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RACE FOR THE DOCTORATE: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP ED.D. STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN A RACIAL EQUITY-FOCUSED PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study aimed to compare the experiences of students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) with those of White students in the same Educational Leadership doctoral program that claimed to be unapologetic in its commitment to producing racially conscious leaders.
Background	This study critically assesses the doctoral program's claims as measured by BIPOC and White doctoral students' perceptions of their abilities as racial equity leaders and their assessments of their transformational learning.
Methodology	This qualitative study employed two separate focus group interviews – one for BIPOC doctoral students (n=7) and the other for White doctoral students (n=6). The researchers could comprehend how the participants experienced an Educational Leadership Ed.D. program with curriculum, andragogy, and assessment viewed through the lens of race and how the participants perceived their growth as racial equity leaders.
Contribution	This study offers several theoretical and practical applications for Educational Leadership doctoral programs that embed racial equity work. For faculty, the study informs their delivery of race-focused courses and programs to optimize their development of racially conscious leaders. For BIPOC students, the study empowers them to advocate for and demand challenging racial equity-focused curriculum and instruction. For White students, the study reinforces the necessity of a race-focused program for professional development.
Findings	There was a marked difference between the BIPOC and White students' responses. White students reported the most transformational growth in their racial awareness, their understanding of structural racism, and their recognition of

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	where equity leadership skills could be utilized. BIPOC students were cognizant of much of this work before entering the program. However, they reported growth in understanding how best to implement effective racial equity leadership while maintaining healthy boundaries and self-care.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Educational leadership doctoral programs with a focus on racial equity work need teaching faculty that espouse and demonstrate anti-racist curriculum, instruction, and assessment without relying on the racialized labor of BIPOC students to "teach" White students about racism.
Recommendations for Researchers	The researchers in this study used separate focus groups – BIPOC and White. The data revealed that although the same questions were asked to each group, the BIPOC responses contained more vulnerable, personal details and yielded richer meanings. Future researchers should consider employing a more robust set of focus group questions that require more introspection and self-reflection, which might produce more significant insights. We believe they may yield more nuanced responses from all racial groups.
Impact on Society	This study revealed that BIPOC and White educational leadership doctoral students have different and varying needs and challenges based on their racialized lived experiences. Educational leadership doctoral programs must provide the tools and opportunities for their students to be conversant and competent to address issues of structural racism.
Future Research	Future research should use transformative learning theory to guide how BIPOC and White faculty in educational leadership doctoral programs assess their abilities to be anti-racist teachers and leaders.

Keywords	educational leadership, Ed.D. programs, BIPOC students, White students, racial equity leadership, transformative learning

INTRODUCTION

How does one intentionally educate oneself to be an anti-racist? There is no shortage of books, articles, documentaries, podcasts, and other resources devoted to antiracism (Dowling, 2023; Reinke et al., 2023; Smalling, 2022). A month after George Floyd's murder, every non-fiction title on the New York Times' best-seller list was about anti-racism (Grady, 2020). While it is certainly possible to fill one's head with this knowledge, there is a twelve-inch journey between the head and the heart where this supposed personal transformation takes place. It takes time to manifest as applications to personal and professional practices. Even if the transformation happens over time, because of the incredible cultural inertia to maintain the racial status quo, there is the constant risk of regression (White, 2023).

A doctoral program is one of those conditions under which students expect to be academically and personally challenged. Choosing a doctoral program is usually taken seriously (Semich & Ray, 2011). To that end, a doctoral program in Educational Leadership claiming to develop racially conscious K-12 and higher education leaders will attract individuals who wish to grow in their racial and cultural competence while eschewing other programs with different priorities.

How can a doctoral program claiming to produce racially conscious leaders assess its practices to substantiate that claim? As a study of one such program, Ed.D. students in various stages of their progress through the program ranging from having just completed coursework to those currently writing the dissertation to those who have graduated from the program, were asked about their experiences, their learnings, their personal and professional transformations, and applications of racial equity work in their leadership.

Our overarching research questions were:

(1) What are the perceptions of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and White students in a race-focused Educational Leadership doctoral program of their abilities and skills as racial equity leaders?

(2) Did the program produce transformative learning?

To answer our questions, we designed a phenomenological study to collect data from two focus groups of doctoral students – BIPOC and White – to better understand if the effect of the design and integration of racial equity curriculum, instruction, and assessment resulted differently for White students compared to BIPOC students; and, was there a difference in transformative learning – the process of examining, questioning, and revising one's perceptions – based on the student's race?

This paper outlines the review of the literature surrounding racial-equity-focused curriculum and instruction as well as the inherent racism that still exists in all doctoral programs. It then describes the methods used in this phenomenological study and its findings broken down by American BIPOC, International BIPOC, and White racial groups. Finally, a discussion follows about how and why White and BIPOC doctoral students assessed their abilities as racial equity leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Phyllis George (2017) said in her evaluation of an experimental doctoral program working to be racial equity-focused, "There is great justification for the development of doctoral programs uniquely designed to populate the profession with more individuals (i.e., administrators and practitioners) who uphold and value equity" (p. 42). Without question, institutions nationwide have been preparing aspiring educational leaders to serve an increasingly diverse student population in our PK-12 and higher education settings, and these leadership institutions have been forced to face fundamental questions regarding their programs' purpose, vision, and equality (Amiot et al., 2020). Many institutions have been found wanting. Normore and Issa Lahera (2019) state, "Despite having a long history of preparing educational leaders, higher education institutions have been roundly criticized for how prospective school leaders have been selected, weaknesses in the curriculum and pedagogy, and inattention to programme effects" (p. 27). Compounding the problem, as Gurr and Drysdale (2018) point out in their study of educational leader preparatory programs, is the fact that ill-prepared educational leaders subsequently encounter limited resources, inequitable resource allocation for high-needs schools, poor teacher retention, and high-poverty issues that exacerbate the problems of inadequate leadership preparation.

Educational researchers have long called for preparation programs to ensure school leaders, as George (2017) concludes, "would understand and make meaning of the fact that for far too long, underrepresented and marginalized students … have experienced a complex labyrinth of systems and processes uniquely designed to disadvantage them in their pursuits" (p. 43). George explains that such preparation programs must be willing to act on their new understanding of educational inequity.

Many of our current educational leaders in both K-12 and higher education are ill-equipped and unprepared, lacking the ability to engage in or facilitate conversations around social justice issues such as race, class, and gender. Diem and Carpenter (2012) state that:

> Programs frequently failed to address a number of the micro-political diversity issues school leaders face on a daily basis. Thus, the offering of a curriculum failing to address how leaders should navigate "day-to-day" issues pertaining to diversity leaves future leaders without the strategies necessary to lead within the current context of diverse schools. (p. 97)

The Need For Racial Equity-Focused Curriculum

In 2016, Davis and Livingstone estimated that only 10% of doctoral programs in the United States have a course on cultural diversity or racial oppression. We now know because of studies like Kondakci et al. (2021), which assert that culturally oriented social justice leadership better aligns with the changing needs of schools in the contemporary multicultural social context. Gildersleeve (2011) found that doctoral students, who entered an academic program without a racial curriculum and research projects exploring underrepresented groups, experienced negative consequences. Even programs that had or claimed to have a racial equity focus struggled to implement transformational instruction and strategies across their programs. Bryan et al. (2012) revealed in their study that, in many cases, conversations about race in programs needed to be improved or expanded despite the programs being advertised as ones where diversity issues were a focus. And yet, significant research speaks to the importance of this missing curriculum. In their study of 10 current principals and the skills they need for successful leadership in our increasingly diverse schools, Küçükakın and Gökmenoğlu (2023) conclude that the leadership of school principals plays a vital role in celebrating diversity and ensuring social justice in education and point to the need of school leaders to increase their agency and capacity to compensate for inequalities that marginalized students face.

It is important to note that there may also be perceived pushback on those who choose to broach the subject of race and racism in their classes. As Gildersleeve (2011) points out, many students of color then shy away from exploring these areas "for fear of being viewed as 'the angry black student' or the 'militant Latino student' in their departments" (p. 105). The absence of a racial curriculum, marginalized perspectives, and tools for analyzing power can also lead to what Davis and Livingstone (2016) describe as student disorientation. Of the 62 University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) affiliated institutions that Hawley and James surveyed in their 2010 study, "the majority reported that issues of diversity were only taught in one course throughout their leadership preparation program" (as cited in Diem & Carpenter, 2012, p. 96). Davis and Livingstone (2016) encourage the expansion of racial justice in doctoral programs, equipping "doctoral students with knowledge and skills needed to address racism" (p. 211). Diem and Carpenter (2012) bring forth five skills for facilitating anti-racist conversations that leadership preparation programs committed to developing leaders for today's diverse settings should focus which include (a) carefully examining issues and concepts of color-blind ideology, (b) misconceptions of human difference, (c) merit-based achievement, (d) critical self-reflection, and (e) the interrogation of race-related silences in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

Our study sought to identify the experiences of BIPOC and White students in various stages of an Educational Leadership doctoral program that claims to develop racially conscious leaders in K-12 and higher education. In other words, did these students consider themselves significantly developed as racially conscious leaders? Did they feel the program gave them the necessary skills and dispositions to be effective racial equity leaders in K-12 and higher education? Are students being transformed during their learning? The underlying question became, "Does the program deliver as promised?". We employed the theoretical framework of transformative learning theory developed by Jack Mezirow (2003) to answer that question. Mezirow, often called the father of adult learning, asserted that transformative learning has two fundamental focuses: instrumental and communicative. Instrumental learning focuses on task-oriented problem-solving and evaluation of cause-and-effect relationships. Communicative learning focuses on how people communicate their feelings, needs, and desires. Mezirow (2003) states:

> Transformative learning is understood as a uniquely adult form of metacognitive reasoning. Reasoning is the process of advancing and assessing reasons, especially those that provide arguments supporting beliefs resulting in decisions to act. (p. 58)

We, as researchers, wanted to know if the education and experience in our Educational Leadership doctoral program offered students the experiences necessary to transform their thinking and skills

enough for them to consider themselves racially conscious leaders. The urgency for such transformative learning has never been greater. In their study of educational leadership programs' focus on equity-focused curriculum, Coaxum et al. (2022) assert that the pandemic and recent racial unrest raise the level of concern for instructors and leadership preparation programs that prepare current and aspiring school leaders – that these events present "new challenges for school leaders that require a transformative leadership paradigm" (p. 34).

According to Mezirow (2000), transformations often follow some variation of the following phases:

> 1. A disorienting dilemma. 2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. 3. A critical assessment of assumptions. 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared. 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. 6. Planning a course of action. 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans. 8. Provisional trying of new roles. 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

We adopted this as a theoretical framework because we saw it as an excellent fit to analyze what the adults in the educational leadership doctoral program must do to earn their degrees – grow profoundly and powerfully in their racial awareness and apply that awareness in leadership. One of the significant aspects of transformational learning is meaningful relationships. Transformational learning happens "through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly, and achieve mutual and consensual understanding" (Taylor, 2007, p. 179).

Our doctoral program's use of a cohort model ensures that students work with and get to know the same group of people. Clearly and often stated norms reinforce how students will conduct themselves in class. Tools such as Singleton's (2014) protocol for Courageous Conversations about Race are used in almost every class to increase students' and faculty's skills in racial discourse. Many small-group assignments and projects require some connection to demonstrating racial equity. Successful completion of this work mandates that group members engage in increasingly deep and sophisticated racial discussions that foster interdependence and connection.

Transformational Difference

A handful of educational leadership doctoral programs in the United States have transformed their program visions and goals to be centered around race – promoting, as Barakat et al. (2019) reveal in their study of school leadership preparation programs, "issues of cultural diversity and developing their students' cultural competence, which includes an appreciation of cultural diversity, an ability to connect with people from other cultures, and a willingness to fight oppression" (p. 213). However, they emphasize that the efforts these programs have made "remain unmeasured and their effectiveness unknown."

California State University East Bay's Ed.D. in Educational Leadership program, established in 2008, brings a lens of critical work in "interrupting systems and structures that perpetuate and expand oppressions in our society, particularly for historically marginalized populations of students" (Porfilio et al., 2019, p. 108). Washington State University's Ph.D. in Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education (CSSTE) focuses on social justice and sustainability issues. Its conceptual framework expresses as one of its core values "a commitment to diversity and importance of interrupting the status quo systems of privilege and power" (Porfilio et al., 2019, p. 111).

In Simmons and Fellabaum's (2016) study of a program at the University of Missouri, faculty intentionally created and aligned courses framed by their programmatic focus on critical pedagogy. From their qualitative evaluation of students' experiences in one of the courses, participants reported that the course was transformative and practical. Additionally significant were the students' evaluation findings that the course instructor's pedagogy reflected the critical pedagogy content. It is this combi-

nation of inwardly and outwardly facing anti-racist programming that makes the transformational difference in student experience and the acquisition of racial equity-focused leadership skills. More recently, Waite (2021) demonstrated students' need and growing appetite for explicitly race-focused doctoral courses in educational leadership. Coaxum et al. (2022), in their study of educational leadership programs and how those programs have responded to current societal issues, state the need and benefits in this way:

> The changing dynamic [of our society post-pandemic and with ongoing racial unrest] further beckons preparation programs to equip leaders with the tools necessary to transform communities by improving the educational outcomes of all students, even those in crisis. In doing so, the student's capacity to engage in transformative leadership may actualize goals of liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and excellence when put into practice. (pp. 34-35)

The Effects of Racism on Doctoral Students and Programs

One cannot export that which one does not grow at home. Before we can assess the end products of an anti-racist program, we must first identify and examine the racism that currently exists in such programs. Even programs that claim to address issues of racial equity and produce anti-racist leaders must look at their policies and practices to identify and root out vestiges of racism and whiteness that harm students of color, further reinforce the racial status quo for White students, and hinder the mission and vision of the program.

Studies show that doctoral students of color experience significant adverse impacts of racism that affect their ability to navigate doctoral programs successfully (Barker, 2016; Blockett et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2004). Students of color are expected to persist through programs that are further complicated by experiencing institutional and interpersonal racism (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Felder et al., 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Deep learning often requires vulnerability to expose areas of ignorance or misunderstanding. As Dortch (2016) determined in the study of doctoral students of color, they need to feel safe in their classroom environments to engage at a level that exposes their vulnerabilities. However, doctoral students of color regularly experience both macroaggressions (Osanloo et al., 2016) and microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), which can lead to consequences such as questioning their self-worth, using self-censorship, and adjusting their behavior to adapt to new rules and norms (Gildersleeve, 2011). Roberts (2020) found that BIPOC doctoral students experienced racism, isolation, self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and survivor guilt.

In a study of twenty-six doctoral students, Truong and Museus (2012) found that the racism doctoral students of color experienced in their programs led to "symptoms of racial trauma such as anger, shock, self-doubt, depression, dissociation, physical pain, and spiritual pain" (p. 237). BIPOC doctoral students navigate "alienated and hostile environments" as they study irrelevant curricula taught by instructors who are culturally insensitive (Patrón et al., 2021, p. 2). Scholars have also shown that graduate students of color pursuing academic careers face assumptions about their criminality, intellectual worth, and belonging (Brunsma et al., 2017).

An often-occurring unintended consequence of programs that claim to have a race-forward curriculum rely heavily and inequitably on their students of color. Many BIPOC graduate students have the added burden of the expectation that they will speak for their entire race or teach their White classmates and professors about race and racism by making themselves vulnerable – sharing stories, experiences, or perspectives that their White counterparts are not asked to share. This *racialized labor* can be thought of as the additional, expected, and uncompensated work – over and above what White people are required – to be seen as contributing members of a learning community that centers the academic achievement of what represents the White racial frame (Greer-Reed et al., 2020). Racialized

labor is further exacerbated when, due to personal discomfort triggering a defense mechanism, the White classmates dismiss or invalidate the perspectives of students of color (Olsen, 2019).

Experiences of BIPOC Doctoral Students

Women of color enrolled in doctoral programs and positions of leadership feel particularly isolated (Davis, 2016; Grant & Ghee, 2015; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008; Shavers & Moore, 2019), experiencing both racism and sexism. While navigating primarily White institutions, female doctoral students of color experience a *double bind* (Ong et al., 2011). Black women in doctoral programs have more isolation than their White and male peers (Ellis, 2001). They experience the culture of their primarily White institution as unfriendly and even hostile at times, and "many Black women struggle silently in doctoral programs" (Shavers & Moore, 2019, p. 211). McCoy (2018) describes how doctoral programs "create intellectual war zones for African American students through oppressive institutional socialization" (p. 325), forcing doctoral students to develop an "intellectual identity" (p. 327) while experiencing constant marginalization. Additionally, Black women's academic programming is intensified by ambivalent faculty, dynamics on dissertation committees, and the inability to ask for help (Dortch, 2016). Further, as Johnson and Fournillier (2022) pointed out in their study of four Black women in school leadership positions, Black women are and continue to be 'othered' in the conversation about leading school at all and certainly in the conversation about leading with equity.

Black male students have also felt isolated in their doctoral programs. McGaskey et al. (2016) studied the effect of race on the compositions of the social support networks for Black male doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. The Black doctoral students had specific patterns of homophily, in that members of their support networks were primarily Black, male, and similarly educated in the same discipline, which allowed them to "communicate their concerns and needs without fear of being misunderstood or penalized" (McGaskey et al., 2016*,* p. 154*)*. However, these support systems were often outside the scope of their doctoral programs.

Latina doctoral students may be overwhelmed by the cultural differences in predominantly White institutions. These feelings can hamper their performance. Commonly reported experiences were "feelings of isolation and shame that arose when a sense of belonging was absent. Impostorism – self-doubt about one's abilities or accomplishments – exacerbates these feelings and fails to account for systemic inequities." (Phillips & Deleon, 2022, p. 204).

Feelings of isolation during doctoral programs also resonate with Hmong American doctoral students. Hmong doctoral students feel torn between their community, culture, and the larger society, embracing being both Hmong and Hmong American as they integrate both cultural systems (Lee, 2007). Feeling "cut off from their roots" due to social and cultural reasons, Hmong Americans often feel they have "no clear sense of direction" when they begin their higher education journeys (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006, p. 13). Many Hmong American students feel out of place and sometimes even invisible at universities (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006). Some must navigate complications such as multiple advisors (Xiong, 2019), and others feel judged in a prejudiced manner by their instructors (Lee, 2007). Furthermore, Hmong American university students share that their education seems "impersonal, disconnected from their daily lives" delivered by professors who do not understand Hmong culture (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2006, p. 14).

International BIPOC Doctoral Students

Although international students are often considered profitable to American institutions of higher education as their elevated tuition dollars contribute to the financial well-being of programs, Cantwell (2015) found that tuition-paying international doctoral students rather than undergraduate or master's students are mainly responsible for generating additional revenue for some public universities in the United States. Madriaga and McCaig (2022) opine that international students of color may experience racism, judgment regarding their language proficiency or accent, and unfair perceived cultural deficits – as though their cultural norms, though different, are inherently inferior.

International doctoral students of color may experience stress and bewilderment. Liu (2016) found that international students navigate their coursework and research while confronting language barriers, differences in educational systems, learning styles, class frustrations, and cultural differences in their environments. These layers provide complex challenges for international doctoral students (Elliot et al., 2016). In their home countries, issues of race may not be as prevalent or as blatant as they are here in the United States; therefore, many international students of color experience racism for the first time. For many of these students, their self-identity must shift from their nationality, ethnicity, religion, or tribe to being classified as a "person of color" and deal with the baggage that the label brings with it – for the first time in their lives. Loo (2019) states:

> When students are part of the majority people group in their home countries, and even more particularly if the country is relatively homogeneous, race may not have been an important marker of identity or have factored into their identities at all. Only when they come to the U.S. does race become salient. (para. 8)

Many international students of color must quickly develop the skills to negotiate their newly racialized identity, interpret their treatment and experiences based on race, and navigate their studies (Madriaga & McCaig, 2022). These experiences of "otherness" may hinder an American or International BIPOC doctoral student's progress toward transformative learning – our chosen theoretical framework – because they are the antithesis of what Taylor (2007) established as foundational: relationships based on trust and an openness to freely share, discuss, and understand. Suppose too much of a BIPOC doctoral student's "bandwidth" is occupied with feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and not belonging. In that case, they might go through the motions of progress – completing assignments and writing their dissertation. However, the transformative learning that fosters the questioning that challenges beliefs and prompts leadership action might not manifest as strongly as it could.

Experiences of White Doctoral Students

It is interesting to contrast the documented experiences of doctoral students of color as they traverse racialized situations as compared to White doctoral students for whom a race-forward approach to education might be a new experience. White students participating in a doctoral program study called "The Anti-Racism Project" (Davis & Livingstone, 2016) expressed their "increased awareness of how White privilege shapes their experiences in the program" (p. 205). Davis and Livingstone share that a doctoral program offering their students the opportunity to openly discuss racial oppression and White privilege is imperative. "The Anti-Racism Project" provided a platform for participants to discuss both the existence and widespread effects of racism. The findings from this study show that required doctoral coursework that avoids discussions about racism hinders all students' ability to prepare for future endeavors, notably students of color (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). Zarate and Mendoza (2020), in their recommendations for educational leadership programs, state that White school leaders must have opportunities to make sense of their privilege, given the demographic makeup of the students they serve. The most important part of this "sense-making" is decentering whiteness – realizing how people of color navigate life is very different from the ways White people do. Niccolls et al. (2021) state:

> Decentering whiteness is not decentering White people. Whiteness is not emblematic of a race of people; it is the pervasive dominant culture in the United States. This culture erases any validity of other cultures or ways of being. It is the normed reference for what is often "proper," "appropriate," "successful," and "worthy." American school systems are set up, implemented, and measured by whiteness standards. (para. 5)

The conscious choice in higher education curriculum not to address issues of systemic racism creates a further problem. Olsen (2019) warns:

> [T]he decision to not instruct students about the social construction of race in a didactic setting could set the stage for students, who may not know any better, to view the accounts of

> students of color as individual anecdotes rather than systematically collected facts about the historical and contemporary effects of race and racism. (p. 66)

We believe that if White doctoral students engage in a meaningful curriculum about race, the effects of racism, whiteness, and their applications to educational leadership, they will be much better equipped to lead in a more racially equitable manner. This result would hold with the study Gooden et al. (2018) undertook, examining a specific anti-racist school leader preparation program, which found that White graduates felt not only better prepared to be anti-racist leaders but also had experienced numerous times during the program a shift in their thinking which then informed a shift in their willingness to act in anti-racist ways.

Each of these groups – the American BIPOC students, the International BIPOC students, and the White students – were either in the process of or had completed their doctoral studies in Educational Leadership. While the validity and rigor of the program were not in question, the claim of producing racially conscious leaders was not as confident. As faculty in the program, this was our attempt at certainty. To test this, we needed to go to the source – the students – to find out if they experienced transformative learning in their racial equity perspectives and leadership skills, so we designed a study that would allow us to determine whether the program delivered as advertised.

What follows is an explanation of our study design methodology, our findings, a discussion of the significance of our findings, a brief limitations section, and some concluding thoughts about our study.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW

This phenomenological study was designed to compare the experiences of students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) with those of White students in an Educational Leadership doctoral program that claimed to be unapologetic in its commitment to producing racially conscious leaders. In doing so, the study sought the answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of BIPOC and White students in a race-focused Educational Leadership doctoral program of their abilities and skills as racial equity leaders?

RQ2: Did the program produce transformative learning for its students?

This phenomenological study examined BIPOC and White students' assessment of their skills and abilities as racial equity leaders resulting from their experiences in a race-focused Educational Leadership doctoral program. We used a purposive sampling of students of different races and in various stages of the doctoral program to determine if the program delivered as promised essentially. We used a phenomenological approach because it examined and tried to understand the meaning of the participants' lived experiences, their assessments of their learning, and the appraisal of their racial equity leadership skills and abilities because of participating in this doctoral program.

Talking about race can be complicated and uncomfortable. We made methodological choices to mitigate student discomfort and researcher misinterpretations. To increase validity in data collection and analysis, we acknowledged the possibilities of (a) Researcher Bias – any negative influence of the researcher's knowledge, (b) Reactivity – possible impact on the participants, and (c) Respondent Bias – when participants do not provide honest responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Flick et al. (2004) recommended using a triangulation strategy to reduce the threats to these three situations. Full IRB approval was obtained for the study.

While all participants had characteristics in common, such as being a current or former student in a race-focused Ed.D. program, the fundamental difference was their race. We used purposeful sampling to select participants in two separate research focus groups, each of which "ideally consists of

five to eight participants" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 67). Patton (2002) recommended this technique when the study calls for information-rich cases when resources are limited. This choice resulted in our decision to use a single-stage sampling procedure (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2023) in which we, as researchers, had "access to names in the population and can sample the people (or other elements) directly" (p. 162). We used class rosters and students' university emails to establish students of color for one focus group, which was facilitated by a graduate student of color, and White students for the second group, which a White graduate student facilitated. The purpose of our decision to group in this way was to eliminate in the White group and reduce in the BIPOC group the variable of race difference in group communication behavior. Race differences may "either reduce the comfort level in the discussion or affect how either perspective gets discussed" (Morgan, 1997, p. 36). We understand that people of color are not monolithic; however, we chose to use a multi-racial group because there were not enough of any one race or ethnicity to constitute a proper focus group for each. While not homogenous, this strategy grouped participants based on a shared marginalized status and the fact that during their coursework, many BIPOC students chose or requested to work in race-based affinity groups. We saw this as an anxiety-reducing measure.

Embarking on a focus group-based study about these participants' perspectives fulfilled our commitment to addressing a central educational research principle that utilizes a Critical Race Theory tenet: recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color. "CRT analyses highlight the importance of voice and focus on the experiences of people of color" (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019, p. 6). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe the CRT notion of the Unique Voice of Color as a genuine vehicle to articulate awareness:

> Because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that the Whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism. (p. 11)

This study aimed to create environments that allowed the "more free-flowing conversations" made possible with an attempt at focus-group racial homogeneity (Morgan, 1997, p. 35), a critical element of holding a group discussion about the sensitive issue of race. Castagno (2008) notes, "Even though issues of race are always present and are often at the surface of school-related discourse, practice, and policies, educators are consistently silent and are socializing students to be silent about them" (p. 315). Given the persistent silence of single voices around race in educational settings (Patton, 2002), focus groups seemed a particularly effective method to explore our participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings around a complex issue.

The doctoral program employs a biennial cohort model, taking on a new group every other fall. The participants in this study represented three different doctoral cohorts. The participants of color (n = 7) comprised African Americans, Asians of different ethnicities, and multiracial people: three females and four males. Two of the participants of color were international students. The White participants (n = 6) were four females and two males. The age of the participants was not a relevant factor. While we fully acknowledge that not all people of color have the same racialized experience, many of them chose to self-select or request BIPOC group work in their doctoral cohorts.

Using our two research questions, we wanted to gauge educational leadership doctoral BIPOC and White students' perceptions of their abilities and skills as racial equity leaders and assess whether the program produced transformative learning for each group. We employed Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning as our theoretical framework to craft our interview questions and later to interpret our findings. Mezirow states that transformations often follow some variation of the following ten phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the transformation process are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

The study examined the lived experiences of BIPOC and White students in an educational leadership doctoral program by exploring the five semi-structured interview questions that broadly aligned with several of the ten phases without being leading questions. Each interview question is prefaced with the racially specific group prompt: (i) as a doctoral student of color …; or (b) as a White doctoral student …. For data analysis purposes, each interview question is followed by numbers corresponding to Mezirow's (2000) phases of transformation.

1. What are your experiences in a race-focused doctoral program? [1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7]
2. What is your recognition and understanding of historical and systemic racial oppression, particularly in American education? [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10]
3. What are your greatest areas of transformation concerning race? [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9]
4. How do you perceive your preparedness to lead through the lens of racial consciousness? [4, 7, 8, 9, 10]
5. What do you think you need to do to stay engaged in racial equity discourse? [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]

Through recorded and transcribed Zoom focus group interviews that lasted an average of about 75 minutes, the researchers sought to comprehend how the participants experienced an educational leadership Ed.D. program with curricula and andragogy viewed through the lens of race. Further, by listening to the participants' various stories, experiences, and opinions, a deeper understanding of the students' perceptions concerning race, racism, racial identity, equity, and leadership ability might emerge.

Kriukow (2020) added that an additional triangulation strategy for data analysis could be achieved by comparing different theories or perspectives with one's own developing theory. To accomplish this, we used a description-focused coding strategy in which we "allow the data to speak for itself –summarizing the relevant information (i.e., empirical indicators) in the data without introducing your interpretation into the construction of the codes" (Adu, 2019, p. 28). The researchers reviewed Zoom recordings several times to understand the "feel" of the rooms and conversations, including nuances like body language, silences, tone, and group synergies. Additionally, the transcripts from each race-clustered focus group recorded Zoom interviews were analyzed and coded for emerging descriptive themes. We used coding procedures that Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to as "open" coding, in which data are broken apart and examined closely to "identify concepts to stand for the data," and "axial" coding when these concepts are put back together by "relating those concepts" to others (p. 198). Thus, we used both coding strategies *individually* to determine our preliminary themes and then compared our analyses to identify the final themes we would use to organize and present our data. This process yielded 51 open codes for one researcher and 58 for the other, resulting in 11 and 17 axial codes, respectively. These axial codes subsequently led to the identification of prominent themes by each researcher for each question. The final set of themes emerged from the interview data after joint analysis.

Researcher Practices

The researchers are an African American female and a White male in the same department of Educational Leadership in a predominantly White university in the Midwest. After both researchers reviewed the recorded Zoom interviews to understand the nuances better, the White researcher

cleaned, analyzed, and coded the transcripts for the White focus group. The African American researcher cleaned, analyzed, and coded the transcripts for the focus group of color. The clean and printed transcripts were then swapped, and the White researcher analyzed and coded the transcript for the focus group of color. The African American researcher performed the same duties on the White student focus group transcript. Together, they compared codes, nodes, and categories while being conscious of suspending their perspectives and interpretations until they reached a consensus about emerging themes. These themes guided the organization of the findings presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to compare the experiences of White students with those of their peers of color in the same Educational Leadership doctoral program that claimed to be unapologetic in its commitment to producing racially conscious leaders. The following sections summarize the responses to the five interview questions:

1. What are your experiences in a race-focused doctoral program?
2. What is your recognition and understanding of historical and systemic racial oppression, particularly in American education?
3. What are your greatest areas of transformation concerning race?
4. How do you perceive your preparedness to lead through the lens of racial consciousness?
5. What do you think you need to do to stay engaged in racial equity discourse?

Because specific differences emerged due to the student's nationality, where applicable, the findings are reported in three sections: White students, International BIPOC students, and American BIPOC students.

EXPERIENCES IN A RACE-FOCUSED DOCTORAL PROGRAM

All thirteen participants were either present or former full-time students in the doctoral program. Additionally, they were all working adults with families. These participants tried to maintain a work/life/school balance. All students commented that they found the program very accommodating for working professionals. The cohort model and the evening classes were all very "doable" from a time and logistical standpoint. The program and curriculum are designed to pair racial equity work with course content to illustrate how issues of race and racism are inextricably tied to almost every aspect of the American educational system. Several students applied to this program because of its reputation for racial equity work.

White students

It was the consensus that the courses varied in rigor and attention to issues of race and racism, depending on the professor. White students echoed the sentiments of students of color about the inconsistencies in racial emphasis depending on the professor. Two White students shared about a particular class where race was not usually addressed. One student shared, "I certainly learned some things, which was good, but I expected to feel more challenged and more uncomfortable around race and racism conversations, and I felt like it was not." Another student reported: "It [race] did not count. This course didn't challenge me in comparison to other experiences I've had, where I've learned to engage in conversations about race and racism."

White students noticed a difference between their experiences and those of BIPOC students. They expressed that students of color were doing more than their fair share of carrying the load in classroom discussions about race. The White students felt they were learning more because students of color had to "teach" them about race and equity – things in which BIPOC students already were well versed. A White student recalled a conversation with her classmates of color about race work in the program:

> I remember thinking, 'What in the world are they talking about?' I actually had no idea what they were even referencing, and it illustrated for me that there may be some blind spots that I have as a student and, therefore, as an educator.

Several White students expressed that the learning in the program was not equal. They felt that White students were able to lean on their classmates of color to learn about issues of race and racism, but not the other way around. A White student reminisced about what she perceived as the uneven burden of difficult class discussions about race:

> I felt like we just sat back the way people tend to just sit back and just like allow our students of color in the program to say more. I think that's the problem, sometimes. I think we need to be willing to say things.

Another White student shared this sentiment as he reflected on his unfair benefit in class discussions compared to his classmates of color: "I think as a White student when it comes to kind of these race conversations, like obviously I'm withdrawing much more than I'm depositing into these conversations."

There was a solid recurring sentiment from White students who felt that they were experiencing their education differently than their classmates of color. A White student recalls a conversation she had with a classmate of color:

> Just to have classmates [of color] say, 'Hey, this might work for you, but it is not working for us.' So, just thinking about it academically in terms of how it's possible that students had a much different experience was really interesting.

Still, another White student recognized that race played a role in the differences in knowledge and the resulting benefits of classroom discussions about racism:

> My classmates of color would read about Critical Race Theory and joke like, 'Yeah, this is my lived experience.' They already know this, and so, for them, I'm not sure how much they benefitted, apart from just kind of seeing how much ignorance is in the room, but again, as a White student, I felt I got a tremendous amount from it.

International BIPOC students

Students of color had markedly different experiences than White students with the race-focused curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This was further broken down by nationality. The international students of color and the American students of color encountered the program a bit differently.

The most pronounced difference between the two groups is that racism was a relatively new concept for international BIPOC students. Their growing awareness of race and racism in America was evident. An international student compared the problem of racism with what she thought she knew:

> We have tons more problems in my country, but in terms of awareness and the struggle against racism, that's where we are so behind. When I came to this country, I heard, or I'm in the middle of conversations about racism. I always considered myself a person with a huge awareness, but actually, I realized how much I was behind.

An international student spoke of one source of her learning:

> As I have been sitting in this cohort and listening to others, there might be times I might have sounded weird. I have learned a lot from my classmates, maybe even more than the textbooks. This program has been more fruitful than I thought it would be because I have been learning a lot from what I'm hearing from you [American BIPOC students].

An international student spoke of encountering racism in the campus community. "We were learning much about critical race theory, and the tenet *racism is ordinary* in day-to-day life in hiring, housing,

healthcare, facilities, and many more. I will cite one example for you." He went on to share a story of a discriminatory housing practice that affected him and his family, who had just arrived in this country – with proper visas – to join him. At first, he just accepted it and tried to look for other housing. It was not until he brought the matter up to someone who informed him it was discriminatory that he realized he could challenge it. It was an eye-opening experience for him to recognize this treatment. He said, "So this course was, really, one of the many examples to share with you to illustrate that racism is real in our communities."

American BIPOC students

Some American BIPOC students expressed disappointment with certain aspects of the program. Members of a cohort that had to switch from in-person to a virtual classroom due to the pandemic noticed a change in how they experienced the courses:

> There really was a lack of equity or racial equity integrated throughout the program, specifically in [certain] classes. It seemed like we began this program on a real high and a focus on equity, and it filtered out. I'm not sure if that was due to the pandemic and having things switched to online or really the structure of the program itself.

Another student stated:

> For me, I think it was when we moved to remote learning and Zoom. I'm not sure if folks felt like they were able to hide behind their cameras. But that's where I saw the shift, and it just went down from there.

The American BIPOC participants experienced frustration with the actions of some of their White classmates. "Then, just as we finished the program, it just seemed to no longer be a safe space. Other [White] folks were very defensive due to the conversations." Similarly, "Watching some of my White colleagues really struggle with their own understanding of their own interactions was really quite harmful."

Two students shared their experiences of feelings of being patronized:

> Some patronization happened in the class, which for me, was very exhausting to finish out this last year. How does the program continue to push for racial equity, have these conversations, and have a safe space? Because it started off that way, and it just did a whole entire flip.

> I did feel like my voice was respected in the room by most. I thought the instructors were on point and that the program was put together very well. But there were just times that I felt like my voice was patronized by some instructors. I felt like the real me wanted to come out and call people out like: 'Come on! Don't patronize me! I'm looking for growth here, not for frustration.

Some courses were rich in applying a racial lens and incorporating racial equity work, while others were spotty and devoid of any racial equity work.

> I'm not really sure what happened with the way that our courses were taught, but we had several courses taught by the same professor, and he did not talk about race at all in the courses, which actually became problematic. The classes that we did have that talked about race, I thought they did a really good job.

Another opinion:

> It really seemed like race was an afterthought, with the exception of two courses. It made me question the commitment of some of the instructors to the program and their understanding of how race, education, leadership, and research all intersect.

As was stated earlier, the participants of the focus groups represented three different cohorts spanning six years of the doctoral program. The program had undergone some restructuring and faculty changes. This might have accounted for differences in student experiences. Depending on which cohort they represented, students spoke of a dramatically different experience. Two students share their positive encounters:

> It seems that the experiences that you two have had are totally different from mine. I'm not sure if a lot of things changed after [professor] left. I think I might have had him like five or six years ago. I think about all my classes and all the instructors I had, only two that really didn't touch on race. But, like every other person, that was the basis of everything.

> The books … *Critical Race Theory*, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome,* and numerous other books talked deep and heavy on race. Also, I don't know if it's the makeup of my whole cohort. I had some strong racial equity leaders in it as well. It's like it was totally flipped from your guys' experience. So interesting.

A person from a different cohort – and a different experience – responded by saying, "Yeah, you speak of [professor], but [professor] was not part of our programming."

An American BIPOC student expressed his frustration with what he perceived as his White classmates' nascent racial awareness.

> Speaking my truth, they would frustrate me because people weren't where I thought, as an educational leader, where they should be. Meaning racially aware. I thought that in this program if somebody were to make this journey in a program that is based on racial awareness, some of them would have been a little bit further along.

Recognition of Historical and Systemic Racial Oppression in Education

White students

The White students participating in this study expressed significant learning regarding recognizing systemic racism. They became aware of several forms of racism through various means. Required readings and podcasts exposed White students to other points of view and ways of life. Classroom activities such as "groundings," where discussion questions followed a short video clip about some aspect of racism, required them to grapple with an "in your face" topic and think about how it affects systems. Small group work, where White students were intentionally clustered with students of color to research and present their findings, forced them to have substantive conversations about racism with people who experience and navigate it daily. This work resulted in specific and personal revelations of their White privilege and perspective. A White student talked about how coursework forced him to question his socialization and, therefore, his understanding of racism:

> The racial socialization exploration that took place in the theory class, for me, was like finding out Santa doesn't exist. Just because it is kind of a privileged White background where all of the answers to the questions that you would ask when younger about like 'Hey, why are Black people discriminated against?' and not just thinking, 'Oh, that's just the way it is; a juvenile-like irrationality like 'Oh, I guess that makes sense – like the story of Santa Claus. But to find out what you've been told were answers that perpetuate the system. That kind of alert in the back of your mind causes you to reevaluate a lot of stuff.

A White student spoke of how she had to, for the first time, acknowledge that school policy throughout history was either written intentionally with only White students in mind or unconsciously ignored multicultural lenses in its development and implementation. She reflected on a policy course

that shaped her understanding of unintended consequences and the far-reaching effects of systemic racism:

> What stands out is the course we took on policy. I really had no idea about K-12 education. I didn't know anything other than the name *No Child Left Behind*. And so, from the good intent of the people creating it [policy], the intent didn't match the impact. It created additional racism in our schools and communities. That was a huge lesson in that whole process. It really made me think about when I'm sitting at a table, and a policy is being developed, and it seems like it's a really good idea. What are we thinking about in terms of every lens and every person's perspective on how it might actually impact them?

White students applied their learning of systemic racism to their professional lives. One student spoke of being able to recognize how he might have to think differently to decide differently to have different outcomes:

> Most tangibly, I've taken the CRT tenant of the *unique voice of color*. Being a supervisor and somebody who's hired staff, from a perspective of 'Of course, you want a diverse candidate pool, but I want to hire the best candidate.' But now, having a different perspective on what it means to have the best candidate and how important it is at an institution like ours–predominantly white in a predominantly white community. The common phrase is: 'We don't have enough qualified diverse people.' And so, flipping it to take on the responsibility of making those decisions, because all those things you just talked about just going to the unintended consequences of policies that are well intended. Or maybe it's less likely to happen if you've got a different set of eyes at the outset with different intentions.

A White student shared his recognition of systemic racism in education and its underlying symptoms during a recent experience at his local school board meeting:

> I had a jarring moment on Monday. Our local school board had an equity audit that was released. And you know, you could identify all of the tropes and all kinds of the fear tactics that are being used to try to shoot this thing [equity work] down before they even take a look at it. Sitting in that room, I saw it very, very differently than I probably would have had I not been a student in this program.

International BIPOC students

Through required readings and podcasts, international students learned about the historical nature of racism in the U.S. and why things look as they do now. Based on the histories of their home countries and some of the harsh practices they observed in their own cultures, they were able to make the connection between race and oppression in an American context:

> From the very beginning, anytime I learn anything here about the systemic or racial problems in this country – from the historical lens or the racial problems that we're experiencing, the more I realize that we have systematic racism. Maybe at different levels, maybe in different forums, but it's the same idea.

One international student who recognized systemic oppression in the U.S. also acknowledged her privilege as a student in the program:

> The program allowed me to compare and also realize that so many things are the same at the bottom. Unfortunately, systemic racism basically works in the same way. This is an outcome of my constant comparison between my country and here. At least in this program in an institution, as doctoral students, we are speaking about it. Whereas, in my country, those who are speaking are being jailed.

American BIPOC students

American BIPOC students entered the program largely aware of the historical and systemic racial oppression in this country. This prior knowledge came from their personal experiences, race-focused school leadership institutes, and research of historical racial events and how they have impacted education writ large. A student compares her learning between the doctoral program and her district's professional development:

> Okay, so again, I don't know, guys, I'm not trying to be negative. I think that with the work that [school district] has done regarding race, there was actually lots of learning there. I think, with the two courses that we did have in the program that really addressed race, we just didn't get as deep because I would assume that our professors were trying to balance the entry point for some [White] students.

Although they admitted to having knowledge of systemic racism in educational settings before the program, the doctoral program provided some new language and skills at the research and policy level. An American BIPOC student shared:

> I think, you know, being in the doctoral program has had more of an impact on me professionally, not because it was race-based but because it was just some good content around how to engage in research, how to review and understand the research, and data as it's presented in a different way than I had prior to the formal training.

Another student spoke of how his knowledge and thinking around historical racism and problem-solving changed because of the skills he acquired in the doctoral program:

> It sharpened my lens for sure, but it also made me think more critically about isolating race. To think more critically about the methods that were used to obtain the data. But also, then, to ask new questions: What's missing? How do we seek out additional perspectives? The missing perspective? How do I apply a critical race theory to this? I think about how to apply critical race theory to problem solving has been quite helpful in my thinking around policies, practices, and data analytics.

An American BIPOC student acknowledged that some of her professors have had to persevere in the face of systemic racism. She considered them role models and resources:

> Hearing the stories of [professors] and how they've navigated spaces that have dealt with race and then just at that moment, you know, being an aspiring superintendent, knowing that if you do come out as a racial equity leader, there can be some negative impacts. But being in a space where I could write about it and there were some professors that would teach about it, and if not, they were a phone call or email away, was really helpful.

Areas of Transformation Concerning Race

White students

The underlying critique of the program is that it came up short in its ability to model and convey what large racial equity gains might look like. One of the White students expressed his mild dissatisfaction with the program's transformational impact in this way:

> I didn't feel like I heard a lot of big success stories about where leadership and knowledge of systemic racism came together and really made a huge impact. [There were] small stories, but not big stories, and maybe that's because that's the nature of the beast: it's only small little pieces, but it would be nice to hear a big one.

Another White student's disappointment resulted from the realization that his new learning and the hoped-for impact would have on his work colleagues were not matching up:

> I feel like I've learned a lot of philosophical ideas that I can turn into some practical applications when it comes to being a more equitable educator. But when I have used what I've learned to try to call in some of my colleagues, there really doesn't seem to have been a lot of eagerness among my colleagues to really understand equity. It is frustrating to have learned all kinds of ideas and viewpoints in this doctoral program only to see them kind of not be valued the way that I think they probably should.

However, another White student described his experience in the program by using an unsolicited term:

> Transformational is what comes to mind. It seems so elusive and abstract but true in every sense of the word. I'm not the same person I was coming in, and I'm very happy and humbled and altered and all those other words and, frankly, grateful.

International BIPOC students

One international BIPOC student spoke of her enlightenment through her conversations with other students of color:

> This program has been more fruitful than I thought it would be because I have been learning a lot from what I am hearing from you [American BIPOC students]. So that's why I'm in the program that allowed me to compare and also realize that so many things are the same at the bottom; unfortunately, systemic racism basically works in the same way.

Another international BIPOC student spoke of his newfound voice to share and process his racialized experiences:

> Whenever other people – my colleagues or students – were facing injustice or inequality, I used to speak for them. But whenever I had the same problem like them [American BIPOC students], I mean the issues of injustice, I used to keep quiet. If it was about me, I used to keep quiet, but after completing these courses, I started speaking about my own experiences. That's a big transformation I have gone through.

An international BIPOC student spoke about when she knew that the program started her transformation:

> My transformation actually started in this program from the very first semester. All the critiques and all the conversations about the racial issues in the US, and then understanding how much work we need in my country.

Another international student's transformation manifested as his newly realized power:

> I think now we have some kind of power, which comes from education, through the courses that we took and the discussions that we had with our colleagues and professors. Now we are more conscious, we are more aware, so whenever we see any issues or anything regarding color and culture, it's important to use that power.

A student spoke of her personal transformation from how she presented in her country to her new-found persona in the program:

> I really learned to be humble in this program because I was the one who came from my country. I was the one who would speak more than a lot of people around. But I came here and realized that, as I said at the beginning of this conversation, the more I learned, the more I realized how much I have to grow and how much I still don't know.

American BIPOC students

American BIPOC students found areas of transformation different from what came up for the White or international BIPOC students. One man spoke to his new-found language:

> Even as racially conscious as I was, I finally was able to acquire some language. Yeah, it helped me articulate that to those who didn't see from my lens. And that's also helped me in my current job. I feel like I've got a little bit more of a knowledge base to be able to meet people where they're at, even when that place where they're at is somewhere where I disagree with.

Formal and informal racial affinity groups proved to be very beneficial to American BIPOC students. A Black male student shared what it meant to him to have a Black male professor:

> The one moment that sticks out for me is having [professor]. Being able to see another Black male who took me under his wing and being able to see things outside of the classroom that he does and how he navigates things was huge. When I think about his scholars' program and see how impactful that was. The impact that [professor] had pushed me to say, 'Maybe I could do this one day.' I would love to be able to do something like this. To be at that level.

Another student spoke to his appreciation for a program-intentional racial affinity space as a source of transformational accountability and support:

> For me, it was probably that first or second class when we were put into a group together, a racial affinity space. It was that day that I knew that I could talk to and count on my colleagues of color to be supportive of the learning community. I knew who we were getting, and we formed a team in a way. It was a really important thing that happened early on. That, I think, was just crucial, and I'm so thankful because we've grown so much together. I think we talk to each other about the things we need to talk about. I probably would have quit this program. I mean, it was to the point of frustration last summer, but it was this crew who helped me stick with it.

Not all BIPOC students, however, were as optimistic about the experience from a transformational perspective. One BIPOC student described explicitly how the program fell short of their hopes:

> I don't know that I had a transformational experience as a leader of color as a result of this program or a shift in race consciousness. I think that there may have been some missed opportunities. If there were perhaps more leaders of color or more, you know, time in an affinity space, that might [have made it a] little bit different, but I do think that you know, some relationships developed through the program with other leaders of color would have been great.

Preparedness to Lead Through the Lens of Racial Awareness

White students

A student questioned whether or not she would be able to convey her commitment to racial equity through the work legacy she leaves:

> The achievement gap at our institution is closing. I hope all of that continues, and I fear that sometimes equity work is about a person and if that person leaves. the work stops, or it changes direction. I don't mean it can't change direction, but I just hope that it's systemic change and that if I'm leading, I hope that I can speak to my commitment to equity and inclusion as deeply as I feel committed, and I fear that I don't necessarily do well at that.

A White student shared her fears about what she thought her racial equity leadership might cost her:

> Because I think I've already kind of experienced where I have spoken up when something needed to be said, and people have not responded very supportively or positively despite communicating something tactfully and in a friendly way. So I do fear that being an equitable leader means burning some bridges or creating some – I don't want to say enemies, I think

> that's too strong of a word, but definitely being seen as sort of a troublemaker in the eyes of people who maybe aren't ready themselves to go through this journey.

International BIPOC students

An international student felt that her racial leadership would incorporate her scholarship:

> I want to be in a position where I can grow academically because this is how I can contribute to my own people's movement. I want to publish. I want to write and even go back to my country and supervise. To be a leader for those who are like me today. That's how my leadership will be like. I hope to be a great leader from the academic perspective to encourage freedom in thinking, learning, researching, and speaking.

American BIPOC students

A student talked about how she saw her leadership as a conduit for change, recognizing that it is a collective effort:

> If anything, I've grown thicker skin and patience working for the state system. Any process of change is very slow, and I would say this last year is the first time I've seen the state in our city agencies take action toward equity and really move this work forward. And I don't like the word navigate, but having worked in the state now is figuring out the rules of the game and how to work the system to really benefit or put folks of color and Indigenous people in a position where they are receiving services. So, this isn't solo work. This is really collective work.

A student spoke of his leadership in developing his White colleagues: "My leadership style is just really empowering and engaging my White work colleagues and supporting them and how they step up and show up. And, you know, whisper in their ear."

Staying Engaged in Racial Equity Discourse

White students

White students spoke about what it meant to stay engaged in equity work rather than "backsliding" to a place of either apathy or well-intentioned "non-work." A student spoke of her intention to stay surrounded by information and push others to do the same:

> I can take what I've learned and share that with others, and maybe there will be books and people and readings and groundings and courageous conversations. I think obviously reading and staying on top of what's happening with best practices, but also just constantly talking about and challenging myself and my leadership team around racial equity.

Two students spoke about strategies for staying engaged by incorporating what they've learned in the program and applying it to their jobs:

> This year, I'm working on culturally responsive customer service training for student affairs at the college where I work because it's important, but what I'm learning and have learned is people don't really know what culturally responsive means. So, we're going to start there. Staying in the work by creating space for my team to continue to learn, but for myself to continue to learn is important.

> It's kind of an extension that, yes, I want to use my career to help effect change as much as possible. In my community, talking with neighbors and these sorts of things, that's how I can see myself kind of staying engaged. Obviously, the spotlight is currently there, but I hope we continue to promote racial equity, not only with education but beyond the walls of the school and start conversations about the students and institutions.

International BIPOC students

An international student strategized about the best way to incorporate his research into his commitment to engagement:

> As an educator, I plan to do more research from a critical race theory lens in the future. I would like to go to a bigger professional network, conference, or seminar and then share my results. I'm also planning to get my research article published, so I think that's how I will continue.

American BIPOC students

American students of color knew that, for them, disengagement was not an option. Therefore, they needed to surround and support themselves with others doing the work. Two of them commented about their responsibility for continued engagement: "I think, as a doctoral student of color, we don't have any choice but to be engaged in equity discourse." And another: "I agree. We don't have a choice. You're in it. But also staying connected to a network of individuals that support each other." The sentiment of support was echoed by another student:

> As I move forward, I have learned it's very important to have a support group and a sounding board where we're able to share our experiences. I think, without that in the cohort and even outside of the cohort, it's hard to stay engaged in this work on my own.

DISCUSSION

The significance of the findings lies in the conclusion drawn from them that the program from which these students emerged, to at least some degree, is living up to its claim of being committed to producing racially conscious leaders. Whether it be transformational learning or their growth as school leaders, the data certainly suggests this program is on the right track. The goal of any educational leadership program is for students to return to their school districts equipped to do their work–transformed in big and small ways. So, too, is the goal of such a program with a race equity-based focus, different only in the added goal of transforming participants in ways that will provide them the knowledge and tools to effectively move racial equity initiatives forward in their home schools and districts. Not surprisingly, the thirteen participants in this study described a wide variation in the degree of transformation they experienced, ranging from disappointment in the program for the lack of "new" learning to them providing a sundry list of ways the program was transformational in relationship to race consciousness and leadership.

PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS TO LEAD WITH RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

BIPOC and White participants agreed that the program prepared them to lead by understanding the systemic nature of racism, both in general and in their educational systems specifically; thus, they were better prepared to navigate those systems as racially conscious leaders – knowing when to push, when to pull, and when to utilize the space in between. There is no doubt that given the wide-ranging disposition of school communities across the country, this awareness of what to do and how to navigate the push and pull is critical to the equity work that needs to be done. The knowledge we must move forward is essential, but if school leaders don't have the people skills and savvy to lead their staff to change, the knowledge will only serve them well. It is also crucial that in examining the significance of these findings, they are seen both from a collective perspective – that is, considering all the participants' responses as a whole to look for truths that are neither BIPOC nor White specific; and through the two lenses separately, to illuminate those truths that are distinct to each group of students.

BIPOC students

The American BIPOC students were clear about their responsibility in returning to their schools and being racial equity leaders: they had no choice but to stay engaged and move equity forward in their

schools. One BIPOC student indicated that they simply "don't have a choice not to." Another referenced how they would use "their new language skills to engage others in the work." and "[I] need to push others to do the work." A third BIPOC student identified a means multiple BIPOC students spoke of their confidence in staying engaged, regardless of the external forces they might encounter.

While no doubt a respectable and gallant perspective to take, the idea that BIPOC school leaders have no choice but to lead equity initiatives circles back quickly to well-researched issues with Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith et al., 2007) among school administrators of color and should undoubtedly raise concern for those school leaders who not only feel compelled to take up this work but who also must go it alone in their districts. One solution to this concern, as one BIPOC student identified as a means to ensure their engagement moving forward and the engagement of the entire district, would be to codify the district's equity work within the strategic plan. In this way, pushing change would be an expectation of the school system, not just the interest of an individual or a few. It would also circumvent any tendencies within a given district to write off the pushed-for change as merely motivated by Gildersleeve's (2011, p. 105) "Angry Black" or "Militant Latino" school leader.

One BIPOC student emphasized that part of feeling more prepared to lead was "learning different ways to get the same work done," a finding that reinforces Gildersleeve's (2011) description of school leaders of color learning how to *play within the system* to lead to systemic school change. In addition to these skills being critical to the students' work in overcoming obstacles to change in their district, they also help them overcome the hesitancy of addressing issues of race and equity in their schools that kept substantive racial equity work at bay. Also important are the other BIPOC student voices, which spoke of the value of learning to do research as an asset to their equity leadership, of having their beliefs about equity work affirmed, and gave them more confidence to lead their schools.

An interesting irony surfaced as well in the responses of the BIPOC participants to the question of how they would stay engaged in this equity work in their workplaces. Several of them expressed frustration about their White counterparts' lack of preliminary equity knowledge coming into the program and an equal amount of frustration about feeling like it was left in large part to the BIPOC students to close that knowledge gap for those White students during the program. However, several of the BIPOC participants seemed to embrace, or at least accept, the idea of returning to their workplaces after the program and focusing their time and energy on empowering their White colleagues to engage in equity work, even if it means, as one BIPOC participant suggested, constantly "whispering in their ear." The message was consistent, however, that the BIPOC participants felt compelled to, as one of them stated, "do good work with my White colleagues."

Unique to the American BIPOC students was a focus on ensuring they considered self-care while bringing equity changes in their district. One BIPOC student spoke of the importance of having and keeping a support group as part of their engagement strategy – again, to facilitate self-care while moving changes forward. Another said they needed to stay connected to supportive individuals, which could be within their work world or beyond it (e.g., professors in the doctoral program). Again, this is significant when one considers the current trend among so many school administrators who feel discouraged, burned out, or exhausted by the challenges of school administration. That BIPOC leaders recognize this concern and have thought through a response plan to those pressures may very well mean the difference between racial equity leadership that is executed with fidelity and that which lands with a thud.

Finally, the *range* of leadership transformation among the BIPOC students who participated in this study was much broader, including some for whom the program was, perhaps surprisingly, as transformative as it was for the White participants, yet some, again, perhaps not unexpectedly, for whom there was no impact at all. A BIPOC student spoke of how the chance to build relationships with other leaders of color and community through affinity groups had impacted their journey and trans-

formed their leadership. Other BIPOC students mentioned similar types of transitions to those mentioned in the White student focus group, including an increased awareness of systemic racism in schools, the acquisition of language to help them better articulate their views, the courage to speak up for change, and the power to use their knowledge for good.

Of the BIPOC students for whom the program was not a transformational experience, one pointed out that it could have been because their home school district had done a substantial amount of equity work, so the program, by contrast, "just didn't get that deep." Another BIPOC student believed that simply being a school administrator had done more to prepare them for leading with an equity lens than the program had. In addition, a third acknowledged that the programs' limited impact was likely because "professors are trying to balance an entry point" for doctoral students who come to the program with a wide range of knowledge and racial equity preparation.

Critical to future racial work in this program, specifically and more broadly in all educational leadership programs, would be to zero in on what needed to be added for those who completed their studies without this impact. No doubt, BIPOC students bring to this and other programs a lengthy "head start" in terms of racial equity awareness; they remain students in such a program and, as such, deserve a level of benefit commensurate with their White counterparts. It could take the form of curricular programming that considers tools necessary for BIPOC leaders to move equity forward with whatever staff demographic they might have, i.e., how do they approach racial equity with predominantly White staff, predominantly BIPOC staff, or a balance of the two? This way, program faculty can be assured that all students will return to their schools with newfound skills and implementation strategies.

White students

It is no surprise that the experience and benefits of navigating this race-focused program were different for White students than for BIPOC students. No racial equity initiative can eliminate the "understanding gap" between the lived experiences of BIPOC and White students in our society. That said, certain similarities arose in the data. As the BIPOC students did, the White focus groups acknowledged that their learnings in the program left them no option: they collectively said they had to stay engaged and actively work to move equity forward in the schools in which they worked, noting as one White student did that "once you see it, you can't *not* see it regarding systemic inequities, and just seeing the problems with more clarity really does help to stay engaged." The White students also clearly recognized a necessary component of staying engaged was working to impact others, specifically their work colleagues. It is crucial, albeit perhaps obvious, to note here that all of the participants in the study are projecting these discoveries and commitment to use their new awareness and skills in their contexts – no two of which are alike. However, they see their new skills, transformation, and learning as applicable and valuable to their lived context, a conclusion that validates the specific means through which this doctoral program is delivering its race equity focus.

As expected, clear distinctions arose between the BIPOC and White students regarding how they felt about moving forward as equity leaders. White students were concerned that external forces could circumvent their efforts: reticent staff, backlash from colleagues, colleagues who do not have the same knowledge base, and a lack of support from their institutions. White students felt more strongly that they needed that additional support to bring change. These concerns among white participants need to be examined closely through two lenses: first, while it would be naive to think White leaders have a more difficult road in bringing race equity work into their schools than BIPOC leaders, it is worth noting that for White leaders, the challenge of decentering whiteness not only for themselves but for each member of their staff poses a complexity in that those leaders must first find and acknowledge all the places where whiteness is centered in their leadership. It is not until that task is complete that, to reiterate the work of Niccolls et al. (2021), White leaders can turn their attention toward moving their staff forward. BIPOC leaders have been alert to the centering of whiteness all their lives, and "sense-making" of that difference for White leaders must come first.

The degree to which the program would transform their leadership was consistently more significant for the White participants. White students mentioned being aware of their whiteness and privilege for the first time, as well as the role of whiteness in the systemic issues present in their schools. One White student said that, before the program, she had "never had to worry about this; it's just been outside my bubble," so the program had led her to transformative conversations with family and colleagues. Specific to the program's transformative impact in their workplace, other White participants described their increased awareness of systemic issues in school, how they were compelled to look more closely at policies and push others to do the same in hopes of changing them, how they became voices for equity in their schools, and how they were shown how deeply racial socialization, or "the way things are" impacts the world in which they live and work. Noteworthy again here is the nature of the transformation. While the program should have given White students the tools to work racial equity change in their districts, perhaps the real value of the program for white students is the birth of awareness – of privilege, of whiteness, of the centering of whiteness, and of the racial socialization that permeated in all of their districts.

It is fair for us also to acknowledge that there were participants in the White group as well who did not feel the program better prepared them to lead through the lens of racial equity. Some faculty members did not emphasize racial equity leadership development as much as others, leaving gaps in students' preparedness, and as BIPOC students had noted, the delivery and depth of racial equity had to be considered through the lens of multiple students in widely varied places on their equity journey. Perhaps other than the obvious need for leaders of this program to evaluate continually its impact on all students, not just a specific subset, this may beg for this program and others like it to gather data from its doctoral students at the onset of the program – data that would allow faculty to have an understanding of where their students are on the continuum of racial equity learning when they start, and better individualize and tailor programming to ensure a benefit to all students, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all delivery protocol.

International BIPOC students

One of the more unexpected results of our study was the way and degree to which the international BIPOC students experienced revelations and transformations as educational leaders due to the program. These students left their home countries and came to the United States as adults to attend graduate programs. While this transition was already ripe with challenges, the most surprising part of the culture shock for the international students was that they were now considered "people of color." Their racial identity had not previously been an issue in their home countries as tribal, clan, class, or religious identity had been more critical ways of categorizing people. As adults, they were learning to navigate the racial landscape and history of the United States – something their American BIPOC classmates had been doing since birth. One international BIPOC student spoke of their transformation as a direct by-product of their conversations with American students of color. The doctoral program afforded the international BIPOC students not only a place to learn and discover this new self but also a safe space to unpack some of their newly racialized experiences with American BIPOC students. They began to recognize patterns in how they were treated in society and learned that this treatment had a name – *microaggressions*. Indeed, it behooves graduate program faculty to be prepared to take this new learning for international BIPOC students further and to address this nuance that would otherwise not exist in graduate programs not populated by students from other countries.

Transformational Learning

Mezirow (2000) based his description of transformative learning on his constructivist assumptions. He held that meaning was built on experiences and perspectives, and these perspectives could change if challenged, constituting learning. Feeling more prepared as a leader and being transformed are closely related ideas but are not the same. While indeed focused on preparing its students, the doctoral program is also designed to give educational leaders the skills and the confidence to lead through the lens of racial consciousness. To revisit our initial research purpose and questions as to

whether the education and experience in our Educational Leadership doctoral program offered students the experiences necessary to transform their thinking and skills enough for them to consider themselves racially conscious leaders, we compared our findings to Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory.

As previously stated, the White participants seemed to undergo different experiences from the doctoral program than the BIPOC students for various reasons. The most likely explanation is that people of color in America have had to navigate their lives with race being at the forefront of their thoughts and actions–a conclusion that the research confirms specific to BIPOC students' pursuit of doctoral degrees (Barker, 2016; Blockett et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2004). This varied response between White and BIPOC groups is telling as well in that the lived experiences of the groups suggest starkly different realities of the potential threat to their well-being as change agents. This additional stress caused by being an agent of change in a school building or district layered with the lived BIPOC experience is well-documented. To wit, Smith et al. (2007) coined the expression *Racial Battle Fatigue* to describe this stress, which can manifest in numerous psychological and physiological ways, all of which point to the importance of ongoing self-care and support, as the BIPOC participants in this study describe. Because of this and from a very young age, people of color have developed the awareness, stamina, and coping mechanisms necessary to survive and thrive, not only because they *must* but also because, as the research points out, they are *expected* to (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Felder et al., 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Race continues to be a constant consideration in most decision-making, but normalizing the thought processes, struggles, and strategies for effective leadership was helpful. There was a common desire for relationships, racial affinity groups, or any venue to gather with other people of color to talk, compare notes, or decompress. This sentiment is reminiscent of the title of Beverly Daniel Tatum's 1997 book, *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* Not all BIPOC students claimed to be transformed by the doctoral program – mainly because they had learned aspects of racial equity leadership from other experiences. However, those BIPOC students who claimed to have been transformed by the program noted their newfound understanding of how to *play within the system* to lead to systemic change. This understanding among BIPOC students was critical for overcoming the hesitancy of addressing issues of race and equity that Gildersleeve (2011) found inhibited substantive racial equity work. These students demonstrated several elements of Mezirow's (2000) phases of transformative learning, most notably the dilemma of trying to lead while being a person of color, self-examining their feelings of fear or anger, and building their competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. Additionally, they presented some form of each of the other phases.

Recently arrived international students of color have endured the culture shock of a newly adopted identity. As adults, they have had to learn that they are seen and treated as people of color because, as Loo (2019) points out, they have likely been part of the majority in their home countries and have not been subjected to racial biases and discrimination until they arrived in the United States. It is a "baptism by fire" in that international students suddenly do not have the luxury of ignoring race and must learn to quickly navigate racism in an American context while simultaneously trying to read, write, and speak academic English and establish or maintain a work/life/school balance. By conversing with American BIPOC students and friends, the international students of color heard stories, explanations, and advice. This information confirmed some of the required readings depicting their experiences and how research could be applied to develop their leadership further. From our point of view, there seemed to be a hopefulness about these students. While they became more aware of – and perplexed by – America's racial issues, clearly a disorienting dilemma, they seemed eager to explore options for new roles, relationships, actions, and some form of the other phases of transformative learning. This eagerness was certainly in contrast to the findings of Taylor (2007), who concluded this dilemma was a significant obstacle to international students' pursuit of doctoral degrees.

White students, many lacking in racialized lived experiences, have primarily not needed to examine their lives or leadership through the lens of race and perhaps had even been erroneously encouraged

not to do so for fear of inciting racism. For many, discovering how race and racism are deeply interwoven in the American fabric was a hard truth to hear and accept. White students, as their awareness of White privilege and how it shapes their leadership increased, as it did for students in the work of Davis and Livingstone (2016), had to often "unlearn" what they had been socialized to know. This unlearning is the epitome of transformative learning. Taylor and Cranton (2012) credit Mezirow in their explanation of what is necessary to change a person's mind or challenge their socialization:

> Mezirow (1991) is explicit in describing transformative learning theory as being based on constructivist assumptions. Meaning is constructed through experience, and our perceptions of those experiences and future experiences are seen through a lens of the perspectives developed from past experiences. Learning occurs when an alternative perspective calls into question a previously held, perhaps uncritically assimilated perspective. (p. 8)

Additionally, when trying to realize their racial learning and leading, White students often experienced tacit resistance from other White people or systems who preferred the status quo. They had to overcome the natural urge to avoid change and discomfort and constantly reevaluate their motives and practices to remain engaged in racial equity work. White students in our study exhibited their disorienting dilemma in several ways, which required them to sit with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. Further, they had to address the critical assessment of their socialized assumptions as they continued to present themselves. They, too, showed aspects of the other phases of transformation. Important to note, however, as Olsen (2019) found in her study, that while White students underwent significant disorientation, their discomfort did not manifest as invalidation of the perspectives of students of color.

LIMITATIONS

Every study leaves space for further consideration, and this one is no exception. Our choice of a focus group method resulted in rich, honest data from the study's participants, particularly our BIPOC students. Group interviews allowed them to explore their lived experience as members of marginalized populations in ways they previously had not. While we fully acknowledge that not all people of color have the same racialized experience, many of the BIPOC students in this study chose to self-select or request BIPOC group work in their doctoral cohorts. Participants in this safe space created a synergistic effect as they listened to others' stories, generating novel insights in ways that might not have happened with individual interviews. We believe this truth made the focus group interviews the best means of gathering the data we were pursuing.

We acknowledge that focus groups allowed limited time for participants to contribute to the discussion and data collection. The group setting could cause some participants to hold back part of their truth when they may be less hesitant to speak openly in an individual interview. This has the potential to limit the richness and completeness of the data. Each participant in this study had an average of 15-19 minutes (depending on group size) to share their responses and stories. Other types of equally significant data could have come from employing a different method, such as a varied data collection approach that includes focus groups and individual follow-up interviews.

CONCLUSION

Faculty at colleges and universities nationwide are guiding educational professionals to advanced degrees. Still, as stated in the literature review, only a tiny percentage of those programs have a course on cultural diversity or racial oppression, let alone a focus on racial equity across their courses and throughout their program (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). It is not an overstatement for us to assert that this statistic means graduates of these programs are not as prepared as they could be to confront and address issues of racial equity in their schools once they have their degrees.

A program like the one where this qualitative study took place, while well ahead of most educational leadership doctoral programs across the country in terms of its focus on race, is still on its journey. While many of its participants spoke of significant growth and transformation as educational leaders, others attested to feeling minimally impacted and not significantly better prepared to lead their schools with a racial equity focus. Each student brings a different life experience to the program; therefore, each participant will measure the program's impact differently. Given how many leaders it has transformed, there is reason to be optimistic about the program. However, there is also cause for critical reflection about how to make more of an educational revelation and impact on BIPOC students.

Our participants' varied experiences engaging in integrated racial equity work germane to the course curriculum ranged from being very present in specific courses to a limited or non-existent presence in others, which may stem from a variety of factors, including disciplinary cultures as well as faculty values and expectations (Bryan et al., 2012). The disappointment in the lack of transformational experiences, particularly for some of the BIPOC students, and specifically the Black students, while unfortunate, is nevertheless instructive. A cohort of educators in any academic program will bring a wide range of knowledge, learnings, experiences, tools, and expertise to that program. This finding reinforces the importance of looking for ways to differentiate instruction within the racial consciousness and leadership focus to meet each participant where they are and provide meaningful new learning at the appropriate level. It will require a commitment among the program faculty to build effective relationships with the program's participants to locate their students on the racial equity learning continuum accurately. In our estimation, doing so will place it as a model for other educational leadership programs to follow suit.

We agree with Bryan et al. (2012) that for doctoral students in education to be truly prepared for their roles, their institution must prepare them with racial literacy; thus, we conclude that critical conversations about race should be intentionally integrated into doctoral coursework in education and educational leadership. We suggest that schools of education not only formalize the integration of racial literacy education into doctoral coursework but also ensure that the integration is done with fidelity by all faculty while being mindful of the racialized labor tendencies that rely on BIPOC students to shoulder the responsibility of educating White students and faculty about race. Further, we recommend that the quality and content of that integration of racial literacy and its practical applications be reviewed regularly to ensure its ongoing value for the benefit of the students in the program and those students and staff with whom they work in the schools and programs they lead.

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