all the way through present day leaders in the Black community have attempted to influence education policies as a means of garnering upward mobility and obtaining the American dream (Anderson, 1988; Cooper, 1972; Du Bois, 1935; White, 1973). Self-reliance has been a common theme in these pursuits under the rationale people should and can have the best solutions for improving their own communities (Du Bois, 1935; Leonardo, 2003; White, 1973). Leaders and organizers have attempted to influence what education should look like from the local level through the highest levels of policy-making in the federal government.

However, efforts to influence policies that support providing quality education to all people, and people of color in particular, have not resulted in closing gaps in opportunities (Buras, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; P. Noguera, 2013) that
result in disparate outcomes for Black students as compared to their white counterparts, or shifted the nature of how academic achievement is assessed in decades, much less since the more recent passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (NCLB). Several scholars submit this is a result of a system of white supremacy embedded in American politics, and suggest studying this persistent phenomenon by using strategies that acknowledge and take a look at the critical role of race in policy-making and implementation (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Dixson & Lynn, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Tate, 1997).

There has not been a comprehensive study on the influence of Black people in education policy-making at the national level since 1970, when Harold Wolman and Norman Thomas used a qualitative methodology to examine Black people’s influence in federal housing and education policy-making (Wolman & Thomas, 1970). Since then, NCLB has extended the federal government’s role in public education by setting specific standards and benchmarks for school districts to reach in order to obtain funding from the federal government (DeBray & Blankenship, 2013; E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009a). Since the passage of NCLB, the current presidential administration has continued to use the power of the purse through various grant competitions for federal funds called Race to the Top (RttT) to influence education practices at local and state levels (Carter, 2009).

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3 Barack Hussein Obama served as the 44th President of the United States from January 2009 – January 2017
Using RttT, the federal government has asked states to advance policies in support of charter schools, alternative teacher certification programs, and using standardized tests to hold educators accountable for student outcomes to name a few (Scott, 2011). Some hold that these efforts are not cultivating better schools for Black and poor children (Beabout & Perry, 2013; P. Noguera, 2013), but instead, shifting community resources into the hands of elites and beneficiaries of a system of white supremacy (Buras, 2013). For example, in her examination of the emphasis on establishing charter schools mostly staffed by inexperienced white teachers, and displacing the veteran Black teachers possessing deep community ties in the post-hurricane Katrina New Orleans Recovery School District, Kristen Buras asserts “this is a feeding frenzy, a revivified Reconstruction-era blueprint for how to capitalize on public education and line the pockets of white entrepreneurs (and their Black allies) who care less about working-class school children and their grandmothers and much more about obtaining public and private monies and an array of lucrative contracts” (Buras, 2011) p. 303. In its later stages, the Obama Administration turned its eye to efforts to ensure highly rated teachers are in all classrooms, including those in highly impoverished communities as well as to increase the diversity of educators in schools.  

What remains to be seen, are significant improvements in outcomes for Black students on established assessments, or, changes in approaches taken to establish

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3
more thoughtful assessments and/or indicators of success as a means of acknowledging community values not readily accepted by mainstream America. The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA known as the Every Student Succeeds Act\(^5\), and its corresponding regulations could present an opportunity for a change of course in more readily involving community voice. During the reauthorization process, well established civil rights and Black-led organizations put forth the Opportunity to Learn\(^6\) The question remains as to whether or not policies are being developed by including the voices from communities who will be most directly affected by them. Additionally, if in some cases, people are involved who have bought into or been intentionally acculturated to interests of reformers, yet happen to be of those communities.

**Significance of the Study**

The main goal of this study was to identify gaps and opportunities for those interested in representing the voice of Black communities and/or increasing the presence of Black voices in education policy-making at the federal level. Observing current national education policy-making processes through a race-conscious lens can provide an alternative perspective on ways in which Black students, families and activists can set a course toward realizing educational success in ways they value and at a pace they find acceptable. Further, with the transition to a new

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\(^6\) [http://schottfoundation.org/resources/civil-rights-framework-providing-all-students-opportunity-learn-through-reauthorization-el](http://schottfoundation.org/resources/civil-rights-framework-providing-all-students-opportunity-learn-through-reauthorization-el)
federal political Administration, identifying points of leverage may be more of an imperative to communities of color.

To date, Critical Race Theory scholars have used the theory and methodology to explore educational policies for their impact on people of color, as well as the context in which those policies are made primarily at local and state levels (Dixson & Lynn, 2013; Lynn & Parker, 2006). There is very little scholarship specifically exploring which people have access to critical points in the policy-making process at the federal level which intentionally adopts a race conscious lens. Likewise, there is equally little scholarship exploring how those with access use their positions to advance policies that benefit and/or are derived from communities of color in order to disrupt gaps in opportunity that manifest as the achievement gap. This study has the potential to break new ground both on ways historical factors causing inequitable educational outcomes may be overcome as well as guidance for charting a new course in policy-making for people who have not had access based on structural exclusion from the process.

Along with Critical Race Theory scholars before me, such as Crenshaw, Delgado, Ladson-Billings, Noguera and Tate, I believe people should be involved in creating policies that affect their lives. In particular, to the extent policies are specifically directed at them and/or their communities, they should have a strong voice and heavy influence in what those policies are and how they are implemented. Further, as an educator, mother, and education advocate I believe I will be most helpful if I can learn more about and understand values and beliefs of people
actively involved in influencing federal education policy. As a researcher I am
guided by the Ten Vital Principals for Black Education and Socialization established
by the Commission on Research in Black Education. They are:

1. We exist as African people, an ethnic family. Our perspective must be
centered in that reality.

2. The priority is on the African ethnic Family over the Individual. Because
we live in a world in which expertness in alien cultural traditions (that we
also share) have gained hegemony, our collective survival and
enhancement must be our highest priorities.

3. Some solutions to problems that we will identify will involve differential
use of three modes of response to domination and hegemony. (a)
Adaptation – adopting what is deemed useful; (b) Improvisation –
substituting or improvising alternatives that are more sensitive to our
culture; and (c) Resistance – resisting that which is destructive and not in
the best interests of our people.

4. The “ways of knowing” provided by the arts and humanities are often
more useful in informing our understanding of our lives and experiences
and those of other oppressed people than the knowledge and
methodologies of the sciences that have been privileged by the research
establishment despite the often distorted or circumscribed knowledge
and understanding this way of knowing produces.
5. Paradoxically, from the perspective of the education research establishment, knowledge production is viewed as the search for facts and (universal) truth, whereas the circumstances of our social and existential condition require the search for meaning and standing.

6. The priority is on research \textit{validity} over "inclusion." For research validity, highest priorities must be placed on studies of (a) \textit{African tradition} (history, culture, and language); (b) \textit{Hegemony} (e.g., uses of schooling/socialization and incarceration); (c) \textit{Equity} (funding, teacher quality, content, and access to technology); and (d) \textit{Beneficial practice} (at all levels of education, from childhood to elderhood).

7. Research informs practice and practice informs research in the production and utilization of knowledge; therefore, context is essential in research: (a) cultural/historical context; (b) political/economic context; and (c) professional context, including the history of AERA and African people.

8. We require power and influence over our common destiny. Rapid globalization of the economy and cybertechnology are transforming teaching, learning, and work itself. Therefore, we require access to education that serves our collective interests, including assessments that address cultural excellence and a comprehensive approach to the interrelated health, learning and economic needs of African people.
9. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims, and the UNESCO World Education 2000 Report, issued in Dakar, Sénégäl, affirms that “education is a fundamental human right” and “an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.” We are morally obligated to “create safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments” conducive to excellence in learning and socialization with clearly defined levels of achievement for all. Such learning environments must include appropriate curricula and teachers who are appropriately educated and rewarded.

10. African people are not empty vessels. We are not new to the study of and practice of education and socialization that is rooted in deep thought. We will not accept a dependent status in the approach and solution to our problems. (King, 2005)

Most specifically, from this study, I hope to be better able to use a process of (a) Adaptation – adopting what is deemed useful, (b) Improvisation – substituting or improvising alternatives that are more sensitive to my culture; and (c) Resistance – resisting that which is destructive and not in the best interests of my people. (King, 2005) The ultimate goal is to have insights gained support my work in eliminating gaps in opportunity that manifest themselves as an educational achievement gap.

The main line of inquiry for this study will be guided by the following research question:
What are the perceptions of leaders in education reform about who has greatest influence on shaping national education reform policies, and the particular role of Black leaders?

As discussed, this study will use a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to explore the existence of and opportunities for Black leadership in national education reform spaces. The background of the study lays a foundation for exploration of previous attempts of Black leaders to influence policy. Further, absent a similar study of this kind for several decades, this study could be significant for the ways it can be instructive to Black communities seeking more influence in education reform and for leaders seeking to do authentic work to create space for those communities to lead. The next chapter will more specifically set forth research supporting a historical view of Black leadership in education, the context in which policy is made and the choice to use Critical Race Theory as a lens for analyzing the data surfaced.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The roles that race and equity play in schooling have been prevalent questions since the earliest days of public education in the United States of America (Du Bois, 1935; Franklin, 1990; McPherson, 1970). Scholars and practitioners alike have attempted to identify effective ways in which the formerly enslaved\(^7\) have sought to better their conditions by using education to improve opportunities for upward social and economic mobility. However, as long as Black communities have sought to educate their children, there have been forces intentionally and unintentionally blocking their abilities to ensure there are enough resources for and the quality of that education (Anderson, 1988; C. D. Lee, 2005; White, 1973). To that end, the Black community has sought, either directly or through established leaders, to gain political access to the purveyors of resources and developers of policies, or the policy-making elite if you will, that could disrupt inequities in educational opportunity. Often times that access has been non-existent, elusive, or superficial at best (McGuinn, 2012b; McPherson, 1970; White, 1973; Wolman & Thomas, 1970).

The following sections will explore first historical view of attempts leaders in the Black community have made to address educational inequity and/or establish educational systems; then, identification of scholarship about the very existence and

\(^7\) I adopt the practice of scholars before me such as Carol Lee who reject the identification of African descendants in America as slaves (C. D. Lee, 2005)
nature of present-day gaps in opportunity built on educational inequities along racial lines; followed by, an exploration of the process of education policy-making at the federal level in the post-NCLB era, with a goal of understanding access points, who is playing an active role, and opportunities for systemic change; and finally, literature defining critical race theory (CRT), the predominant lens I will use for conducting and analyzing the study.

Historical View of Black Leadership in Education Reform

Scholars date efforts of Black leaders in the United States seeking to empower their communities through systems of formal education to the earliest moments of the establishment of the Nation as an independent republic through the present day (Gordon, 2000; C. D. Lee, 2005; White, 1973). In examining the antebellum years post-Revolutionary War (1789–1864) through the Civil Rights era (1954-1968), academics continue to seek understanding of and learn from efforts that seemed to be at sometimes grounded in ideas of self-improvement, others a desire for self-reliance and sometimes a combination of both (Anderson, 1988; Gordon, 2000; C. D. Lee, 2005). The literature examining these historic activities bolster concepts found in Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly the concept of interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Matsuda et al., 1993). Specifically, white people are more apt to take action on providing educational opportunities to Blacks as it becomes clear those actions will support their own best interests (Wolman & Thomas, 1970). Therefore, a brief recounting of historical Black leadership in education reform can offer a basis for analyzing the lived experiences
shared by study participants, and juxtaposes those experiences against outcomes sought from education reform by its leaders versus how reform actually happens.

As a freedman, Prince Hall used his influence to press for “African” schools during the antebellum period in Boston. Adopting a self-improvement stance while simultaneously seeking self-reliance in the face of “vex and insult” from disrespect issued to Blacks who did access Boston schools, Hall sought to establish a school as early as 1787 (White, 1973). Others, some who were a part of Hall’s efforts, sought to do the same across New England cities during the years leading up to the Civil War. Some sought separate schools while others began to push for integrated schools when it became clear “African” schools would not be funded or administered with equity in quality (Cooper, 1972; White, 1973).

During the Reconstruction era (1865-1897) and through the years of the Jim Crow laws (1877 – 1954), scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois pressed more actively for equitable resources in support of education for Blacks. In *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?* (1935) Du Bois questioned efforts of Black elites demanding school integration despite poor treatment of Black students by white Americans even inside of those schools. He also questioned how Black students could learn about their rich heritage and be developed as scholars by people who saw them as inferior in integrated schools, noting “Negroes must know the history of the Negro race in America, and this they will seldom get in white institutions” (Du Bois, 1935) p. 333. A mantra repeated by activists such as Marcus Garvey of the Black Nationalist movement in the early 1900s (Chapman, 2004) and those who
developed African-centered or afro-centric schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Another significant critique from Du Bois came in his questioning of Blacks who wanted access to predominantly white institutions because they believed those institutions would inherently provide better education. Beyond his general assessment of the state of education for Black students, he challenged whether the interests and agenda being pushed by Black leaders overall aligned with the interests of the broader Black community. Du Bois submitted:

The N.A.A.C.P. and other Negro organizations have spent thousands of dollars to prevent the establishment of segregated schools, but scarcely a single cent to see that the division of funds between white and Negro schools, North and South is carried out with some faint approximation of justice (Du Bois, 1935) p. 332.

During Reconstruction, there were several prominent members of the Black community seeking to influence the utilization of education for upward mobility through their scholarship and activism. Their actions and theories ranged from promoting integration into white schools, to identifying the purpose of education – academic development versus ability to have workforce skills, to demanding greater resources for Black schools (Chapman, 2004; Franklin, 1990; McPherson, 1970). Frederick Douglass was pursuing separate schools, controlled by Black people, while other scholars were seeking the existence of wholly Black-owned and operated institutions particularly at the collegiate level (McPherson, 1970).

Black Interests, Black Groups, and Black Influence in the Federal Policy Process: The Cases of Housing and Education (1970) also provides a high level of guidance for
this study. In it Harold Wolman and Norman Thomas explored federal policy-making processes through a qualitative review “to discover which groups had access and where, and at what points in the policy-making process that access occurred” (Wolman & Thomas, 1970) p. 877. The study is contextualized at a pivotal point in the Civil Rights Era where there is both a great deal of turmoil in race relations and several major legislations seeking to address inequities in class and race had been passed by Congress. At the time of that study, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 had recently been passed. Since publishing the study, there has not been an in depth quantitative or qualitative analysis of the levels of influence of Black people on education policy-making at the federal level.

Wolman and Thomas established the federal policy-making processes they were examining to include (1) the innovation stage, (2) the formulation stage, (3) the legislative consideration stage, and (4) the implementation stage (1970). They found the most prevalent strategies being used by Black leaders to have influence were testimony before congressional committees, lobbying, litigation, and public confrontation to gain influence in the mass media. However, all of these strategies happened late in the legislative consideration and implementation stages (Wolman & Thomas, 1970).

Ultimately, it was found that Black participation in federal policy-making was ineffective due to “a severe lack of resources and a decision to concentrate most activity at the level of local communities” (Wolman & Thomas, 1970) p. 894. A core line of inquiry in their study was understanding “to the extent that Black Americans
do share common interests, how successful have they been in achieving effective access to federal decision-makers and in helping to shape national policy to conform with those interests?” p. 876 What Wolman and Thomas unearthed was a limited number of Blacks in the ranks of the policy-making elites, some Black officials who believed themselves to be working in the interest of Black masses, a use of a few Blacks on multiple high profile committees who serve in advisory capacities, and indirect influence stemming from white liberal groups claiming to understand what Black communities are interested in (Wolman & Thomas, 1970).

In recent history, Black leadership in education policy-making and policy implementation has been wrought with differing perspectives about the pathways communities and leaders should take to improve the quality of education for Black students (Beabout & Perry, 2013; Scott, 2011; Warren, 2005). A common thread throughout previous research is the rationale that Black people need to take the lead in setting the course for their community’s outcomes. Lessons learned from historical activities of Black leadership can deepen analysis and understanding of the data collected about the lived experiences of present day leaders seeking to influence development and implementation of policies impacting educational outcomes of Black children.

**Gaps in Opportunity**

*Despite the rhetoric of American equality and the effects of school desegregation and finance reform, the school experiences of African American and other “minority” students in the United States continue to be substantially separate and unequal* (Darling-Hammond, 2000) p. 202.
The need to study how race impacts educational policy-making is predicated on the fact that persistent gaps in achievement between Black and white children have existed in the United States for decades (Barton & Coley, 2010; Berlak, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006). During the enslavement of Black people there were explicit laws that kept educational opportunities out of their hands due to their status first as chattel and less than citizens. During the period where Jim Crow laws existed, we can also draw definitive conclusions about why poor educational outcomes existed for Black children as a result of explicit policies limiting access to resources in schools and broader wealth building opportunities for communities of people of color (Anderson, 1988; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Milner, 2012; Perlstein, 2002). However, since the Civil Rights Movement when the playing fields were supposedly made level by federal policies, (Kantor & Lowe, 1995) we continue to see persistent gaps in opportunities for Black children manifesting in clearly observable gaps in educational attainment and achievement. We also continue to see under-resourced schools in communities predominantly populated by Black and residents with low incomes (Berlak, 2001; Carter, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012).

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues “that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt,” in From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. She submits that disparities in achievement between Black and white children persists because research, policy and practice has not
focused on the root causes of how the gaps came to and continue to exist. Instead, researchers and practice often focus on addressing the present deficits of children with an expectation they will disappear (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

For example, in 1992 white students outperformed Black students in 3rd grade reading on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) by 33 points and by 23 points in 2012 on the same assessment. Meanwhile in 1992, white students outperformed Black students in 3rd grade mathematics on NAEP by 27 points and then, by 26 points in 2012. So, while there have been gains in eliminating the gap in reading between the two groups in over 20 years, there continues to be a large gulf in achievement and also ostensibly no change whatsoever in the gap in mathematics achievement. Pedro Noguera notes that “(NAEP) scores... have been flat and in some cases declined over the last several years... and on most international measures of academic performance, American children have fallen farther behind children in other wealthy nations” (P. Noguera, 2013) p. 182. Nonetheless, study after study, strategy after strategy, and reform after reform fail to place great emphasis on the structures that created those gaps and cause them to persist in any significant way.

Scholars posit that in order to eliminate gaps in opportunity or Ladson-Billings’ “education debt,” policies are needed that address the many systems that perpetuate the state of poverty for many families, deprive access to the best schools and educators, as well as the inequitable disbursement of resources between

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schools across the Nation (Buras, 2013; Carter, 2009; DeBray & Blankenship, 2013; Gillborn, 2013). The question becomes whether or not those involved in policy development at any stage are equipped with historical perspectives and flexibility in notions of what should change in order to reduce the debt. In Equity and Empathy: Toward Racial and Educational Achievement in the Obama Era Prudence Carter explores the potential for researchers and practitioners to ignore critical disparities in achievement and its causes through a race-conscious lens now that a Black president has been elected in the United States. Carter offers that:

“...we must ask whether an Obama administration should proactively caution our nation from dismissing the relevance of race too quickly, when the reality is that many of our students still do not trust and interact across racial and class lines. The administration should support the struggle not only for mixed-race schools—by reversing the dangerous legal and policy trends that act on the false premise of a postracial society...” (Carter, 2009) p. 293.

Carter (2009) centers her inquiry on the need to remain cognizant of the role race plays in education from policy to practice as it relates to supporting integrated school environments. Whether or not, there is evidence the Obama administration achieved this balance as it comes to an end depends upon the metrics used to assess functioning on a premise of a “postracial society.”

Other scholars insist the persistence of gaps in opportunity causing the achievement gap can be dismantled if, again while identifying race conscious strategies, poverty and inequitable distribution of resources are the main focus of policy-making. In his article Confronting the Achievement Gap, teacher leader David Gardner insists “The achievement gap will begin to disappear when attitudes in this country begin to change, when eliminating poverty becomes a national priority. It
will begin to disappear when racism is recognized as the pervasive and insidious cancer that it is and when Americans are united in their willingness to do something about it” (Gardner, 2007) p. 545.

Most scholars agree the study of gaps in opportunity is deeply complex (Barton & Coley, 2010; Carter, 2009; J. Lee, 2002; Milner, 2012). Even with attempts to identify moments when the achievement gap was decreased, scholars could only draw the conclusion that there needed to be more in depth interdisciplinary study of factors affecting the still expansive achievement gap. While not going as far as suggesting a counter narrative approach to studying the ways in which the achievement gap is affected, Jaekyung Lee proposes that “we look beyond conventional measures of racial and ethnic inequity in order to develop a new framework for further empirical research on the bifurcated racial and ethnic gap patterns” (J. Lee, 2002). What follows from an alternative approach to identifying gap patterns is identification of the ways in which policies are developed, both of which could be satisfied by adopting a Critical Race Theory framework (Gillborn, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Finally, in The Achievement Gap and the Schools we Need: Creating the Conditions Where Race and Class no Longer Predict Student Achievement (2013) Pedro Noguera offers some clear strategies for addressing factors resulting in the achievement gap through policy-making with explicit acknowledgment of the role of race. Noguera lays out historical context noting a need to address how efforts to reform education failed to acknowledge inequities inside and outside of schools, as
well as a lack of will to address lingering effects of and even a return to desegregation. He also highlights the hesitation and discord among civil rights organizations and Black leaders around limiting provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for fear of a return to an era where high performing urban schools and suburban schools and districts could hide the disparities in achievement between white children and children of color (P. Noguera, 2013).

**Federal Education Policy Formation**

In the decades prior to the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal government played a limited role in establishing education policies directly impacting how state and local governments administered education to their citizens. However, in 1983 when the *A Nation At Risk* Report⁹ was released by the U.S. Department of Education highlighting disparities in student achievement and emphasizing how low-achievement impacted the United States economy, conservative and liberal political forces both developed a rationale for a greater role of the federal government in determining educational standards (E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009a). Scholars note that:

“By the end of the 1990s... The national politics of education had changed in important ways that weakened the ability of groups on the left (the teachers unions) and the right (libertarian and state’s rights groups) to block school reform proposals... Responding to the pressure of voters and an interest group environment in education that was more complex and less supportive of the old finance equity regime, national policy makers embraced the call for a more aggressive federal role in school reform.” Ibid

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⁹ [https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html](https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html)
In their examination of Black influence on federal education and housing policy processes, Norman and Thomas (1970) adopted a policy system framework articulating four key points where policies may be informed including 1- the innovation and formulation stage where specific policies are recommended, developed and written to address an issue, 2- the legislative consideration stage wherein once developed, a proposed law may be slightly reshaped once it comes up for debate through the legislative structure and in the public sphere, 3- the appropriation stage where resources are allocated for implementation of a law, and 4- the implementation stage, where once passed, proponents and opponents of a law may take steps to protect, overturn or modify how a law is implemented.

This study uses narratives shared by participants about their own efforts to influence policies to identify whether or not there is adequate access for Black people to influence policy in the earliest stages of formation or effectively undertake efforts to overturn existing policies in the implementation stage. The study also gleans insights from those possessing status as either political elites or who have standing in spaces where policies are informed based on racial and/or resource privilege, so readers may develop ideas and strategies about how to further benefit from and influence the policy process.

People presently active in federal education policy formation beyond legislators, include a range of players representing organizations both historically involved in the process and relatively new to the landscape (Barone, DeBray, Hess, & Kelly, 2011; E. H. DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007; McGuinn, 2012a;
McGuinn, 2006). Groups historically involved in efforts to affect what happens in America's public schools by influencing federal policy-making includes teachers unions, coalitions representing state-level education leaders and local governments, as well as civil rights organizations (Barone et al., 2011; E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009a; McDonald, 2013; McGuinn, 2006).

Relatively new entrants into the federal education policy-making landscape include philanthropic organizations, who use their resources to fund organizations promoting policies they support (Ferris, Hentschke, & Harmssen, 2008). In congruence with the Nation At Risk Report, Ferris, et al also note:

“Over the last three decades, poor schooling performance, as evidenced by low test scores and high drop-out rates, has fueled public concerns about the overall quality of K-12 schooling. As a result, a number of foundations have shifted their education interests from support of school programs to school reform.”

There has also been a proliferation of think tanks formed and entering the education policy arena since the release of the 1983 report. These think tanks have been increasingly ideology based, often times with conservative positions pushing for market-based reforms such as charters, vouchers and school choice (E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009b; McDonald, 2013; McGuinn, 2012b).

To the extent “Race and racial power are part and parcel of the policymaking process,” (Buras, 2013) p. 218 it becomes necessary to understand the lived experiences of the people who are making behind the scenes decisions about where and how to advocate for change. In his 2012 piece Fight Club, Patrick McGuinn asks ‘Are advocacy organizations changing the politics of education?’ He spends an entire
article examining the structure, financing and fine-tuned strategic practices of Education Reform Advocacy Organizations (ERAOs) seeking to influence federal and state educations policies. As an aside, the only time McGuinn acknowledges race specifically is when he points out:

“There is also a major generational and racial gap between the leaders of groups like the NAACP and ERAO leaders, who are an overwhelmingly young, elite schooled, and “white” bunch and as such are often viewed skeptically by people of color. Figuring out how to create state-level alliances with civil rights groups and mobilize urban communities—which are disproportionately minority and poor—remains an ongoing challenge” (McGuinn, 2012a) p. 29.

At no time does McGuinn question whether the values and policies being promoted by this “mostly white bunch” of elites are actually policies the communities they are targeted at are interested in supporting.

**Critical Race Theory**

This study will adopt a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens and approach to understanding and analyzing the data collected. “CRT first emerged as a counterlegal scholarship to the positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights. This scholarly tradition argues against the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (Ladson-Billings, 1998) p. 7. The genesis of this theory came about when a group of 23 lawyers met in 1989 for a weeklong workshop at a convent in Madison, Wisconsin where CRT was formally established drawing on critical legal studies, radical feminism, and civil rights thoughts of nationalism and group empowerment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) p. 2. Delgado and Stefancic note the early establishment of CRT stemmed from “realizing that new theories and strategies were needed to
combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground” during the 1960’s and 1970’s. p. 1 In *The History and Conceptual Elements of Critical Race Theory* (2013), Kevin Brown and Darrell Jackson draw a fine point on what the developers of CRT sought to accomplish, sharing:

> “While the legal scholars who met at the first CRT meeting were looking for a community of like-minded individuals, they were also motivated by a desire to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color had been created and maintained in America. More importantly they wanted to develop the understanding that would change it.” (Brown & Jackson, 2013) p.14

In their primer on CRT, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefancic describe the key tenets of CRT as a guide for scholars seeking to apply the framework to their work (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). First, racism is a normal part of American society, not an anomaly. Second, progress in disrupting racial inequities happen more often than not as a result of when interests of white people converge with interests of oppressed people of color and not otherwise, a theory of interest convergence. Third, race is a product of social interactions and is not a scientific phenomenon; therefore, assigning character traits to groups of people based on appearance are choices we make. Fourth, the existence of the concepts of intersectionality and anti-essentialism, which is to say “no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity.” p. 4 Also, they put forth the voice-of-color thesis, which is that use of storytelling is a method people of color should use to amplify their unique perspectives and counter mainstream narratives about their experiences. CRT scholars and analysts, including Delgado in previous work, also add that the
framework is both interdisciplinary and a strategy for ending racial oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Matsuda et al., 1993).

Building upon the scholarship of CRT, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate were leaders in taking steps in the mid-late 1990’s highlighting linkages for use of CRT to explore inequities in education. Ladson-Billings noted, “Since schooling in the USA purports to prepare citizens, CRT looks at how citizenship and race might interact” (Ladson-Billings, 1998) p. 7. Ladson-Billings also pointed out that “If we look at the way that public education is currently configured, it is possible to see the ways that CRT can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience” p. 18.

More recently, Marvin Lynn and Laurence Parker have taken a look at the many ways scholars have used CRT as a framework or methodology for exploring racial inequities in education in Critical Race Studies in Education: Examining a Decade of Research in U.S. Schools (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Lynn and Parker began with a brief chronology of the emergence of Critical Race Theory followed by an explanation of its relevance to the field of education. They featured Ladson-Billings and Tate’s 1995 Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education as a piece that “demonstrated the centrality of racial inequalities in U.S. schools.” p. 266 Lynn and Parker suggested:

In short, they were arguing that CRT – with its insistence on exploring both the ideological and material manifestations of racism – could be used to explain the important connections between race and class in American schooling... they helped to explain how a critical analysis of racism in education could lead to the development of new ways to think about the
failure of schools to properly educate minority populations.” p. 266

Lynn and Parker went on to highlight both William Tate’s 1997 piece Critical Race Theory and Education: History, theory and implications, as well as Edward Taylor’s 1998 piece A primer on Critical Race Theory to make clear the links between CRT and education research and theory, particularly in the ways they amplify that CRT is “by, for and about people of color who understood racism from multiple vantage points.” p. 268 (Lynn and Parker, 2006). were submitting that these three seminal articles were a springboard for future use of CRT in education research, serving as a call to move from theorizing to “action that impacts the lives of disenfranchised people of color” p. 268.

When using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a frame for interpreting perceptions about influence in federal policy-making it is necessary to place the data into a race-conscious context. In Let’s Be For Real: Critical Race Theory, Racial Realism, and Education Policy Analysis Kristen Buras (2013) lays out the following elements to inform a deeper level of analysis using race-conscious examination of policy-making aligning with CRT methodology, including:

1- situating policy within a history of white supremacy,
2- mapping the racial-legal infrastructure that presently shapes education policy,
3- using and developing critical race constructs to analyze policy formation and implementation,
4- centering the counterstories of the racially oppressed in assessing policy effects, and
5- acting in alliance with communities affected by racially destructive policies in order to challenge those policies. (p. 217)
This study aims to move from theory to action using narratives to identify tangible activities that can more rapidly support the advancement of people of color. Adopting the core tenets of CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2013) and adapting the utility of CRT for examining inequities in education policy-making is a thread tying this study together. “CRT grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive contextual experiences of people of color and develop through the use of literary narrative knowledge and story-telling to challenge the existing social construction of race” (Lynn & Parker, 2006) p. 260. Having participants chronicle their experiences in attempting to influence education policy-making at the federal level can illuminate what opportunities may exist in those spaces to more effectively influence policymaking targeted at accelerating educational achievement for Black children. Additionally, integrating the voices of people who work alongside and/or outside of the presence of Black leaders can equally provide insights into opportunities where Black people can exercise their voice at a greater rate and more effectively.
Introduction

Although education tends to be a very local endeavor as it relates to implementation of policies and regulations governing how public schools are run, as discussed in chapters one and two, the federal government has played a much more significant role in what those local policies should be. It is federal laws that set the framework for closing centuries old gaps in opportunity bolstered by foundations of white supremacy. Further, the nature of local policy is increasingly being steered by national actors working to dictate the rules of the game across states by gaining influence in federal policy and by using national communications strategies. For these reasons, observing the phenomenon of influence in federal education policy-making is necessary for scholars, practitioners and communities seeking to have some level of influence on those policies and subsequently their implementation.

The question presented in this research is:

• **What are the perceptions of leaders in education reform about who has greatest influence on shaping national education reform policies, and the particular role of Black leaders?**

This study does not focus on people physically located in a singular place such as a particular school, school district, or city. Many of the interviews occurred with people physically based in the Nation’s capital. This happened both because the participants involved locate a great deal of their work attempting to influence

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federal policy in proximity to the US Department of Education and members of Congress. Some participants, however, are located all around the country and did not physically participate in Washington, DC, despite possessing strong familiarity with working in the District and with federal elected and appointed officials.

This section describes, in greater depth, the rationale for undertaking a qualitative study in order to explore the phenomenon of influencing federal education-policy through a race-conscious lens. I offer scholarly support for adopting a qualitative approach in addition to the choice to apply inductive thematic analysis of data collected through one-on-one interviews. I will make clear my role as a researcher in this study in addition to why the research is both significant to me and for generally advancing the field of education. Lastly, I identify limitations in the study.

**Methods**

I took a qualitative approach to this study, in order to learn from participants about their perspectives on levels of influence held by Black people in education policy development. Exploring race and using a race conscious lens in research can be a very sensitive undertaking. Therefore, it was important to centralize the voice, thoughts and theories of participants themselves in the study (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). “Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013) p. 4. More than using a qualitative approach I set out to help lay the groundwork for developing an
action agenda for reform with an eye on helping people who have faced historic inequity in the United States of America, adopting a transformative worldview. (Creswell, 2013) Because qualitative research is explicitly used to develop narratives and descriptive accounts of practices as well as serving as a tool for interpreting phenomena based on what it means to the people experiencing them (Guest et al., 2011), it is an integral component of conducting race conscious research.

Beyond using a qualitative research design, I more specifically used interviewing as the data collection tool for learning about how the participants experience the phenomena of attempting to influence federal education policy-making. Interviews supported an emphasis on garnering a view of what has already occurred (Maxwell, 2012) in the lived experiences of participants and allowed for a focus on participant meaning. “In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or that writers express in the literature” (Creswell, 2013) p. 186. The core tenet of developing a counter narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013) embedded in Critical Race Theory methodology can only be supported by a design that places an emphasis on participant meaning and voice.

The questions used while interviewing were shaped to elicit narrative responses more heavily than ones that would come from targeted questioning. However, some questions placed participants in a position to move beyond
narrative and take an affirmative stance on their beliefs about Black influence in education policy-making along with sufficiency of the efforts of white leaders representing the voice of Black communities. As a result of conducting cultural interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) it was important for me to serve as an active listener in order to learn as much as possible from participants. Because qualitative research provides the “ability to ask questions that are meaningful to participants and to likewise receive responses in participants own words,” (Guest et al., 2011) p. 13, it is the strongest tool for engaging in research that could garner a deep and authentic narrative about the phenomena of Black leaders attempting to influence federal education policy-making.

Research Design

**Purposeful sampling and participant selection.** The nature of this study is one wherein random selection could not offer the type of data necessary to draw conclusions or serve as informative for people interested in ensuring broad Black influence exists in national education policy-making. To that end, I selected people who could provide information particularly relevant to my research question and goals through purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2012) p. 91 of participants who serve in the following contexts and met particular criteria:

1. Black people serving as senior leadership in organizations articulating and/or exercising a role in developing and/or implementing education reform(s) and/or policy-making including government agencies,
2. Black people identified as experts in education reform theory, policy development, strategy, and
3. Non-Black people meeting criteria in number 1 and/or 2 besides racial identity.

The goal was to learn from those with closest proximity to opportunities for influencing the formation, legislation and implementation of federal education policy. Also, I was interested in selecting participants with whom I could establish the most productive connections and could best help me with answering the research question. (p. 99) Having worked for a year at the US Department of Education as a graduate intern and fellow, and subsequently as Deputy Director in a White House Initiative housed at the Department beginning January 2015 allowed me to establish a professional relationship with potential participants and access to people who may have otherwise been difficult to reach.

The literature on federal education policy-making makes clear there is a high level of activity from education reform advocacy organizations, think tanks, philanthropies and member-based organizations including civil rights groups, teachers unions and of course government entities (E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009a; E. H. DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007; McGuinn, 2012a). It follows that study participants would represent the leadership of the most prominent of these organizations, be embedded in federal government’s education policy-making structure, as well as organizations explicitly articulating their representation of interests of Black Americans in federal policy-making more broadly.

Data collection. I used semistructured open-ended interviews as the qualitative approach for collecting data. The semistructured format supported my ability to direct the interview responses on the specific topic of Black influence on
national education policy-making, using a limited number of questions and follow-up probes in support of deep responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Interviews allowed for me to mine for rich and detailed information that includes examples, experiences and narrative stories. I also had the flexibility to rearrange the questions ordering and/or adjust wording as the conversation progressed, further creating a space for participants to share an authentic narrative of their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

I sought approval through the institutional review board process for this research since it involved human subjects, who by the nature of their work and the sensitivity of the topic require some level of protection. Participants received a letter (See Appendix A) in the body of and attached to an email requesting their participation, outlining the steps I will take to ensure anonymity by limiting identifying markers attributable to them and/or organizations where they work (Creswell, 2013).

After piloting (Maxwell, 2012) the interview protocol (See Appendix B) with two colleagues I made subsequent adjustments in order to ensure I would elicit responses of participants sharing a narrative of their lived experiences, to control for participants who may be inarticulate or hesitant to be vulnerable with me about a topic as sensitive as race in America, and, to address any issues with my style of questioning.

I then conducted 20 interviews with participants through one-on-one interactions in person, using the web applications Skype or Google Hangout and via
telephone where other options were prohibitive. 60 minutes were allotted for interviews in order to give participants the time necessary for them to recall their personal stories of working to influence federal education policy. Data was recorded and transcribed in support of allowing participants space to share their stories without limitations from seeking clarity during a note-taking process.

**Data analysis.** Once I completed interviews with participants, I undertook an inductive thematic analysis of responses. “The applied thematic analysis approach is a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible” (Guest et al., 2011) p. 21. Throughout the data-collection and analysis process I wrote memos and maintained a journal in order to capture immediate thoughts, questions and new information learned in support of identifying developing themes. Once I began to analyze the data, I sought to unearth themes based on the contents of the interviews as opposed to attaching codes preemptively. Identifying the themes inductively helped to provide a means of limiting bias from my own perspective and to ensure the voices of the participants were elevated. Using the themes identified, I developed a code book (Guest et al., 2011) that corresponds with identified themes and performed a second review connecting them with data.

Once themes were developed inductively I then used deductive analysis to take a look at the “data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether I needed to gather more information.” (Creswell, 2013)
I also used qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) as a secondary method for identifying themes and evidence from the data set supporting themes already developed in the inductive process. Because QDAS “have converged to the point of being superb textbase managers with text- and code-retrieve functions that facilitate theory and conceptual network building,” the QDAS helped to enhance the efficiency, consistency and comprehensiveness of the thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011) p.218 – 220.

Undertaking this level of thematic analysis was intended to support the critical race stance of studying a phenomenon to the extent what is learned from the personal experiences of participants may be both applicable and informative. “CRT can be used to question the variables chosen (or ignored) in quantitative research as well as establish counter-narratives in qualitative research” (Brown & Jackson, 2013) p.21.

**Researcher’s role.** I believe people should be involved in creating policies that affect their lives. In particular, to the extent policies are specifically directed at them and/or their communities, they should have a strong voice and heavy influence in what those policies are and how they are implemented. My approach to the research has a definite bias towards supporting repair for inequities faced by Black communities. (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) Further, as an educator, mother and researcher I believe I will be most helpful in the effort towards Black liberation from systemic inequities if I can learn more about and understand values and beliefs of people actively involved in influencing federal education policy.
My entrance into K-12 education was non-traditional, beginning with my work at a youth advocacy non-profit supporting law-related education programs in public high schools. The next step for me was serving as a founder of a public high school alongside a group of community advocates in partnership with a local public school system. The school's mission centered on social justice and community advocacy resulting in students, parents and faculty bringing issues to local and state policy-makers. Years later, that school became a public charter school. The school experienced some successes and also experienced deep challenges connected to attempting systemic reform through the one school at a time method and closed after ten years. So, despite the well-meaning community working to advance social change and implement an alternate pedagogical approach of project-based learning with young people who were accustomed to a teach-to-the-test structure, we had to fold operations and move on to fight another day and another way.

After leaving the school I helped to found and embarking on doctoral studies, I worked for one year at the US Department of Education as a graduate intern and fellow, affording a new perspective into how local education policies are being influenced at the national level and by who. During that period, I also worked as an educator through a role managing college readiness and dual enrollment programs for high school students and as an adjunct instructor at an institution of higher learning. Following that role, I was appointed to serve as the first Deputy Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans,
which I did for one year before taking on a more senior role in the Obama Administration.

As a result of working at both the local and federal level I have particular perspective about what should and could happen to greater empower communities and people being impacted by education policies being developed. Because of my work in federal education policy I recognize I was less of a disinterested participant. I was diligent in acknowledging any biases I possess as a result of my experiences both in education and as a Black woman who is a mother seeking the best options for her own children. Further, as someone who has experienced obstacles to ascending into leadership first hand at the intersection of being female and Black, I believe this study may be instructive in more ways than one. I did not adopt a stance of having no opinion on how Black Americans should be influencing federal education policy-making. Maxwell notes the opinion of his colleague Fred Hess, that “validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but integrity” (Maxwell, 2012) p.124. Instead, I used thick description by offering many perspectives about the themes that arise (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2011). I also acknowledge where data either differs from my perspective and/or experiences, and made every effort to identify data that provides negative or discrepant information from what I thought I might find, along with being diligent about using language that honors the voices of all participants (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).
**Significance of the study.** The main goal of this study is to identify gaps and opportunities for those interested in increasing the presence of Black voices in education policy-making at the federal level. Further, “the history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States continues to be highly relevant to current efforts at closing the achievement gap, because racist thinking about the intellectual capacity of different ethnic groups has contributed to the development of racist educational policies and practices” (P. Noguera, 2013) p. 187. People already participating in and leading efforts to create circumstances where all students can achieve to their highest ability, have a birds-eye view of ways to influence policy makers. However, a question remains about whether they have taken steps themselves to not perpetuate systems of oppression.

While there is literature on who is influencing federal education policy-making and how they’re doing that, there has not been any substantive analysis of the role race place in those efforts. Therefore, observing current national education policy-making processes using a race-conscious lens, will provide an alternative perspective on ways in which Black students and families can better set a course toward realizing educational success in ways they value and at a pace they find acceptable.

**Limitations of the study.** To expand upon the research conducted in this study, interviewing additional participants as well as taking steps to verify the accuracy of perceptions held by participants could strengthen the reliability of the results. It is possible that people who are working to influence education policies at
the federal level generally share a similar worldview. Therefore, including perspectives of the policy makers who they are attempting to influence, about where opportunities and gaps exist, would be a next step in identifying whether or not perceptions held accurately depict how to best influence federal education policy and who has the greatest level of influence. Likewise, although participants have individual influence as a result of their roles as leaders in their organization or field, it is possible midlevel staff working on their teams would have better ideas about the work it takes to influence federal policy makers in addition to more accurate observations about who is most successful in influencing policy.

Another limitation in this study is the use of a singular data collection tool. While the design of this study is intentional and targeted specifically at learning the perspectives of participants, use of some alternate method such as a survey or analysis of external information in the data collection process could support more definitive conclusions about or corroborations of what participants are sharing (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012). Also, relying solely on interviews could limit more distinctive details or nuance in the phenomena being explored (Guest et al., 2011). Subsequent studies that are both more expansive in the number and type of participants and/or conducting another level of study by collecting data about the phenomena described by participants through each stage of the policy-making process, could be ways to continue the inquiry began in this study to strengthen practices in federal education policy-making.
Chapter 4
Findings & Analysis

Introduction

The data analysis process began by identifying a wide variety of divergent thoughts and perspectives in order to allow the narratives of participants to take precedence over any preconceived notions or assumptions made by me during data collection. As a full participant in the research I recognize I brought my own experiences to the study and was mindful of this when trying to understand the narratives being shared. Also, points where participants were either quite emphatic, or particularly negative or positive were interrogated in order to unveil possible themes. Likewise, where participants either excluded themselves from a reference or were insistent about what others should or shouldn’t be doing caused me to spend more time making sense of the context of what those leaders were saying or the meaning they were trying to convey, resulting in several themes surfacing. This seemed particularly important to the extent I interviewed leaders who are Black and who are not Black, considering their lenses would be different based on lived experiences.

Through inductive thematic analysis, broad themes began to emerge. The themes included the critical need for leaders to engage communities in policy-making and schooling as owners of the process, leaders and their responsibility to disrupt the status quo, the power of whiteness to set the agenda and direction for education policy, the ways in which money drives influence and affords access to
where and how decisions are made, the burden of Blackness in leadership spaces, and the pipeline to leadership in the education policy-making space at the national level. Each theme presented itself from varying perspectives of the participants, whether the narratives shared were aspirational, highlighted some practice already in progress, or was judgmental or an indictment of what has not yet happened.

This chapter is organized into a series of themes that were surfaced by the narratives shared by participants. The first theme offers an analysis of responses, on a scale of one to five, to four questions I asked participants offering them space to also elaborate on why they gave the rating provided. The remaining themes delve into ideas repeatedly shared by participants and are divided into sub sections geared at offering clarity and basis for the analysis through supporting content.

**Perspectives on Access and Influence**

In order to consider perspectives of all of the leaders on a common set of questions, I asked them to rate their response on a scale of one to five with a one being absolutely not true and a five being absolutely true. Participants were also invited to expand on their answers where they felt compelled to do so. The questions asked are below:

1- How would you rate the statement that “Black leaders have full access to influencing national education reform and policy-making?”

2- How would you rate the statement that “national education reforms are centered on what is desired by people from communities they’re targeted at?”
3- How would you rate the statement “when Black people are not present at important decision-making tables, non-Black education reformers raise issues that would be most important to Black communities?”

4- How would you rate the statement “when Black people are not present at important decision-making tables, non-Black education reformers are willing to challenge ideas from a racial lens?”

1 = Absolutely not true and 5 = Absolutely true

Table - 1

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| Mean         | 2.35   | 1.8    | 2.42   | 1.86   |
| Median       | 2      | 2      | 2      | 2      |
Overall, the leaders articulated moderate to low levels of agreement with the statements presented to them, with an average rating of two (2) or “not true” to what was asked. This could have been a result of the format of the questions or deep reflection on the shortcomings of the leadership present in the movement to reform schools in order to close gaps in achievement. The next our sub sections dive more deeply into analysis of the questions presented.

**Question one.** An overarching theme within responses to question one was that there are in fact efforts being made to ensure Black voices are represented at decision-making tables. The leader who gave the highest rating had this to say, “I want to go with 4 just because I do think we do quite a bit of work around opening the door for these dialogues to take place. If you don’t take advantage of it, I do think, to be honest, it’s then on you” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016). This was admittedly a jarring response to hear. When leaders are acting on behalf historically unrepresented and systemically oppressed people, it would seemingly follow they are clear of the many ways simply opening a door to talk about what community is interested versus working to do what community has already demanded is not going far enough. Alternatively, this participant could be functioning from a worldview where equal opportunity is the standard versus equitable access to opportunity. Lastly, taking the response at face value, the respondent could simply believe a lot of work is being done to make room for new
or alternative voices of Black leaders.

**Question two.** Question two had a lower rating of agreement overall than the first with much more discussion making clear why the ratings were so low. That input reflected the narratives heard from the questions soliciting open-ended responses at the beginning of each interview, which was that for the most part, communities have not been involved at the front end of policies being developed to impact their own communities. Two leaders wanted to give this question a rating of less than one if possible. Another leader noted “I do not see a direct justification for advocacy by any of the groups frankly, well not all, most of the groups whether they're from the hardcore in ed reform side or hardcore, you know, status quo side and I think that you know I think in each case there is a philosophy and an agenda that has been formed without a direct line from parents and you know consumers at the local level” (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 3, 2016).

Another leader connected their low rating to what I understood to be paternalism by people with access to decision-making around policy. They noted

“I think that for the most part we have suffered in the national reform effort to the extent to which the voice of community has been left out in the agenda setting process. I think the reformers believe they are representing community interests. The difference between a one and a two for me was in respect to what these folks think they’re doing. They honestly think they’re acting in the best interest of the community, so they have, curiously, decided that the communities don’t know what they need or want. Therefore, these kinds of top down solutions are imposed on them. When you bring up this question of community engagement to them, they think it’s a messaging
problem. ‘If these folks just understood they would agree with us about this’ (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016).

Even those who did not decide to give a low rating on question two still articulated the lack of engagement of community. Often times the deciding factor seemed to be whether or not they felt the people in leadership or with resources actually care about community. A good example is this leader’s perspective saying, “I would say three. I wouldn’t go all the way on the true side yet, because there’s just not enough partnership with communities, although it’s growing, it’s definitely growing. I would say three, because at the end of the day, most of the philanthropists, I would say do care about, not all, but most, is the baby being educated. I’d say three for that” (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 16, 2016). Somewhere between leaders feeling they know better than communities and the fact that they really care, was whether or not organizations did the intentional work to ask communities if they agree with what the organization came up with as a policy requiring the greatest focus.

**Question three.** Interestingly, on question three, leaders were relatively positive about whether or not leaders who aren’t Black would raise issues that many in the Black community would find critical or important. It seemed most people had witnessed someone doing so when they were either the only Black person in the room or a white person in a room with no Black voices at the table. And although positive, there was often questioning of the experience of witnessing white people raise issues on behalf of Black communities with either the intent
behind doing so or the audacity to have done it at all. One leader expressed “...I definitely think that there are white advocates that sit at that table that think and sometimes they’re right that they are representing the views of the Black community, but I also want to ... I’m rounding down because of the fact that we don’t know because there aren't the Black leaders at the table to confirm or deny that that's true” (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 3, 2016).

As it relates to leaders experiencing colleagues actually raising issues they felt were important to Black communities, a particular name that came up on a few occasions was Kati Haycock of the Education Trust. For example, one leader noted “You know, I do think they do raise them. I mean, when you talk to Kati at the Education Trust, she’s speaking on behalf of Black communities, so I don’t know that they’re not representing their voices and their needs” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016). Another, in regard to why another leader mentioned Kati, they said, “because Kati shares her capital... that makes her unique. A lot of these other reformers, they don't share their capital with Black people” (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3, 2016).

It seems important to note one leader who had a different approach to this question by offering a perspective that took the statement offered literally, in turn, agreeing with others that there are white people who would speak on behalf of Black communities, but turning that agreement on its head when offering the highest rating of a five. This leader explained the rating as follows, “What I meant by
that is that people will talk about issues that are very important to our community whether we are there or not a couple of times. That’s how I took the question, and they are very comfortable being white people talking about what we need whether we are there or not. That’s how I took that question, and I said it was absolutely true” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016). I then understood this leader to be offering a level of admonishment for white people who are readily willing to speak to and act on behalf of Black communities with maybe too much comfort and ease.

**Question four.** Unlike question three, participants seemed to be much clearer in their perspective about white leaders exploring decisions or setting policy agendas through a racial lens when there are no Black people in the room, as question four asked. They felt it either rarely-to-never happens, or the discussion is not going to yield results because it is unchecked for accuracy of the lived experiences of people of color. In fact, over half of the leaders were quite emphatic that the fortitude did not exist for not only white leaders, but also leaders of color who have a seat at decision-making tables, to challenge a line of thinking or reasoning squarely on the lines of race.

One leader framed their perspective by sharing a scenario they believe captures the duality of either not having Black people in at the decision-making table or having white people be the leaders raising racial issues. The leader stated:

> I think the last question is particularly interesting, because that, for me, has shaped a lot of, at least the small sense of hope that we organize with... Is that
unwillingness to have real hard and difficult conversations, that touch the core of what we're experiencing. A very clear example has been the work around suspensions. People really didn't want to talk about race so much. I would say some of the stuff about school-to-prison and they'd be like, "Oh, It's not like that." Yeah, not like that for you. Then when the data came back that said, yes there is some race stuff, then it was this thing where you always have to prove, you always have to come up with some data around this shit. This shit always has to be evidence-based. I'm like, "Come on. You see all them folk." This shit is solid (Anonymous, personal communication, February 5, 2016).

A second said, “I think it goes back to the conversation we just had, that if we're not in the room, it's a different conversation... I think it's imperative that we be at the table to check things that are being said” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 6, 2016). A third articulated the difficulty with event having Black leaders raise racial issues if they aren't equipped to do so, saying "I would put that at a 2, just because it's hard to do that if you're not ... I don't even ... I mean, not every Black person can look at it through a racial lens either. I feel like it's, you know, certain people are better at it then others" (Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016).

Another leader offered guidance on their own positionality as white and a person with a seat at key decision-making tables where influence is wielded. Their thought was "[t]he bottom line is we can't worry about offending somebody because we're all going to be offended and we're all going to have little bit of differences in our views. We got to get to the place where we're actually creating opportunity and the only way we do that is to look like the kids we're trying to create the opportunity for. That is the only way. That means me taking a back seat to some of
these conversations and I got to be comfortable with that” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2016).

And finally, one participant offered a level of nuance and skepticism about the people they do experience pressing on racial issues, contextualized by the belief white people and people in power are simply becoming savvier about what they need to say to sound credible. A clear description of interest convergence. This leader shared more specifically, “[g]enerally, some people are getting better at being attuned to the issues of race, class, gender. Conversations happening, but not frequently enough and not to a level where I personally feel like if people of color, specifically Black people, left the room that these things would be addressed efficiently, right” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015)?

While poignant and directed, these questions offered laser-like insight into the more descriptive narratives shared by participants. In the following sections, themes surfaced are derived from the unfettered ideas of the participants which is deeply important to a critical race analysis.

**Theme One: Engaging Community As Owners of Change**

One theme that was pervasive throughout was the concept that communities needed to be engaged in development of and at decision-making tables about education reforms. Regardless of race and gender participants made clear both that communities need to be involved and engaged to make decisions about their own children as well as the fact that existing reforms did not originate from the
communities they are targeted and therefore unsustainable.

**Acknowledge existing Black community leadership.** Within the theme of engaging community there were subthemes that repeatedly surfaced, one of which is the critical need of leaders and those in seats of power to acknowledge Black community leadership. More specifically, participants articulated they believe there are existing voices in the Black community, whether they be at the grassroots level or at the head of national organizations, that either going unheard or are simply not deemed as critical or credible by those in power.

Examples were shared where parent leaders may have driven or are continuing to drive change at the local level that may have led to existing reforms but did not receive the credit for doing so because the education reform space isn’t connected to parent and community activism in a way that would heighten credibility of community work. For instance, one leader raised the example of the Wisconsin tax credit efforts to fairly fund public schools stating “while the traditional story is the, right-wing foundations, and [another] group did it… there’s all this parent-work, parent leadership that happened” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016).

Another leader highlighted that at the national level they’d seen wealthy funders who were participating in discussions trying to influence the nature of the new Every Student Succeeds Act but were in many ways disrespectful to members of the civil rights community sitting at the table by not acknowledging their
perspectives or ideas as well as by hosting meetings where the purpose was only to appear to engage civil rights community leaders all the while still having decision-making sessions before hand or afterwards (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

Although articulated in different ways, leaders addressed how and when Black community members should be acknowledged in the policymaking process and uniformly shared the common belief that it must happen. Nonetheless, there were moments when some participants set out to dictate how those community leaders participate in order to be seen as credible. Further, participants’ discussion about the role money plays in affording the ability to influence policy discussions offer insight into why it might be that Black community members were not being acknowledged for their leadership. In other words, what they pressed for did not make it to the top of the agenda, therefore their efforts went unseen.

**Develop the capacity of community members to use their voice by making the possibilities clear.** Another subtheme that came forward when participants discussed involving community, what’s the need to develop capacity for community members to both use their voices and understand exactly what was at stake. This subtheme was also presented from both the macro and micro perspective. On one hand some discussed the need to ensure Black community members could see themselves as leaders in existing national organizations. A participant shared "I think we need to be saying to people that you can imagine
yourself in that space and it's a space that welcomes you and will support you and your feelings... further you” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2016). And another said, “I think we need to have a conversation why it is that we don't have more leaders interested, and also what can we do to the extent that there is interest and make sure that we're priming the pump in order to educate, and train, and elevate the profiles of leaders in the making in the future” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016). While others spoke to educating parents on the ground about exactly what possibilities might be available to their children so they would advocate for them.

At the micro level, some participants framed the responsibility of national leaders to develop capacity of community in the context of parents and community members who believe public education systems are not set up for their students to succeed to begin with. Also, that some white leaders, no matter how well-meaning, don't necessarily have interest in investing the time and resources to build the relationships and trust that might mitigate perspectives in the Black community that reforms are being done to them and not with them. A leader emphasized they “always tell superintendents that they have to remember that they are stewards of the community's values. Community's going to be there a lot longer than you are. Your job is to build the capacity of the community and make good decisions on behalf of these kids and leave it better than you found it” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016).
A small number of leaders interjected their desire to see students elevated as agents of change for their own learning and conditions when discussing developing community capacity. This corresponded with an interest in positioning Black community members to be able to develop the knowledge base and experiences that could push them into the national conversation. Two participants went as far as to note the measure of success for any reform would be to determine how likely it is, or to develop many examples of, people from those communities being educated through the context of reform and returning to their communities as leaders (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 16, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016).

At the macro level, participants expressed discomfort and sometimes dismay at the premium placed on academic attainment and/or the appearance of being polished as an antecedent to being taken seriously. Further, that the inclination to simply put a Black face on an already established reform despite that person not actually being from or connected to the communities being served was not actually building capacity in those communities (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015; Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 16, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, March 11, 2016). One leader eloquently stated “I'm of the mind that if you simply have a Black face representing the cause that he or she is not from the community that they are serving, you're actually no different than a white person coming in to serve the community. So yes, being Black
is one factor, but I think coming from that neighborhood and community is equally important” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 31, 2016).

Also, at that macro level of working in the national policy development and agenda setting space, developing capacity was articulated as rerouting funding to community-based organizations instead of large reform organizations who already have sizable dollars and networks that support advancing their interest (Anonymous, personal communication, March 11, 2016). The thought is community members and leaders could then use those funds to actually be present when federal legislation is being drafted, debated, and having rules established for its implementation not relying on a particular leader in a national organization.

**Yielding to community interests and wishes.** This subtheme was closely connected to the idea that it is critical for people in power, White people in particular, to yield to community interests and perspectives that community members articulate. Examples from the data range from being a superintendent and making time for a small group of parents in the same way they would the head of the NAACP (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016), to hearing parents say they want to discuss school discipline practices and not the latest high-stakes test (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3, 2016), to functioning with the basic belief that every child should be welcomed and served in public schools across the country with the same love and care (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, March 8,
2016), and finally, listening to parents demanding that their students have high-quality options to learn a trade as opposed to only being told college preparation is what their children need (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2016). Participants were repeatedly articulating their understanding that it would be impossible to sustain any reforms that did not originate from the community itself, and further, that it is incumbent on leaders themselves to make space for those interests.

It is important to note that several participants conversed about community engagement from a standpoint that many white leaders are either reticent to bring race into the equation when discussing education reforms or policies, or, hold the belief that Black communities either don’t know what’s good for them or had their chance to improve education but failed. In other words, they have little interest in engaging Black community on the ground or at leadership tables. Participants described that it is almost as if it would be more expeditious for white leaders to simply tell communities what they need and get the buy-in on the backend, and beyond being expeditious the most rational solution.

**Engagement of community results in a shift of power.** Finally, with knowledge of the goals of the study, many of the participants framed their perspectives around the need to engage community members on the front end of policymaking oh what they believe that engagement would deliver. The terms liberation, empowerment, and sustainability were most prevalent in the data.
As previously stated, participants were resoundingly decrying that no education reform could be sustained if it originated from outside of the community. One participant noted “diversity without power is an illusion...” questioning “...how is it that the people who are being liberated don’t play a more critical role in defining the pathway to their liberation” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016). Another leader shared the quote that “freedom is never freely given by the oppressor it must be demanded by the oppressed” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016) when unpacking why community needed to not only be engaged by those in leadership roles, but the people in those roles might not, although they should, readily relinquish control.

**Theme Two: Disrupting the Status Quo**

The second broad theme that appeared throughout the data, related to the concept of disrupting the status quo. Some participants referred to this disruption as the act of making rapid change to the existing system of public schooling. Others seemed to be discussing their perspective that the processes of education reform itself needed to change in order to reach the goals education reformers claim to be seeking to make. These two perspectives differed and converged in several ways, with the problem being articulated as “Currently we have a set of policy makers who for the most part have worked insularly with their higher up politicians to create a policy that has a specific agenda” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015).
Constructing a completely new system for desired outcomes. One subtheme that frequently appeared around disruption of status quo is the need for rapid or drastic changes to result in a completely new education system that will hopefully result in better outcomes for students and communities. Participants who discussed this idea were pushing against assumptions that have been held about why reform is necessary in the first place. Some noted the ways efforts seem to be identifying students and communities as problems to be fixed. Others plainly stated there is a need to make substantive changes as quickly as possible because children and communities don’t have time to lose. While others, made the connection between rapid change in the outcome of Black liberation and community empowerment.

As a rationale for creating new systems based on tested assumptions about why reform should occur, one leader declared “we literally have never offered students of color equal opportunities in schools. We’ve never made an assumption that every baby when that baby starts schools is worthwhile and could be educated and could grow up to be anybody she wants to be. If we tested that, we might not have this notion that’s so prevalent right now that there’s a particular gene pool that’s less intelligent than another or that being poor means you can’t be educated or that being Black means you can’t be educated and you’re not going to succeed or that you’re more likely to commit crime or you’re more likely to misbehave in school” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2016).
Another leader connected the genesis of reform to systems of imperialism suggesting that the framework for why reform is even necessary is built on a shaky foundation and it must change. They said:

“in the past 15 years that [reform] has been about the notion that the problem facing communities of color and low-income communities is that they have too much control over their own educational system and that the solution is to take control away... I think the overall structure is a colonialist structure and it is problematic. I personally believe irredeemable... I don’t believe in diversifying ed reform. I think we need to build a new structure which is built... that is premised on the idea that people of color have power and should be determining their own destiny“ (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

This subtheme was one where participant’s language was often strong. Words like radical, substantive, rapid, gravitational, empowers, new and liberation were paired with statements about disrupting the status quo. It was also a subtheme that appeared very frequently throughout the data. Understandably, when participants were being asked about the definition of educational reform, disrupting the status quo was a ready response. A representation of several participants was articulated here when one lead provided their definition of education reform as “it means organizing and movement of folks who want to make substantive and dramatic changes quickly in K-12 education” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 18, 2016).

**What efforts will lead to change.** Second, a large number of participants seemed to be asking questions about or suggesting what practices or environments need to be put in place in order to cultivate a change in the status quo. A leader
shared “The basic idea is that it's healthy in a democracy to have independent advocates push in on the system, that a lot of good change can come from that, but that it takes a lot of effort to push some people- The status quo is for self-reinforcement. It takes a lot of effort to get people to consider change (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016). Another asked “how do we drastically shift the structure, the processes of schooling and support of schooling to impact those groups who have been traditionally way under-served by traditional schooling” (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3, 2016)?

Some of the suggestions included adopting strategies that were intentional about preserving relationships with the Black community and its schools. Accomplishing this would mean not shutting down schools or pushing out Black teachers en mass. More specifically a participant insisted “It is important that ed reformers have a strategy for how to talk to veteran Black teachers, for example, and that we can't have an ed reform thing that's built on let's shut down Black schools, fire Black teachers. Because if you go back and look at the integration thing... You can look at that. It's the same thing that's now happening in ed reform (Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016). While another participant raising the same concern asked if reforms being put in place would ensure students who are experiencing those reforms will come back to their community to continue to sustain positive change or a new normal (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 16, 2016).
Some of the questioning centered around whether or not rapid change could happen inside of the existing model for schooling in the United States, or, if the system itself, even including existing reform efforts, would need to be dismantled in order for any quality change to occur. In other words, whether are not a massive paradigm shift and our understanding of school itself is the change we wish to see. One leader captured this by noting “we seem to have spent a decade plus operating on the assumption that reform had to do with control in governance and accountability. If you could just hold the adults accountable, as if the vast majority of them weren't trying hard and working hard to get better outcomes, that things would just get better. That theory has turned out not to be true.” This leader goes on to describe their observation that within the education reform landscape, we see people who are coming to the profession with different skill sets that don’t necessarily lend themselves to the nature of schools but instead offer problem-solving and disruption through the lens of the business model or scorecard system of tallying success (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016).

Finally, several of the participants who addressed this subtheme insisted that efforts to recruit and retain more diverse educators should intentionally start with communities that the policies are trying to impact. This was framed matter of factly by leaders making declarations along the lines of “[w]hat I do believe is that you cannot have an effective movement with long-term sustainability on behalf of a people or a community that does not see themselves reflected somewhere in the leadership. That I believe” (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3,
Another stated plainly “I think we have a chance now to bring more 
educators of color into the field because of the changing demographics of this 
country. In the next 10 to 15 years, wow, what a change. I think it’s imperative that 
students see someone who looks like them so they can see their own future, so that 
they can also have access to somebody who has a different perspective on the world, 
and somebody who can give them a sense of belonging. I think that’s huge…”
(Anonymous, personal communication, February 6, 2016).

**Community members as drivers of change.** Third, one group of 
participants insisted upon community members actually being the drivers of change 
as they discussed how leaders could support the community in powering the 
disruption of the status quo. This sometimes manifested amidst the struggle of 
answering whether or not White people could lead the type of change Black 
communities needed to achieve the type of success those communities ultimately 
wanted. While some stated anyone could help lead positive change, others while 
agreeing asked if that would be the change communities really want. One great 
example is this leaders’ thoughts:

As I understand, we have a history of education in this country, and our relationship to it. Education just is, to me, pretty much a Black struggle. I think it’s important, at least as an organizer, I believe it’s not only the win, but how you win. And we can win. I do think there is something in the long-term around Black folk winning, organizing, mobilizing, and winning the kind of education they want that will change the ultimate relationship that they have to these institutions, which I feel, has been the quest. [White leaders] could provide access. There’s a history there. We have HBCUs. There’s a reason why Howard is named after O. O. Howard, right? You know, the civil war, and so forth. It is possible. I think the question is whether or not it
should. Where Black hands and minds are helping to shape that (Anonymous, personal communication, February 5, 2016).

Within this subtheme we also see participants asserting the flaw in efforts to reform or improve education if community is not driving change, and absent community, leaders should assess themselves as failing at reform. One participant shared “I would say first and foremost I think this is a conversation and an agenda that should be driven by Black people. I think it can be more diverse than that but I think if it’s not primarily driven by Black people that is an indication that something is wrong because I don’t actually think overall and in general anyone cares as much about Black children as Black people do” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

**Leaders as barriers to change.** Finally, throughout this data many people describe how education reformers themselves, along with other institutional leaders, served as barriers preventing the type of change that would result in the disruption of the status quo. Several attempted to unpack the dissonance between what some leaders articulate about working with community and the actions some take to work around community. One participant noted “I don’t think that people are discomforted enough in their own stations to say, hey, these issues may not be important to me, but we need to talk about this because we’re going to continue to see the outcomes that we’re seeing if we keep creating these policies that have little to no relevance to the folks that we’re trying to work with” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015). While another blatantly states “in fact there is
a status quo that is being protected around the degree to which the Black community is driving issues forward in education in a representative form” (Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 3, 2016).

Additionally, some leaders spoke to the need for people in power working on behalf of others to be more self-reflective about the ways they contribute to slow reform or reforms centered on what communities want to see. They suggested being more intentional about understanding the needs of community members beyond simply saying the right things. One said “there are a lot of people who have never ever met or interacted with a Black child who sometimes seek to advocate on behalf of Black children. I do think that’s problematic. You have to meaningfully engage with people whose interest you seek or say you seek to represent” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 11, 2016). The implication seemed to be that the absence of doing so creates pitfalls and discord. Alternatively, another pointed to the need to speak clearly to community members so they are not enticed to follow reforms not created with their interests in mind stating, “honestly, progressives... don’t have a simple, clear and seductive story” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016). Another spoke to institutions taking similar steps to be reflective declaring “even some of the stuff with the unions, they always want to talk about going after these corporate actors. They’re like, “can we call them racists” [but its] not like they’re challenging their own racism in their own ranks” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 5, 2016).
Despite a clarion call across the data around the need to involve community and cultivate leadership from within those communities, participants made clear the work community needed to undertake to even be heard made the intentions of leaders nefarious. One leader noted “it takes disproportionate effort for Black parents” for example “to have their voices heard.” They said “there's this constant temptation to short-circuit Black parents or use them as a tactic when white people are actually calling the shots. White, rich, all that” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016). Another shared “The racism that exists in schools, even if you have means and you're Black or brown, you may not be treated as you should as a white parent who comes in seeking change…” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016).

And, in regard to institutional work, a leader highlighted opportunity presented in the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act by arguing “if we can get implementation right and actually, meaningfully, make it an inclusive process, it creates new opportunities to institutional power. New Opportunities to access institutional power for community leaders... but it's going to be very hard because for 15 years people have not been investing in this infrastructure” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

**Theme Three: Power of Whiteness**

An unmistakable theme throughout pointed to the power of whiteness – the power of whiteness to determine who sits at the table determining how and which Black leaders should lead at all, the power of whiteness to have space to become an
education reform leader or policymaker absent credentials in education or communities being impacted, and the power of whiteness to pull the strings to determine if communities who seek to lead in decision-making and policy construction for their own liberation from systemic injustice will be able to do so.

**Privilege to assert how change should occur.** One participant frames how systemic white leadership has positioned public education and its opportunities for success under Black leadership when they share “I think education is probably one of the few areas where Black folk have ascended to positions of leaderships and conditional authority... You can look around and it’s one of the few sectors, public or private, where Black folks are in leadership positions in ways that they aren’t, for the most part, anywhere else...I personally observe that this has happened only when we've seen sustained public disinvestment in the system” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016). In other words, that Black people were only permitted to ascend into leadership when the white community took its resources and local political capital elsewhere, or in turn, allowed Black people to lead.

Stemming from this position other participants discussed ways that white leadership and white voice is given primacy over everyone else’s even when they are least impacted by the change. Leaders referred to situations on the ground in communities where you have thousands of Black parents advocating for their position on issues like Common Core or opting out of tests, only to have small
numbers of white parents step in to disrupt the Black parents’ advocacy or legitimize an effort to elected officials and people with resources (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 16, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016). More specifically, one leader offered an example of the testing opt-out movement saying “all that foolishness around opt-out is such a middle-class, white people problem but that was the only thing that you were hearing. When we talk to [Black] people we hear about school discipline, we hear about facilities, we hear about access to high quality teaching...” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

Alternatively, over half of the leaders made an indication that whiteness privileged decision-making about who could obtain institutional leadership in education reform. Three leaders spoke directly to the influence of institutional white leadership on selecting the person who leads the United States Department of Education as an example of putting someone in place who is acceptable to white leadership using Linda Darling-Hammond as their evidence. One leader simply declared “Linda Darling Hammond doesn’t get enough credit as a woman of color obviously” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015). While another noted “when there was talk that Linda Darling-Hammond would be Secretary of Education. It’s amazing to see how far from her camp this Administration is and that’s because the influence of Linda, despite the fact that she loomed so large, isn’t as effective as the influence of people with money” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016).
A third participant shared,

“[Linda] was someone who was strongly thought of as the right person to become secretary of education when Obama first went into office. If you want an indication of the influence [of some reformers] it would be that she did not get that job because she was viewed as much too close to organized labor, much too close to teachers, much too close to higher ed. All those folks, higher ed, organized labor, have been painted broadly with a brush that says they’re part of the problem not part of the solution” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016).

Beyond dismay around whether or not Linda Darling Hammond was or is being given the respect she is due. Leaders spent significant time discussing the choices made by white leadership for Black communities or how the choices being made in policy or practice impacted Black communities. One participant offered an emphatic opposition to the way schools were shuttered in New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina to make their case. This leader stated:

“Every time some new thing comes down the pipe in education it has a negative impact on Black teachers, and on the Black community so that I've been in debates forever about the fact that you can't tell me that the only option that people have post-Katrina is was to fire all of the Black teachers... but my point is that every time we talk about a reform, the question is how does it impact us? Who gets to lead the reform? What impact does that have on us? What impact does that have on our children, and what impact does it have on our community at large?” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016)

Even beyond the privilege of asserting how change should occur and its impacts on the Black community, participants lamented on how white leaders positioned themselves and other white leaders in that change when it is occurring, often times as experts on the Black community. One leader raised New York education reformer Eva Moskowitz as their proof point noting, “I think that this is the great whale that ed reform is looking for, is who can deliver all of the Black
people? I think they look to Eva Moskowitz to do that. I think that's a lot of what we saw in New York but I think it's thinking of Eva Moskowitz as the one who delivers Black people as emblematic of maybe they don't have a great strategy for engaging Black communities.” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016)

This participant went further to round out this point by asserting their privilege to leave when things get hard in the reform world as a white ally, who “when it's uncomfortable and when it's stressful... can go do something else” in a way members of the Black community cannot.

**Ability to lead without credentials or community standing.** Many of the leaders expressed intrigue at the ways in which white leaders and white-led efforts seem to be deemed valid by power brokers despite their disconnect from the communities where their work is targeted. For some participants, they shared this phenomena matter of factly on several occasions using the word entrepreneurial, while others used it to amplify how difficult it is for Black people to be owners of their own fate or take on leadership themselves.

One participant who used the entrepreneurial descriptor for national education reform leaders offered context around why and how this advantages white people and disadvantages people of color noting:

I think the interesting thing about that, which again is connected to other trends in America, is ... It's entrepreneurial in the sense that it's new organizations, and you're not following a career path set by bureaucracy. That, I think, can also dis-advantage people who don’t look like the people who are paying for the programs. This has certainly been my experience, it’s hard to start a career. You’re basically going out purely on trust, and getting people to hand you a check. There's no amount of vetting they could do to
possibly decide you versus these hundred other people, and in fact, they won’t even meet with those other people. It’s actually the entrepreneurial nature of it that can make it very closed, because it’s not obvious how to get in. I think the parallels to the tech world, actually… because you also see that in the tech world. It’s seemingly wide open, but it’s not, it’s actually quite closed, because of the way the [venture capitalists] operate (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016).

Alternatively, another leader who also described the education reform sector as entrepreneurial articulated it began as “very white.” They went on to point out there are changing tides in the pipeline up to heading ed reform organizations, but, the changing tide didn’t negate the fact the leadership space at the national level is still mostly white (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 16, 2016).

As noted in other parts of the analysis I highlight leaders who shared how people like John Jackson at the Schott Foundation are powerful Black voices who seem to be intentionally set aside as thought leaders because they express views that may be uncomfortable to white leaders (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016). This was one way participants expressed the lack of standing frustration. John Jackson, who is advocating for positions that don’t always tow the line for reformers or leaders of long standing institutions doesn’t have the same position as some who have no connection to Black communities beyond implementing their reforms. Another leader framed the frustration by stating “I think it’s rooted in the fact that folks who already have authority and power and control over resources are used to dealing with a certain type of person and a certain type of people and people, if they’re not very conscious and purposeful and intentional, they can just hire people who reflect themselves” (Anonymous,
**Shot callers behind the scenes despite the face of leadership.**

Participants shared the ways certain privileges rested with white leaders including their positionality to make decisions behind closed doors, their ability to gain access to resources, and their ability to dictate what policies and reforms move forward while sometimes putting a Black person forward as the voice of that reform. Much of this framing was embedded in the ways money drives influence, but, was distinguished by the centering of whiteness as the pathway to access resources.

Multiple participants pointed to the whiteness of the inception of the current wave of education reform more pointedly naming people like Wendy Kopp who founded Teach for America, Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg who found KIPP Schools, and Norman Atkins who founded Uncommon Schools (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015; Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016). One participant directly highlighted members of this group as a “cabal” asking if I’d heard of the “Fight Club” (McGuinn, 2012a). While another drew a direct line to the influence of these people and their successors role in shaping which reforms have been valued in the last 10-15 years stating “[w]hen you look at it it’s pretty powerful pillow talk if you can bring $100 million of federal money into your bedroom. Wendy Kopp got $50 million, KIPP got $50 million. Wendy is married to Richard Barth. They got a $100 million. I’m just saying when I look at who has really
influenced the direction of federal policy in education reform during this period.

Frankly, it has been groups like in TFA and organizations like that” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016).

The thread around what policies are pushed forward at the national level or its presentation with a person of color as the leader promoting them despite its origins outside of Black communities took the tone of pointing to the more intentional acts of white people to dictate by actions taking behind the scenes.

Several participants noted, some Black leaders unwittingly may not have the seat at the table they believe themselves to have. One made the case by sharing that many of the most influential organizations may have Black people on the team or in senior roles, but those people only show up to represent the organizations at civil rights breakfasts. This leader went on to say:

“They’re invited to the party, but when you go into the back room with the head of the policy development for Senator X or Representative Y, that’s how you know … Whoever gets to do the final edits, that’s who really has the power. It’s great you went to the meeting, but if you’re still in a room with 20 people you’re not in the power room yet. It’s when you get into the room with four or five people, then you know you’re in that room… Anyway, I say all of that to say, I don’t think we’re talking to those people and they’re not in those rooms or they’re only in the civil rights breakfast, right (Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3, 2016)?

**White people’s work.** While it didn’t present frequently enough to be a subtheme, there was a concept that pushed through in the dialogue related to the responsibility of white people to create a climate conducive to change. One leader eloquently stated, “there is this thing we call white people work as well, right, which
is trying to tell other white folk, “Hey, listen. We’re messing up. There is just that element too” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015). Another, said plainly “I just think, honestly, I think the white folks... I’ll put myself in this... have to be prepared to follow the lead and that’s the real problem. It’s not so much people aren’t leading; it’s that we aren’t ready to follow the lead” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2016). While another shared “I think there’s a role for white allies but I don’t think... I think this kind of attention paid to how do we convince white people to care is just not a really useful way to go about [education reform]” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016). It seems to me this leader is emphasizing, along with the others, the importance of white leaders owning their participation in isolating Black leaders and Black communities from decision-making tables.

**Theme Four: Money Drives the Ability to Influence**

The other theme that participants were most unequivocal about, is there prospective that money dries the ability to influence education policies at the federal level above all else. The concept of money and resources came up and was woven throughout each of the other themes in ways that even involving community was not. Further, several participants described disbelief at the level in which those with access to dollars and people power despite the most well-meaning intentions for education reform, could dictate the nature of education policy making at the federal level. This disbelief seemed to be couched in the fact that there are so few people with actual access to influence, that without shifting the paradigm of how
money flows into the education reform discussion it could be impossible for the policies developed to ever have the results desired.

Just as with perspectives on how the pipeline to leadership is developed, the concentric circles drawn around who leads, how they’re connected to one another, and who they deem as the right type of leader seems most connected to who you know versus how your policy could best help students and community. Notwithstanding its proximity to whiteness, having money and resources trumped every other factor study participants articulated could grant you access to being able to influence the policies proposed and ultimately adopted.

**Theme Five: The Burden of Blackness**

Inextricably linked to the power of whiteness was the burden of Blackness. Centered around what in some cases might be understood as a paternalistic view, white leaders and frankly some of the Black leaders attempted to suggest how Black leaders step up to better serve their communities.

At some points, participants discuss the difficulty in maintaining ones seat at the table of leadership or even accessing that seek to begin with. Challenges like whether or not you have the right degree, whether or not you’re connected to the right organization, whether or not you towed the party line for the most well resource reform positions were all discussed as barriers, whether real or perceived, to accessing a seat at the table where decisions are actually made. In fact, no one could point to the type of leadership that is unapologetic and radical on behalf of the Black community. A couple of participants even pointed to leaders who they thought
should be more prominent but possibly are not because they don't make people feel comfortable.

Additionally, the requirement to speak in an authentic voice was palpable. This requirement, in addition to a few others, seems to raise the bar for what someone who has leadership in education reform movements must say, do and be to acquire and maintain that role. While well-intentioned and, more often than not, framed as a necessity for Black liberation, issuing these standards sound very similar to the stance taken by those who develop reforms without communities in the first place. One leader posited, “A great public school for every student. What does that look like? What is a great public school? As a leader, I've wrestled with that my entire career, from the time I forced my two sisters to go to school on the front steps of our home, to this day, it has been focused on my commitment to the education of kids that look like me” (Anonymous, personal communication, March 8, 2016).

**Theme Six: Pipeline to Leadership**

Through the divergent analysis process a third theme that began to arise from narratives being shared related to developing or entering the pipeline to leadership. While it was generally clear the leaders interviewed felt community voice and engagement is critical to the sustainability of education reform, it wasn’t so clear they knew how to overcome the obstacles to putting members of that community at decision-making tables.
**It’s Not What You Know It’s Who You Know.** In describing the typology of a person who is currently leading in the education reform space several participants intimated that it’s not what you know, but it’s who you know. When addressing this subtheme, participants generally we're acknowledging the whiteness of the leadership in education reform and education policy making. They would then follow, with the description that contextualized what they meant by whiteness, using words like entrepreneurial, safety net, and or acceptable to all types of people (generally meaning other white people).

**Identifying credible pathways to leadership.** Another subtheme that appeared was the question of where they may be credible pathways for Black leaders to be groomed and developed. These points of reflection typically acknowledged the traditional ways Black leaders engage and the institutions that give them the space to be cultivated. Participants also highlighted cultural shifts along with the dearth of leadership from younger generations either within existing institutions or being grown from communities deeply impacted by educational policies and reforms.

**Making room at the table for and acknowledging existing Black leaders.** More than three quarters participants, despite acknowledging the overwhelming majority of educational reform leadership being white and often well-resourced people, were unwilling to discount the existence of Black leadership.
These perspectives were framed as the subtheme that it is necessary for those in power to make room for and acknowledge the Black leaders at the table who are actively working to develop policies that reflect the voices of community members. One participant eloquently stated “we need to perhaps create new tables because some of these old tables won’t allow for us. We’re going to have to bust those tables down and create new ones to allow for these new seats to come in” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015).

In different ways, multiple leaders either discussed the ways Black leaders oftentimes go unseen or unheard even when they are in the room where decisions are being made or plotted. Whether it be barriers resulting from how Black leaders present with the appearance of respectability or credibility, the organizations and institutions in which they hold leadership, or the effort required for them to push into places or garner the resources necessary to be present, participants articulated that they are present nonetheless.

When asking participants to name Black leaders whose they see as representing or articulating needs being expressed from Black families, there was an acknowledgment that some Black voices get pushed forward as authentic and sanctioned by systems of power from both education reform and traditional education institutions while others do not. For example, several leaders wondered aloud why John Jackson, head of the Schott Foundation, isn’t seen as or utilized as a prominent voice with power players. In regard to John Jackson, one participant asked, “why isn’t his voice out there?” to which I responded that something happens
where if you’re not towing the party line and the participant goes on to state “...he’s got the money... that’s right, you lose your seat to the table... It’s got to be, if you say the wrong thing as an African American male leader, it’s very different than saying the wrong thing as a white male leader” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016).

I found the themes surfaced to be inextricably linked while simultaneously distinct. In the next section, I present findings related to the data found and possible next steps. I include a section, with direct critical race analysis beyond the concepts interwoven throughout the previous chapters and some of the findings.
Chapter 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

“The framework we have right now is one in which we have a benevolent oppressor, and sometimes a benevolent oppressor does the right thing... In every framework throughout human history, that has always happened. Let’s be clear that’s the framework. There is always going to be the time when the oppressor actually needs to remind everyone they’re the ones who hold the cards; they’re the ones with the power” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

What does the data mean?

The quote above is from one of the participants of the study who, while reflecting on their reading of James Anderson’s *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860 – 1935* and against their own interest, position and seat of security in the realm of education reform at the national level, shares what they believe is the current state of leadership in the education policy-making ecosystem. That is, as I am concluding, Black leadership in national education reform and policy-making, while existent, functions largely at the pleasure of longstanding systems and institutions that place a premium on whiteness. Further, that superficial efforts to engage community in education policy-making are pointless without a deep inspection of the ways white privilege, both personally and communally, can undermine efforts. Lastly, that our path forward should be to engage in radical and intentional behaviors that would seat power and resources in the hands of people with closest proximity to the impact of and goals for education policy in the United States of America.
Finding 1: Reform at your pleasure. The genesis of this exploratory research stemmed greatly from my own efforts to understand the education reform movement’s proclivity for seeking to fix Black communities and children instead of supporting Black communities to be what it will in its own image. Likewise, the literature about who actually controls the education reform space left me somewhat puzzled, and moreso disturbed that there didn’t seem to be a level of urgency or alarm about the whiteness of the leadership (E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009b; McGuinn, 2012b). The more deeply I’ve explored this phenomena or worked in the education reform ecosystem, the more white and disconnected the space seemed to be even when the whiteness or its cultural values was presented by a Black face.

The data leading to unpacking the power of whiteness, as well as, money as a driver of access to seats of influence themes rising from the study provided insights into why my experiences were happening. Poignant examples were leaders who suggested the only reasons Black people have been allowed to have any leadership in education spaces has been because of a targeted disinvestment by white people as they’ve found other ways to education their own children (Anonymous, personal communication, February 15, 2016). Therefore, the data in many ways verified that my experiences are not imagined or anecdotal, but widespread and a phenomena worth exploring further.

The data in fact shows that leaders, regardless of race, themselves believe that the work happens at the hands of a benevolent oppressor to the extent the work is led by people who overwhelmingly don’t look like or come from the
neighborhoods where policies are targeted. It unearthed additional evidence of the ways systems perpetuate themselves even when the levers of the systems, in this case well-meaning white people with institutional and generational access to money and influence, believe they are doing good work that would uplift people who they know very little about. As examined in Chapter 4, the repeated discussion of the people and power players in education reform, along with the people and power players in government, along with the people and power players in unions and state level organizations all pointed to the same thing. No matter what organization or structure the national education policy agenda was coming from, white people were in charge of determining if there is value in a particular policy, if a Black leader could represent the idea and were authentically welcomed to the table to decide direction, or if money would flow to Black community to devise something other than what white leaders determined they needed.

What was described in the power of whiteness and money drives access to influences themes were classic examples of the concept of interest convergence embedded in critical race theory (Bell, 1991; Brown & Jackson, 2013; Tate, 1997). The idea that white people will not advance a person, place or thing that does not prove to be something they value in large part because they hold the power and money, and, humans rarely act against their own interest even for the greater good. Nonetheless, the data from the two themes, particularly narratives coming from white leaders, included a mandate that white leaders at every level both acknowledge the existence of Black leadership already at the table even if it didn’t
come through their pipeline for leadership and that they take proactive steps to bring to the table Black voices versus seeking to speak for Black people themselves.

**Finding 2: With liberty and justice for all.** Literature reviewed in preparation for this study repeatedly pointed to the formation of policies in public education generally stemming from government responding to outcry of the public for better conditions and sometimes policy researchers and analysts studying a particular condition or set of outcomes and determining they needed to be fixed (Barone et al., 2011; Carter, 2009; McGuinn, 2006). However, the research and data are rarely examined from a racial or sociological lens that takes cultural difference into account. Participants in this study make clear the public hasn’t been able to decide what the fix for any educational issue would be at a formation or implementation level, nor has the agenda setting been built by examining which conditions set current outcomes in motion, so those conditions are not replicated or built into new models.

Money being a driver of access to influence has been a large piece of the challenge of authentically engaging community because, as participants pointed to, even when community is mobilized to take action, without the credibility of a larger and recognized organization or the dollars to enter spaces where public opinion is requested, community members haven’t been positioned to do the agenda setting (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015; Anonymous, personal communication, March 11, 2016). Likewise, the analysis on the theme of engaging community includes multiple data points within the subtheme that shows how
leaders themselves are barriers to change. They may be barriers as individuals driving an agenda with any connection to the people impacted by the agenda, and/or because they actually believe they know better than the community does, what changes would be most helpful. At the institutional level, there were many participants who explored the fact that many national organizations do not have Black leadership at the top, and those people of color internal to the organization (whether parents or employees) only show up when it seems someone expects a person of color to legitimate a particular stance.

Historically, even when the Black community has been effective in their demands for change and had narrow opportunities to articulate what that change should be, certain voices were given more credence by white leaders. During times like the Civil Rights Movement, the community members most readily impacted by education policy faced instances of classism that muted their voices (Orr, 1999; Perlstein, 2002; Weiner, 2009). Further, the literature also advances the idea that white leaders in national education policy-making would decide which credible voices from the Black community could cosign their positions, by repeatedly propping up the same names and faces as evidence of inclusion (Wolman & Thomas, 1970).

Despite the size of the sample of participants, their level of leadership in national well-resourced organizations gives credence to the perspective that communities didn’t ask for many of the reforms we see today, despite the fact they did ask for change to occur. There is no doubt Black communities will continue to
seek and fight for change. It is also the case that policies that are proposed, whether it be in teacher pipeline development, school formation or closing, curriculum, or the ways in which students are assessed for learning and progress, gloss over the need for leaders advancing an agenda to be deeply introspective. For any change to occur in achievement outcomes for Black students and be sustainable, there must be accountability and transparency from white leaders about their approach to policy-making, including naming the ways their privilege and race is considered.

**Finding 3: Get up stand up.** Participants sharing there is a need to disrupt the status quo and the many ways “the responsibility of Blackness” thematically appeared, all pointed to an unmitigated requirement that Black liberation and tools for self-determination would and could come from pursuing education reforms at policy entry points white-led organizations have. Further, that building the pipeline to leadership must also happen intentionally with and by Black communities in order to rapidly and radically develop new structures that reflect their own values. Alternatively, that power brokers and the people with access to and possessing resources needed to bring about change should take bold steps to seed those resources directly to communities who have little or none. These concepts are also prevalent in the literature discussing how money works and moves around in the education reform space at the various leverage points in the process (Ayon, 2005; Ferris et al., 2008; P. Noguera, 2013; P. A. Noguera). I’ve personally seen new white-led education ventures propped up over cocktails with donations secured from people who profess to be progressive in their politics. Absent access to those
friendships and networks, community members will need to leverage the ethos of interest convergence between what they want and the pet projects of people who presume to have the answers for students they have no real connection to.

All of the themes that came forward through the data were tightly woven by threads of both frustration and hopefulness stemming from naming the role of Black leadership in the national education policy-making and reform landscape. Even when participating leaders were unwilling to yield the point that people of any color or background could and should work to improve the quality of America’s public education system for all children, (Anonymous, personal communication, December 29, 2015; Anonymous, personal communication 1, February 3, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication 2, February 3, 2016) none were willing to abandon the notion there is an inherent flaw in the existing system as it relates to who leads those efforts (Anonymous, personal communication, February 5, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 22, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016). This tells me the timing is ripe to push leaders to be more intentional about their work to engage community and to also be much more deliberate about cultivating Black leadership. Current leaders’ efforts would be well served to develop an interest in and opportunities for Black leadership to move into positions of authority and influence, either through support and sponsorship from existing leaders and their organizations, sharing of social and financial capital by existing leaders, or current
leaders removing themselves from the equation as soon as possible while positioning grassroots action to surface and thrive.

Data supporting the theme of disrupting the status quo was also most heavily found along with references to theme of engaging community in agenda-setting. Likewise, the power of whiteness as a theme was the second thing most heavily referenced in relation to disruption of the status quo. The large volume of data supporting this narrative is also explained in the literature exploring the relationship between white people and the ways they participate in education justice movements (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescoleaux, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). While not surprising, seeing the break down for how many times participants pointed to the barriers placed by white leadership to community engagement and/or the need for white leaders to get out of the way or make a way for Black leaders was impressive. Particularly impressive in light of the public narrative on how education reform has been helping children to achieve. As one leader put it “I think it's kind of ironic because a lot of the data about ed reform is that ed reformers are over-selling what they can do” (Anonymous, personal communication, January 19, 2016). Therefore, any leader at the national, state or local level ought to consider ways they support big disruptive ideas not for the sake of disruption, but for the sake of capitalizing on the opportunity to make change or seed a paradigm shift for Black liberation.
**Finding 4: A critical race analysis.** This study aimed to move from theory to action, using narratives to identify tangible activities that can more rapidly support the advancement of Black people, by equipping them with the tools and leadership roles supporting influence on education policy at the federal level. What I’ve found in my research, 45 years after Wolman & Thomas’ seminal study of this topic, is that Black people have a long way to go as it relates to heavily influencing education reforms in the earliest stages of policy development and as credible leaders. The most prevalent similarity between what I’ve found in my data and the 1970 study, is the role white leaders in education reform play to dictate which reforms have primacy and will be advanced, along with serving as gate-keepers to which Black leaders gain access to any influence they may have. Further, while the numbers of Black people occupying space in the policy-making elite may have grown, so too has the number of groups claiming to understand and speak on behalf of what policies and practices Black communities are interested in.

Ultimately, what the 20 participants have highlighted, through their narrative accounts, is that the current status of modern day education reform in this country is unequivocally white-led. Further, that when Black leaders ascend to leadership in the movement, it is typically through systems and channels grounded in the reforms developed without the direction or guidance of the communities most readily impacted by those reforms. While unintentional, this is a clear case of white supremacy in action, especially to the extent no national leader has given up their leadership role to a Black leader, restructured the governance model to more
deeply reflect community voices, encouraged funders to redirect resources to grassroots action or regularly seek to get Black leaders access to spaces with elected officials. Instead what we see are attempts to build pipelines for Black people to lead in their own image.

If communities begin with the knowledge existing systems of power and influence will not be willingly turned over to them, it is critical they maximize on the awareness expressed by people with a seat at the table to gain access themselves. The convergence of interests between well-meaning white power brokers and the Black community seeking representation at the highest levels that reflect their voice and values should be capitalized. Instead of awaiting a seat at the table, using the opportunities presented by progressive interest in race equity for education policy-making, community members could seize the opportunity to create new tables for leadership in innovating in education models.

The leaders, both Black and white, able to suggest rising stars who are deeply connected to the grassroots movements should also strategize efforts to help those people ascend to leadership and determine what channels should be available to take hold. Disrupting the Whitney Young effect where people with greatest influence rely on one or a few acceptable voices will require everyone with a semblance of access to both reach down, make room or get out of the way for those existing leaders who aren’t locked into or developed by the current system. Further, supporting the redirection of resources to non-traditional pipelines would go a long
way to creating the ecosystem making Black leadership attainable and a product of community voice.

In the remaining sections I revisit the importance of this study, lessons learned and potential next steps in light of the data I’ve found. This broader view may be built on by future studies or serve as a foundation for more aggressive action at the grassroots level or with leaders truly seeking to expand access to the points of the policy process where there is the most leverage to influence what is included.

**What is the importance of the study?**

As shared throughout the data by participants and implicit throughout the literature on Black people’s history with public education agenda-setting in America used to frame this study, liberation from the vestiges of enslavement and education’s role in that liberation makes this research critical. At a more granular level, to the extent people are interested in either cultivating more Black leadership in the national education reform ecosystem or establishing a system of K-12 education that is built for and by Black people where they exist, the research provides points for further consideration on how to do either of those things more effectively. This includes, but is not limited to, discontinuing practices that do not have purposeful engagement of community in the strategy for making change, which may be difficult in the short term, but strongest long term. Likewise, this study may serve a springboard for additional research on who is influencing education reform at the national level on a larger scale or to be replicated in local school districts.
around the country serving to create a new narrative about systemic reform of public education. Finally, and most tangibly, the research cannot be unseen by those who both consume and participated in it. There will be an imperative by us all to act accordingly.

The clarion call to engage community at the outset of agenda setting juxtaposed against a clear dearth of Black leadership, along with limited willingness of those in power to give up their positions without dictating what happens when they do was palpable throughout this study. The core rationale for using critical race theory’s storytelling and personal narrative sharing framework (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Buras, 2013; Gillborn, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009) to unearth deeper perspective and insight into the phenomena of education reform and policy-making at the national level, was to have people be explicit about the influencing factors they experience firsthand as leaders in the space. This study reiterates what the literature shares about national education reform and policy-making ecosystem being a polarizing space where agenda-setting largely falls along political and ideological fault lines (Buras, 2013; E. DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009b; Malin & Lubienski, 2013; McDonald, 2013) versus the demands of citizens most readily impacted. The goal here, was to weed through the background noise making plain for the Black community especially, exactly what is at stake and what they might be missing in pursuing opportunity for their children and themselves.

Black liberation, that is, the freedom of Black people to exist as full citizens in the United States with all of the opportunities to achieve the American dream, is a
simple concept that is one of the most elusive phenomena in the United States. Yet it is an undoubted and firm rationale for the ways Black people have sought to engage in existing systems of public education or to establish alternate systems of schooling for their children. As J.D. Anderson points out “The foundation of the freedmen’s education movement was their self-reliance and deep-seated desire to control and sustain schools for themselves and their children... The values of self-help and self-determination underlay the ex-slaves’ educational movement” p. 22 (Anderson, 1988). This struggle has been with Black Americans from the moment we were enslaved and persists today. And as noted in the literature review, as early as the period immediately following the American Revolution, free Black people like Prince Hall in Massachusetts, sought to establish schools that acknowledged the wholeness of Black people in this country (Franklin, 1990; White, 1973). Through this research, we see people at the pinnacle of influence and leadership in directing how people experience the American education system, both Black and white calling for communities to experience liberation through education without needing to seek permission from white people and institutions of power (Anonymous, personal communication, January 6, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 5, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 11, 2016; Anonymous, personal communication, February 26, 2016).

Lessons Learned.

While I entered this study holding the perception there are not actually many Black people who are heavily influencing national education-policy making, even
though some of the most senior people in government are in fact Black, my theory of action was to ask the question, so my hypothesis could be proven or challenged by the evidence. What I experienced was much more complex. I learned that nothing is ever really Black or white, and that while I really did want to explore the concept of Black leadership with people in leadership, I ultimately wanted to know if anybody really cared that Black leaders weren’t driving education reforms and policy-making.

I was quite surprised by the uniform admission that reform is a train that left the station without community members as conductors, passengers or deciders of the destination. This made me wonder if the participants left our discussions with new commitments to impact change in the ranks of leadership through more deliberate activities beyond finding a Black person who could tow their party line. This also amplifies the need for creating and analyzing new policies through a critical race lens in order to disrupt repeated occurrences of attempting change, only to meet with resistance, minimal success and skepticism by the people those policies are targeted at helping.

Another surprising factor was the unabashed critiques that came from the white leaders who participated. While those leaders fell across the spectrum in political ideology and experiences in the education field as a whole, they readily acknowledged the absence of Black leadership as a problem. Despite the number of participants not being at a level that would allow me to make blanket distinctions between white and Black leaders views on the presence of Black leaders in national
education reform, I feel confident in my ability and authority to identify opportunities for growth or change with others interested in setting a new course for Black communities having conducted this research.

Ultimately the key takeaway is there is room for my own voice as a leader, bridge builder and facilitator of self-determination and community uplift. I have greater power through exploring this topic and can use the data to empower others to challenge the norm and the possibilities for our communities.

**Implications and Next Steps**

As a practitioner-researcher I will use my access to the leaders who participated in this study and relationships in the field to share this study's results broadly. Practitioners, including myself, should share the data and its implications in spaces where academics as well as lay people frequent, whether or not they're familiar with education systems and policy-making, so those people may be inspired to change or develop a new approach to reform. Additionally, I may elect to further contribute to the scholarship about Black leadership in education reform by exploring, through new research, some of the standout themes. Specific themes of interest include the resourcing of the education reform landscape at the national level or the critical need to effectively engage and claim power with community to reform education policy-making from the local to the national stage in ways that spawns self-determination and unencumbered agenda-setting power. Likewise, taking a more refined look at Black influence in education policy-making coming from through the civil rights community might be an avenue to pursue. Especially in
light of the insistence of many participants to this study that the Black leaders they interact with are primarily in large membership organizations that focus on multiple issues causing them to seem absent at critical moments of leverage.

Using education journals, blogs, book chapters, new media and public presentations in conferences and forums, the research could be developed into shorter pieces that explore the themes unearthed more deeply in the public sphere. Several participants wondered out loud about where the next generation of Black leadership would come from in education reform. In light of the current landscape of having had America's first Black president, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, an impending transition into a new presidential administration, along with the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement as a marker for deep investments in accelerating social justice solutions there is undoubtedly a place for this research to spark the fire to lead boldly. Therefore, tapping into outlets, media or otherwise, deeply engaged in connecting with the broader public to inform them about the landscape of justice issues they find important appears to be a potent opportunity. Further, the absence of a study like this in the past three decades would make the research appealing to educational journals more attuned to issues of critical race in education policy-making.

In general, people don’t know what they don’t know, but when they do know there’s no turning back to what once was. As renowned author, artist and activist James Baldwin said so eloquently, “The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is
being educated” (Baldwin, 1963). This holds true in the classroom and in our everyday lives. So, it would seem as an educator, it is my charge to share information with people that will cause them to examine and improve their own circumstances in ways they may not have previously considered.

Anyone deeply involved in education policy-making will also assert that education is a local issue. Therefore, the opportunity to layer the methodology and core research questions used here in local, state and/or regional settings might be an opportunity to provide insights into where power and influence exist in those places. The data unearthed may offer insights into where and how communities can take the lead or start anew. Alternatively, either I or another researcher could expand this research using either the same methodology or a mixed method combining quantitative data with the qualitative narrative of participants related to the resources being poured into education policy-making and reform. That new research would again use a focused lens on access of Black leaders and/or Black communities but identify what dollars are available for their use.

Layering a racial lens on the question of access and influence in social justice movements is not a new or recent practice. However, learning from not only Black people about their experiences in advocacy and leadership on critical issues, but those perceived to be in the seat of power when not Black, can offer a more clear and transparent picture of the opportunities present to shift the paradigm for Black communities and Black families writ large. The juxtaposition of voices of the powerful and the purposeful using a racial lens could be a practice that moves
exploration of education policy-making to new heights. Offering powerful and influential people an opportunity to share their narrative perspectives as human beings versus all-knowing could go a long way towards building understanding and collective good. Asking the powerful to express their narratives for the purpose of exploring how their positions can be disruptive to the justice goals they claim to be working towards and examining those perspectives alongside ones of people who are supposed to be recipients of a just society can also tell a more nuanced story.

Ultimately, the research is ripe to be picked up and shared broadly or expanded upon with an eye on sharing the narratives and experiences of Black leaders as well as the experiences of the Black community working actively to experience liberation through agenda-setting in education policy-making. Telling community to come to the table when they have been on the proverbial menu for centuries without proactive efforts to make clear where dinner is being served is nonsensical. Instead, using the insights found about how leaders actually feel about their work, how the work came to be and is being undertaken, and the opportunities they see for growth making clear the potential to turn the system on its head should be exploited to its fullest extent.
APPENDIX A: Study Participation Letter

January 1, 2015

Dear Colleague,

Hello, my name is Khalilah Harris, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania and the {Professional Title}.

I am inviting your participation in a research study examining the perspectives of leaders working on education reform at the national level. The study will explore who influences education policy development and reform strategies at the federal level. The study is a central piece of my Ed.D. dissertation and is conducted in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania’s, Graduate School of Education (PennGSE).

The research has emerged as a result of my experiences in education and a desire to enhance my ability and the ability of others to have the greatest impact on which education reforms and initiatives are brought to their communities. I have had experiences ranging from coordinating law-related education programs with a youth advocacy non-profit, founding a new high school, advocating with students, families and colleagues to improve school facilities at the local and state level, advising my school district on new school formation and serving as a fellow to a White House educational initiative at the US Department of Education subsequently becoming it’s Deputy Director. All of these opportunities and, most importantly, my identity as a mother have led me to explore the national education reform landscape more closely.

Your role as a participant would be to engage in interviews about your experiences attempting to reform education policies and practices in the national socio-political landscape. Your personal narrative will offer insights and alternative perspectives on how the federal policy-making process occurs informing more clear opportunities to engage in agenda setting.

I have considered the research design with ongoing input from my committee who include: Dr. Annie McKee, my dissertation chair/advisor, who is a senior fellow and director of GSE’s PennCLO doctoral program and the Med Ed masters program as well as a founder of the Teleos Leadership Institute, Dr. Vivian Gadsden, the William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Education, Director of the National Center on Fathers and Families and Associate Director of the National Center on Adult Literacy, Dr. Andre Perry, who is the Founding Dean of Urban Education at Davenport University and a columnist for both the Washington Post-PostEverything section and The Hechinger Report, and Dr. Rand Quinn, an Assistant Professor in
As a part of this study, participants will be asked to:

- Complete a brief biographical survey prior to the interview
- Engage in a 60 minute interview on a date mutually convenient between the two of us
- Engage in a follow up interview, if necessary, for clarification after the first complete round of interviews has been conducted

I anticipate completing the study in the spring of 2015. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, the research design includes safeguards to insure the confidentiality of individuals and the organizations where they serve. Neither individual participants nor organizations where they work will be individually identifiable within the study results. Interviews will also be stripped of any indentifying information when being analyzed. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy, but individuals will not be identified in transcriptions. In addition, my dissertation committee will review the manuscript of my findings before publications of my dissertation.

I hope you will consider participating in this study. I will follow-up with you next week to inquire about your interest in participating. If you would like to participate or if you have questions, please feel free to contact me at 410-935-9551 or harrisk@gse.upenn.edu.

Best Regards,

Khalilah Harris, EdD Candidate, University of Pennsylvania GSE
{Professional Title}
Cell: 410-935-9551
harrisk@gse.upenn.edu

Enclosures:  Dissertation Abstract
Khalilah Harris Resume
Consent Form
Brief Biographical Survey

cc: Annie McKee, Ph.D., Chair
APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

Good Afternoon XXXXXX,

As you are aware, I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education conducting dissertation research and I’ve invited you to participate in my study about perspectives of leaders regarding who has access and influence to inform federal education policies. As a leader in the landscape of people working to influence or inform federal education policy I believe your insights are necessary and critical for any substantive research on this topic. I am most interested in learning about and exploring your narrative of experiences in education policy-making and education reform in order to gain insights from your lived experiences.

I’ve requested at least 60 minutes of your time for this interview and plan to be respectful of our schedule. This will be an anonymous study and any readily identifiable feedback will be adjusted to preserve your anonymity. Only members of my dissertation committee will have knowledge of participant names.

At the end of the interview I will again share my contact information. If at any point you need clarity about a question or have a concern, feel free to interrupt me. There may be times I need to ask you for clarity, but in general I will give you as much latitude as possible for sharing a complete response.

Thank you for completing the biographical information survey requested. Do you have any additional questions before we begin? Great. I’d like to confirm it is okay to record you.

1- During the next hour I’m going to be asking you a lot about who you believe has influence on national education policy making. But I first want to ask you a couple of short questions to make sure we’re clearly communicating… The phrase national education reform means different things to different people, tell me briefly what does it mean to you, what are its elements, or what does it look like in practice?

2- Now I’d like to learn a little bit about your own activities when it comes to national education reform… Could you give me an example of ways you’ve been involved with national education reform either around a particular topic or policy making more generally?

3- I’d like with the next few questions to get to the heart of my interview with you. We’re going to get into the important part, which is who you think is influencing national education reform. Can you tell me who those
people are, maybe naming the top two or three people influencing education policy? (Probe: More broadly, tell me what types of people and groups are wielding the most influence? Describe them for me. For example, what type of background do they have, what organizations do they belong to or represent? What are their races, gender, geography?)

4- I want to focus in on race here, and get your perspective on what you think about the involvement of Black people in national education reform. Do you think there is Black leadership in national education reform, and if so, at what level or in what ways?

5- There’s been recent discussion about whether or not people who aren’t Black can sufficiently support or change educational outcomes for Black communities. What do you think about that? (Follow up if necessary: I’m trying to get at your opinion about whether or not people who do not identify their race as Black can effectively represent the voice of the Black community in spaces where federal education policy is being informed and developed)
   a. How can we be sure how people who live communities most deeply impacted by education policies can participate in the national policy-making process?

6- Give three – four sentences that describe Black leader’s engagement in federal policy-making and have them agree or disagree. Put people on a likert scale so they can be explicit about their feelings.
   a. On a scale of 1 – 5 with one being not true and five being absolutely true, how would you rate the statement that Black leaders have full access to influencing national education reform and policy-making.
   b. Also, on the same scale of 1 – 5, how would you rate the statement that national education reforms are centered on what is desired by people from the communities they’re targeted at.
   c. On the same scale of 1 – 5, when Black people are not present at important decision-making tables, non-Black education reformers raise issues that would be most important to Black communities, and
   d. When Black people are not present at important decision-making tables, non-Black education reformers are willing to challenge ideas from a racial lens.

7- I just want to ask you one more question to make sure I have your thoughts on who is influencing national education reform. If you’d had to rank the following factors (Printed/Emailed Document: resources, class, race, gender, education, or organizational affiliation) in terms of
how much they impact a person’s ability to influence national policy-making, how would you rank them?

➤ Why did you rank race & gender in that way?

Is there anything I haven’t asked about who is involved in national education policy-making or how national education reform is happening that you want to add or make sure I’m thinking about?

Thank you so much for your time and reflection. Let me share my contact information one more time.

(Share contact information again)
APPENDIX C: Biographical Survey Questions

1- First and Last Name
2- Organization (If applicable)
3- Title
4- How long have you been serving in your current role? [YY/DD]
5- How long have you been working to influence reforms in federal education policies or policies directly impacting schools? [YY/DD]
6- Have you ever been an educator? [Y/N]
   a. If Yes, in what capacity?
   b. If Yes, for how long?
7- Does your or your organization's work presently include direct community organizing? [Y/N]
8- Have you ever directly participated in any form of legislative advocacy? [Y/N]
   a. If Yes, at what level? (local, state, federal)
   b. If Yes, for how long?
References


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