**EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSION:**
**OPENING DOORS FOR DIVERSITY**


by

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**Abstract**

This study invited principals and vice principals who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups to share their perspectives on representation in educational leadership. The goal was to uncover supports which helped them in their pursuit of a leadership role and the barriers they faced. Using a questionnaire and follow-up interviews, a qualitative analysis was conducted focusing on the experiences of school-based administrators in the Evergreen School District in British Columbia. The respondents shared thoughts and feelings on discrimination, stereotypes, double standards, misrepresentation, and inequitable representation. They discussed why representation, role models, and mentorship mattered. They also shared how authenticity, resilience, a growth mindset, and relationship building contributed to their success in becoming a school-based administrator. The stories shared can inform and empower others who aspire to administrative leadership roles in education.

## Preface

This capstone paper is the original, unpublished, and independent work of equal authors Amanda Ballard, Lily Kamarn, and Roxanne Pope, completed under the supervision of Dr. Wendy Poole and Dr. Marilynne Waithman. The study described in this paper was granted approval by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board under the certificate number H19-03328.

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## Dedication

Roxanne dedicates this work to her village of loving caregivers, including her parents, Jack and Joan, and her aunts and uncles. Their unwavering and ever-present belief in her potential will always be with her. This capstone could not have been completed without the continual support of her friends and colleagues. She is grateful to her devoted and loving husband Kristopher and her sons, Nolan and Reid, for their daily encouragement. This work is dedicated to them as well as her parents Marty and Susan, and brother Craig.

Lily dedicates this work to her husband Jonathan who always believed in her, and her daughters, Maiya and Zara, who show their love every day. She would also like to thank her parents, Tippy and Tina Mah, for modeling perseverance and life balance; her brother, Billy; sisters-in-law, Sarah and Saveen; and her mother and father-in-law, Jackie and Harminder for their unwavering support.

Amanda would like to dedicate this work to her loving parents.

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**1.1 Background & Context**

When students see their social and cultural identities reflected in their teachers, they are more empowered to celebrate their diversity, experience a sense of self-worth and become confident individuals which contribute to their own individual and collective well-being (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Accordingly, the researchers believe teachers will also be empowered to pursue formal leadership positions when those leading and mentoring are a reflection of themselves. This is of particular importance for traditionally disenfranchised individuals who may perceive that existing power structures benefit those with social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 as cited in Pajak & Green, 2003). A reflection of diversity within leadership removes the preconception that leadership within education is reserved for a particular group of individuals, most notably men, regardless of skill and experience (Fitzgerald, 2006; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011; Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017; Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan & Newcomb, 2017).

Research on efforts to promote members of underrepresented communities into leadership (Coleman & Campbell-Stevens, 2010; Davis, Gooden & Bowers, 2017; Lee, 2019) as well as examinations of the personal experiences of underrepresented educational leaders (Lopez, 2017; Williams, 2017) highlight a lack of mentors they can identify with. Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli's (2009) study of diversity among Canadian educators demonstrates the difficulties in gathering statistics relating to educators and diversity, but also documents a crucial shift in Canada's demographics:

Canada's population continues to become more racially diverse as current immigration

and Canadian birth patterns change the face of the population. Over the past four decades, the percentage of "visible minority" residents has increased dramatically (Statistics Canada, 2005b). As the diversity of the general population has increased, so has the student population, particularly in the metropolitan areas (Harvey & Houle, 2006). Although much is known about the composition of the general and student populations, less is known about Canada's educators...the racialized teacher population has not kept pace with the racialized student and general populations. In fact, it appears to be falling further and further behind (p. 593).

These same statistics and conclusions, while not specifically addressed in the literature, also apply to educational leaders. Most commonly, diversity with respect to leadership is referenced in terms of gender and the underrepresentation of women in leadership (Robinson et al., 2017). Diversity is also addressed in terms of leaders needing training in how to respond to diverse student populations and promote equity and social justice in schools (Bogotch, 2015; Gale, 2000; Ibrahim, 2015; Ryan, 2006, 2015; Shields, 2010). Very little research exists regarding the effects of diversity among those in positions of leadership (Lopez, 2003; Niesche, 2016). Nonetheless, studies have shown positive effects of having both teachers and leaders that are representative of their diverse student populations (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015).

## 1.2 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of vice-principals and principals who self-identify as members of visible or invisible underrepresented groups regarding opportunities and challenges faced when moving into their current leadership role. Highlighting and examining the experiences and successes of district administrators may encourage and

empower others who identify as underrepresented to move into leadership positions, specifically school-based administrative positions. An investigation of this nature offers an opportunity to educate and empower others with similar ambitions.

**1.3 Research Questions**

1. How can the experiences of school-based administrators who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups inform and empower others who aspire to the role?

   a. What do school-based administrators from underrepresented groups identify as factors which encouraged them to pursue this leadership role?

   b. What do school-based administrators from underrepresented groups identify as barriers to achieving their position?

2. How can leaders encourage members of underrepresented groups in their pursuit of school-based administrative roles?

3. What do school-based administrators from underrepresented groups believe the school district could do to achieve greater representation within leadership positions?

**1.4 Positionality of Researchers**

The three researchers have a mutual interest in equity and diversity in formal educational leadership. We have diverse backgrounds and self-identify with one or more underrepresented groups—one researcher identifies as a racially underrepresented, another grew up in poverty, and all three are women. Therefore, the researchers acknowledge their intersectionality[1] and the ways in which their lived experiences shape their beliefs and biases as well as the impact it can have

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[1] Intersectionality is a theoretical perspective that states "social justice movements must consider all the intersections of identity, privilege and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective." It examines and critically reflects upon "our gender, class, race, sexuality, and…more – that inform our experiences in life and our interactions in the world" (Oluo, 2018, p. 74-75).

on their research. It is of utmost importance for individuals to examine their intersectionality in order to "acknowledge [the] advantages [that] may have kept [them] from first seeing the disadvantages others face" (Oluo, 2018, p. 78). We recognize our identities and experiences have shaped our values, beliefs, assumptions and biases.

Personal experiences and perceptions are powerful. As women we have been socialized towards certain beliefs as they relate to authority and management. Our own experiences have led to internalized beliefs about women in leadership. We are informed by research attesting to a low representation of women in formal educational leadership positions. The research has also pointed to how systemic and perceived barriers have further perpetuated a homogenous replication of those in leadership (Robinson et al., 2017). The research affirms our lived experiences. We will need to maintain an awareness of these experiences and how they shape our assumptions and interpretations throughout the research process. We also acknowledge that we hold a western, colonial perspective as settlers on the shared traditional territories of the Katzie, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, Qayqayt, Kwikwetlem, and Coast Salish Peoples which impacts our positionality as researchers. Consequently, a critical theory lens will inform our research.

In their roles as teachers, the researchers have witnessed the diversity within their schools and community. They recognize that their teacher colleagues who identify with visible and invisible underrepresented groups reflect some of the diversity within the student population. These include members of the LGBTQIA2+ community, individuals of lower socio-economic status, immigrants or individuals living with a disability. It appears that representation is greater at the school level than at higher levels of leadership. In spite of their education, experience, curricular knowledge and encouragement from mentors, teachers from underrepresented groups may continue to internalize a belief that advanced leadership is reserved for those of exceptional

character and ability, and for those possessing the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the white, male, heterosexual, Christian middle class. While these values and beliefs are self-imposed, they are affirmed by a lifetime of socialization that has privileged certain groups over others (Pajak & Green, 2003).

Our hope is to empower underrepresented educators by revealing that they are not alone in their experiences and the barriers they may have encountered. Historically, underrepresented groups have been disenfranchised by a lack of representation and a system of institutionalized oppression. Opening up spaces for more voices in schools and leadership positions recognizes the past while continually committing to a just and equitable society. The educational gains of this research are to raise awareness among underrepresented educators pursuing formal leadership positions as well as those hiring for these positions. Our research will provide the perspectives of underrepresented groups to those hiring for leadership positions. Greater representation at a leadership level will provide a wider variety of perspectives and experiences to be present in policy and decision-making processes. This will ultimately benefit students, teachers, administrators in the school district as well as the community.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Our research examines the issue of underrepresentation in educational leadership. We have conducted a review of the literature on representation in educational leadership and found that educational leaders are not reflective of the diversity among teacher nor student populations. The review begins with research that shows the positive effects of representation in schools, then we explore the leadership pipeline and norms of traditional leadership as obstacles preventing members of underrepresented groups from seeking and achieving leadership positions. The next theme examines several studies suggesting that current leaders can work with those who are underrepresented to identify and break down the barriers and fight for a democratic and equitable education system that better reflects the diversity in our society. We end our review by identifying the gaps in the existing research and situating our proposed research study in the context of the existing literature.

### 2.1 Positive effects of representation in schools

Research has shown that representation among Canadian teachers and leaders is not representative of the increasing diversity of the general population (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As student populations become more diverse, the need for representation is increasing. While the normative impact of representation is positive, research on the effects of representation in schools is limited (Meier, Wrinkle & Polinard, 1999; Pitts, 2005).

The theory of representative bureaucracy posits that the presence of underrepresented bureaucrats in public agencies can improve outcomes for clients who share their identity (Atkins, Fertig & Wilkins, 2014). There is evidence that representation in public agencies, including schools, results in more just and equitable public policies. Niesche (2016) states that

"schools and leaders' practices have, often despite good intentions, resulted in inequitable and sometimes discriminatory outcomes for students of a variety of backgrounds" (p. 151). Solomon (1997) suggests that teachers from underrepresented groups can serve as representatives, speaking on behalf of students who share their identity, educating other teachers, and dispelling myths and negative stereotypes. In his study, Solomon (1997) found that teachers of colour have the opportunity to be the multicultural and antiracist education "experts" in their schools leading to more culturally responsive teaching. Teachers from underrepresented groups are aware of the concerns of students who share their identity and therefore better able to advocate for just and equitable pedagogy and policies. Furthermore, teachers from underrepresented groups report that they were inspired by role models (Campbell-Stevens, 2009; Lee, 2019), and are motivated to be role models for others (Solomon, 1997).

The presence of teachers who share their identity has been shown to improve both educational and non-educational outcomes for students (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015). There is also research to show that the presence of underrepresented groups in school leadership improves educational outcomes for students of the same group (Pitts, 2005). Representation increases school connectedness for students from underrepresented groups which leads to higher grades and increased levels of wellbeing (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014).

## 2.2 The leadership pipeline

There is greater diversity in the principalship within elementary schools compared to secondary schools. This lack of diversity within secondary schools is in line with what Chan, Ngai and Choi (2016) found, drawing upon the work of Blackmore, 1999; Chisholm, 2001; Deem, 2003; and Smulyan, 2000, confirming that "strong and competent school leaders are

usually expected to be goal oriented, instrumental, competitive, assertive and totally

committed to their work—all stereotypes that favour men and masculinity" (p. 195). These

stereotypical perceptions could explain why there are more female principals in elementary

schools. The nurturing and caring stereotypes ascribed to females are perceived to be more

suitable for working with young children in elementary schools, whereas these same qualities are

seen as too soft to be effective within secondary schools. For the position of a secondary

principal, stereotypical masculine leadership characteristics are traditionally more favorable.

These characteristics include having a tough physical appearance and the ability to handle

teenagers who may challenge authority. These stereotypes further perpetuate the "gendered

division of labour—that men manage and that women teach—supports tradition, and therefore

patriarchy" (Blackmore, 2010, p. 54).

Research has found that inequitable pathways to the principalship are not explained

by *systematic* differences in the process of hiring. Instead, research has shown that those from

underrepresented groups moving into leadership positions are impacted by inequitable hiring

practices stemming from *systemic* bias. (Davis et al., 2017; Fuller, Reynolds & O'Doherty, 2016;

Myung, Loeb, & Horngal, 2011). Leadership paths continue to be shaped by stereotypes as

"women and men of color still have lower odds of becoming a principal relative to white men"

(Fuller, Hollingworth & An, 2019, p. 147). Principals, most of whom are white males, tend to

"disproportionately tap teachers who are male and share their ethnicity" (Myung et al., 2011, p.

696). It has been found that often white males "are less likely to encourage teachers of color to

enter the leadership pipeline" (Fuller et al., as cited in Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, p. 137). In

many schools where the majority of students are of colour, the teaching staff continues to be

primarily white (Pollard, 1997). By the same token, although the teaching staff is dominated

by white females, principals continue to be white, male and middle class (Pollard, 1997; Williams, 2017).

Informal networks make a huge impact on who is encouraged to pursue leadership positions and place those in underrepresented groups in a disadvantaged position. Those in leadership positions often hold prejudicial stereotypes of preferred traits of potential leaders. This prejudice is often based on strong masculine cultural stereotypes (Fitzgerald, 2006; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011; Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017). Women may internalize these stereotypes; thus, even when women possess outstanding qualifications for leadership, they often perceive that they cannot be a leader (Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016; Koenig et al., 2011; Pollard, 1997; Reed, 2012). For aspiring leaders, these perceived deficits also deter them from pursuing formal leadership positions. In spite of their education, qualifications, experience and encouragement from mentors, they may hold an internalized belief that leadership is reserved for those of exceptional character and ability–most notably those possessing the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the middle class (Coleman, 2012; Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017; Williams, 2017). The overall effect is to create a sense of disempowerment (Bogotch, 2015; Ryan, 2006).

As a result, those from underrepresented groups often feel the need to work harder to get noticed for their leadership capabilities. Knowing that they do not fit the leader stereotype, they perceive a need to prove they can do the job. In particular, Reed (2012) found that "women with families tend to work even harder to 'prove' themselves and their worthiness to be in leadership roles," however "when men in this study were asked how they justified their leadership roles, they could not even relate to the question" (p. 41). This type of pressure has also been found in other literature where LGBTQIA2+ teachers have put more than the average amount of time

and energy into their teaching, "often over-performing in order to develop a positive professional reputation as an outstanding teacher or teacher leader" (Lee, 2019, p. 3). Reed's (2012) study found that participants felt a constant need to show they were the best at what they did in order to get noticed; and, when they had thoughts of pursuing leadership positions, they felt they should just settle, appreciate and be grateful for their current position. Although research has mostly been done on the intersectionality of race and gender, as opposed to invisible underrepresented groups, the barriers of bias and stereotypes still apply.

For individuals who self-identify as underrepresented, a lifetime of discrimination, racism and oppression results in "years of unconscious assimilation and socialization" (Brookfield, 2014, p. 93). In effect, they are unaware of the 'hidden' norms and practices that place them at a disadvantage (Cruz-Gonzales, Segovia & Lucena, 2019). These may be embedded in traditional hierarchies, hiring policies and even coded language. Rather than identifying and recognizing forms of institutional and systemic oppression, individuals blame themselves for their difficulties (Bonnycastle, 2011; Picower, 2013).

Mentors who are role models can inspire prospective leaders by demonstrating that these challenges can be overcome. However, mentors and role models for underrepresented leaders are scarce (Thorpe, 2018; Quilantán & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004; Jack & Lobovsky, 2016). Researchers have recognized that mentorship also aids underrepresented aspiring leaders in navigating the leadership pipeline (Ogunbawo, 2012; Coleman & Campbell-Stevens, 2010; Lee, 2019). Several school districts and organizations have implemented programs and incentives to recruit leaders from underrepresented groups, such as "The Courageous Leaders" mentorship program for LGBTQIA2+ in London, England (Lee, 2019), the "Aspiring Racialized Leaders Mentorship Program" in Mississauga, Canada (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016), and the "Investing

in Diversity" program for Black and Minority Ethnic Leaders in London and Leeds, England (Coleman & Campbell-Stephens, 2010). These programs aim at breaking down the systemic barriers and internalized oppression that deter potential leaders. Among those who participated in "The Courageous Leaders" program, most reported that they felt more open, confident, and relaxed after participating in the mentorship program and the majority of participants in the cohort were promoted into positions of senior leadership in schools (Lee, 2019). "Investing in Diversity," funded by the National College for School Leadership, explored the challenges faced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) educators in their pursuit of leadership roles. For participants in all these programs, seeing their identities mirrored in role models and mentors helped them to recognize their own leadership qualities, which enabled them to aspire to leadership roles (Coleman & Campbell-Stevens, 2010).

Although there are advantages to these specialized programs, there are some drawbacks. While these leadership programs provide underrepresented groups with more equitable opportunities, those in the programs could potentially feel inferior if they have the perception that they need to rely on a special program in order to achieve a leadership role. Participants in Jack and Lobovsky's (2016) study were conflicted in their opinions of the programs. From the perspective of an outsider looking in, they recognized that the programs could be viewed as discriminatory because they reinforce different pathways for different groups; and, because of "colleagues' claims of favoritism in explaining their promotions, many BME leaders viewed specialized preparation programs as fodder for ongoing criticism" (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016, p. 174). Suggestions have been made that if these programs reinforce "different career trajectories for individuals based on their race, then the preparation programs themselves are discriminatory" (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016, p. 174). Others add that "merit-based promotion processes

that reproduce historic patterns of glass ceiling advancement for certain ethno-racial, gender, religious, or other identities signal the presence of conscious bias in the process itself, or an uncritical bias in how merit is defined" (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016, p. 182). On the other hand, without the programs, inequalities in leadership roles would continue with "little chance of significant change to the persistent imbalance between the numbers of successful white and BME school leaders" (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016 p. 174).

Transformational leadership often focuses on transforming the behaviour of participants rather than on the underlying organizational structures and cultures. This provides more reason as to why there needs to be a focus on identifying and empowering leaders who can undertake critical work with regards to race, gender and how privilege works (Blackmore, 2010). Fundamentally, it seems that the focus should not be on implementing customized programs for 'the Other.' Such programs make 'the Other' obvious and place them in a position of being expected to explain their difference. Thus, before deciding whether these programs work as they are intended, it may also be useful to recognize "the Other within ourselves; that is, learn to know ourselves before learning about the other" (Blackmore, 2010, p. 56). More importantly, the focus needs to be on providing opportunities for all leaders to partake in competence-based programs that focus on the development of the cross-cultural skills necessary to deliver multicultural, anti-racist education and address other equity issues (Blackmore, 2010; Lopez, 2003).

## 2.3 Leadership identity: Normalization of underrepresentation

Rather than serving the majority, institutions, including schools, are designed to replicate and advance the interests of the dominant class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 as cited in Pajak & Green, 2003). Consequently, traditionally marginalized individuals face challenges as

they attempt to move into leadership positions. Those with the cultural, social and economic capital of the middle and upper classes are privileged while traditionally marginalized individuals encounter institutional and systemic barriers (Barakette & Cleghorn, 2000; Gale, 2000; Ryan, 2006; Osborne, 2008; Pajak & Green, 2003).

Attempts to disrupt systemic inequity with more equitable practices highlight entrenched systemic practices. In their study of community engagement and democratic leadership practices, Ryan and Rottendam (2009) found that, when challenged, leaders drew upon the status quo, in this instance, traditional hierarchies of leadership, to legitimize their authority. The study concluded that efforts aimed at providing inclusive, equitable practices ultimately "[mask] more subtle controlling practices and [marginalize] already-disenfranchised groups" (p. 476). Additionally, Lopez's (2017) autoethnographic study of her experiences as a racialized, immigrant woman and educational administrator in Canada speaks to both the internalized as well as external mechanisms that act upon leaders who identify as historically marginalized. While her racialized identity provided experiential knowledge that assisted her in supporting the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students, she often experienced resistance. Ultimately, stereotypes were enacted to undermine her authority, expertise and effectiveness. The values of the dominant group took precedence at the expense of the pursuit of inclusive and equitable praxis.

Institutionalized and systemic forces continue to work against aspiring and current leaders whose identities are underrepresented. There are many ways in which the dominant classes unknowingly marginalize members of underrepresented groups (Brookefield, 2014; Ryan & Rottendam, 2009). Several studies identify various ways in which stereotypes impact educational leadership. Coleman (2012) noted "a general tendency to apply [a white,

middle class] stereotype to leadership" (p. 597). The effect is not only a stereotype that "perpetuates existing perceptions of power and authority" (Fitzgerald, 2006), but also the othering of any individual who fits outside the norm (Coleman, 2012). The overall effect of this stereotype was pressure to fulfill the roles and expectations of the leadership stereotype, resulting in a change in values and beliefs for the leader or a disconnect with oneself (Cruz-Gonzales, Segovia & Lucena, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2006; Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017). Further, the examination of identity fails to acknowledge that individuals are complex, with a multitude of overlapping identities (Cruz-Gonzalez, Segovia, & Lucena, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2006; Lee, 2019; Oluo, 2018). Current characterizations of effective leadership, therefore, are reduced to a singular characterization that fails to acknowledge the diversity among educators or the student populations they serve.

**2.4 Fostering leadership capacity: a social justice lens**

Schools are particularly powerful sites to both replicate but also change society. Therefore, a social justice perspective not only serves those who are traditionally marginalized within the system, but also empowers them to disrupt and effect change. Rather than attributing failure to succeed within a system on individuals, a social justice approach challenges the systems and conditions within our society that perpetuate inequity (Bonnycastle, 2011; Niesche, 2016; Picower, 2013). Social justice education holds educators responsible for identifying, challenging and removing existing forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression (Ryan, 2015; Lee, 2019). This perspective is premised on the belief that a society is only as healthy as its most vulnerable members. In this way, educational leaders are not only responsible for removing institutionalized forms of oppression for their students, but also for their colleagues (Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017). Social justice education calls upon educational leaders within

the system to use their privilege to open and hold space for traditionally marginalized groups to be represented and heard (Bogotch, 2015; Ryan, 2006).

Some researchers confirm the perspective that the pursuit of social justice and equity in schools positively impacts all students, most notably those who are traditionally marginalized (Crockett, 2002; Ibrahim, 2015; Lopez, 2017). It is our assertion that the pursuit of greater representation among school-based administrators will have a similar effect. Coleman's (2012) review of leadership and diversity coverage in the past 40 years of *Educational Management Leadership and Administration* speaks to both the concept of leadership for diversity and leadership with diversity. The latter speaks to the impact greater representation has on staff and students, while leadership for diversity aims to increase the number of people from underrepresented groups present among educational leaders. The cumulative effect is an educational system that "[values] difference [among its educators] rather than trying to eliminate it" (Coleman, 2012, p. 605). Greater representation among educational leaders will not only result from challenging and removing systemic barriers, but also from affirming the lived experiences of individuals from underrepresented groups.

An investigation of representation among educational leaders is not expected to end the lack of diversity. Its goal is to achieve greater diversity among leaders as a means to inform practices and policy that will result in a more equitable, democratic and socially just system. In sum, a social justice view of educational leadership acknowledges the existence of systemic inequities and its effects with an intention to develop and support initiatives aimed to redress those inequities (Shields, 2010). Most importantly, the intent is not to criticize individuals currently holding positions of authority. Rather, it is a systemic perspective that "not only works for the good of every individual in the school system; at its heart, it has the potential to work

for the common good of society as well" (Shields, 2010, p. 583). The goal is to establish a system that is democratic, equitable and reflective of all its stakeholders.

## 2.5 Overcoming barriers

The proverbial ceiling preventing underrepresented groups from rising to higher levels of leadership is a reminder that true diversity is not the norm. In order to tap and break the ceiling, one must learn to overcome barriers, which requires knowing what the current norms are, adopting and navigating through them. This comes with many challenges for those in underrepresented groups because the norms can go against one's own way of doing things. For example, cultural behaviors that might go against existing leadership stereotypes include "speaking too quietly (a sign of weakness) or too loudly (a sign of forcefulness), the requirement to self-promote (seen as shameful in some cultures), and speaking with gestures (a para-linguistic norm in some cultures but outright discouraged during promotion interviews in the district)" (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016, p. 177). The same study found that racialized participants who were not native speakers of English felt apprehensive about their accents and saw it as a leadership shortcoming.

In order to disrupt the status quo, it is imperative to learn about how others have been able to overcome barriers. Pollard (1997) has found that those who were able to break the glass ceiling focused on playing an active role to counter stereotypes; having high confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles; and using their race, gender and/or class to be role models and advocates for their students. Instead of being defeated by the barriers that faced them due to their race, gender and class, they used it as a basis for empathizing with their students (Pollard, 1997). They found themselves better able to relate to their students' experiences which brought a unique perspective to their job (Pollard, 1997). These coping and resiliency strategies, along

with resisting a defensive perspective, were the key to escaping oppression. Essentially, they focused on a strength-based mindset.

Based on our experiences, the leadership pipeline of underrepresented groups is not often talked about because it is an emotionally and politically charged topic. In disclosing internal and external challenges, uncomfortable, potentially traumatic memories may be recalled. There could also be fear of jeopardizing one's position by speaking out and disrupting the status quo. However, uncovering how principals and vice-principals from underrepresented groups have overcome barriers is imperative to helping others achieve leadership positions and push the boundaries of hiring beyond tokenism. True diversity can only occur when one clearly sees and feels a reflection of themselves in those around them.

## 2.6 Summary

There is limited scholarship focusing on the issue of underrepresentation in school leadership. While the rationale for diversity in leadership is well supported, the impact of diversity in leadership has yet to be fully explored.

First, although gender discrepancies within leadership positions have been well researched, there have been limited studies done with those identifying as LGBTQIA2+ (Lee, 2019). These groups also face challenges and barriers perpetuated by leadership norms and stereotypes. Seeking to name these challenges and barriers is the first step to creating safe and inclusive communities and encouraging the pursuit of leadership.

Second, there is a gap in the literature in relation to race and leadership. The paucity of research on the representation of racialized groups in education is most notable in Canada. Other jurisdictions like the USA and the UK have sought to increase representation through mentorship programs and financial incentives for racialized educators (Coleman & Campbell-Stevens,

2010; Jack & Lobovsky, 2016). Despite Canada's multicultural identity and the progressive policies of the current federal government, the issues of racism and inequality are very real challenges in our communities and in our schools. The extent of underrepresentation in educational leadership in Canada needs to be investigated systematically as a first step towards understanding the reasons racialized groups are underrepresented. Furthermore, addressing racism and inequality requires a willingness to examine the ways in which the whiteness of schools has historically disadvantaged racialized groups, which include not only students, but also teachers and leaders.

Additionally, the various missing voices in leadership have resulted in a narrow conception of leadership, diversity and inclusion (Fitzgerald, 2006; Lopez, 2003). Increased representation in leadership gives voice to the experiences of those who have been marginalized (Solomon, 1997). Therefore, the teachers and leaders who are best qualified to share wisdom and guide practice around these issues are those who have been marginalized. Diverse perspectives from underrepresented groups in leadership are more likely to challenge the status quo and envision new ways of leading for equity and justice. Although, there has been an increasing focus on social justice leadership, it emphasizes training leaders in cultural responsiveness, ways of thinking, and skills, rather than actual diversification of the workforce (Niesche, 2016).

Third, the concept of intersectionality is not well understood, specifically as it relates to a leader's unique perspective and ability to recognize and respond to the needs of diverse staff and students. A leader's personal history, especially one that includes marginalization, influences one's identity as a leader (Fitzgerald, 2006; Lee, 2019; Lopez, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). Though a history of marginalization or oppression can reinforce self-doubt about one's ability to

lead, past experiences and challenges can also empower leaders to become more culturally responsive.

Fourth, the literature fails to explore the impact of internalized oppression on the pathway to leadership. A potential leader may not identify themselves as a leader if they do not see leaders who share their identity (Campbell-Stevens, 2009; Lee, 2019). Struggling to fit into predefined leadership roles can be a barrier to pursuing leadership (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Exploring and expanding the definition of effective leadership can help those who might not otherwise be accustomed to seeing people who reflect their identity in positions of leadership. Understanding the internal struggles of those who have doubted their ability or worthiness to lead could also inform hiring policies and practices that would encourage and empower more educators from underrepresented groups to seek leadership positions.

While mentorship programs are one way to encourage and develop aspiring leaders, more attention needs to be given to how aspiring leaders are invited, mentored and supported to ensure that all groups have the same opportunities. Additionally, more role models are needed to act as formal and informal mentors (Thorpe, 2018; Quilantán & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004; Jack & Lobovsky, 2016). It is also unclear whether mentorship serves the specific purpose of increasing diversity among leaders. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the connection between both formal and informal mentoring relationships and underrepresented aspiring leaders' successful attainment of leadership roles.

Finally, there is a need for further research demystifying the leadership pipeline. By uncovering and sharing the narratives of those who have successfully transitioned to leadership, aspiring leaders can better understand their own experiences and discover ways to overcome the challenges. Examining multiple points in the pipeline can inform how leaders are recruited,

selected, developed and retained (Stevenson, 2006). As well, it can help bring more to light about those who have successfully transitioned into the principalship and those who have not (Davis et al., 2017). Unfortunately, there is little research on how, when, and why the transition from a teacher to a vice principal occurs, especially with those from underrepresented groups in a Canadian context. This transition is often a mystery even though most principals were once teachers (Stevenson, 2006). It is important to document the accomplishments of these individuals who have been able to break the ceiling to encourage the pursuit of leadership positions.

In conclusion, while there appears to be a desire to diversify leadership in education, the ways to achieve this remain unclear. Further research can seek to uncover both the personal and systemic factors that discourage or encourage potential leaders from a variety of underrepresented groups. This information can then inform districts seeking to increase diversity among their leadership. The effects of representation in educational leadership cannot be fully understood without first increasing diversity. The hope is that by investigating the stories of current administrators who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups our research can inform efforts to further increase representation in educational leadership.

**Chapter 3: Research Methods and Design**

Our study examined the experiences of vice-principals and principals who self-identify as members of visible and invisible underrepresented groups regarding opportunities and challenges they have faced when pursuing leadership roles. In examining the experiences of the participants, the study also explored their perceptions as they relate to opportunities and challenges for other aspiring educational leaders. Our interest was in exploring the ways greater representation among formal educational leaders can encourage and inform others.

**3.1 Research Setting**

The study was conducted in an urban school district located within the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia. The school district has been given the pseudonym, Evergreen School District, in order to protect its identity. The school district was selected for its large size and social, cultural, economic and demographic diversity. The district is made up of several catchment areas, some of which include inner-city schools while others are located in predominantly middle and upper class communities.

Focusing on the experiences of participants required an approach that emphasizes "participants' specific statements and experiences" (Creswell, Hanson, Clark & Morales, 2007, p. 252). Consequently, our study was qualitative. For members of underrepresented communities, a qualitative approach opens a space for their voices to be heard, honoured and shared. The researchers focused on the experiences and lived realities of each participant based on the assumption that knowledge and reality are socially constructed (Lee, 2019; Yilmaz, 2013).

The decision to examine the experiences of underrepresented communities comes from a transformative, critical lens. It acknowledges that, traditionally, individuals and groups have been marginalized. A phenomenology framework (Creswell et al., 2007) allowed researchers to

explore participants' individual experiences with an aim "to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experience" (Lee, 2019, p. 5). While each individuals' path to leadership is unique, the researchers sought to identify commonalities among the administrators' experiences. The researchers' aim is that these common experiences will resonate with others who identify as underrepresented to inform and inspire others with similar experiences and aspirations.

## 3.2 Participant Recruitment

Following approval from both the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) and the school district in which the research took place, the researchers emailed a letter of invitation to 243 principals and vice principals. The letter of invitation identified the researchers, Principal Investigator, and Researcher Supervisor, and explained that the research project was a capstone project required for completion of a UBC Master of Education degree. In order to ensure informed consent, the letter also included the educational context of the research, its purpose, as well as the measures taken to ensure participant confidentiality. This included details relating to the storage of data on encrypted, password protected devices, and contact information in case the participants had any questions or concerns. Further, participants were informed that the collection of questionnaire data complied with the BC Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) with data kept secured, stored and backed up in Canada. The letter included a link to a questionnaire on Qualtrics, an online survey tool available to University of British Columbia staff and students. Participants had the right to not answer any of the questions on the questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire indicated their consent to participate in the study.

Since the initial response rate was low (3%), the letter was sent again and the response rate rose to 5%. Eleven respondents completed the questionnaire; however, one respondent did

not meet the criteria for inclusion and was thus excluded. A total of ten questionnaire responses were analyzed. Six respondents expressed an interest in a follow-up interview. Two respondents chose to withdraw from the interviews before they were conducted. A total of 4 participants were interviewed.

Participants in this study included one vice-principal and 10 principals in the Evergreen School District. Their appointment to a leadership position indicated that they have successfully navigated the district's leadership recruitment and hiring processes. They also self-identified as a member of an underrepresented group. Such identities included, but were not limited to, those members of the LGBTQIA2+ community, immigrants, Indigenous, racially underrepresented and other visible and invisible groups. One respondent did not meet the criteria for inclusion. Therefore, their questionnaire responses were not included in the data analysis. Consequently, ten questionnaires were analyzed.

### 3.3 Data Collection

**3.3.1 Questionnaire.** The questionnaire was administered using the online survey tool Qualtrics. The researchers chose a questionnaire as the primary method of data collection for the confidentiality it offered participants (Fowler, 2012). Participants were asked to share professional experiences as members of underrepresented groups. According to Fowler, "sensitive information is more frequently, and almost certainly more accurately, reported in self-administered modes" (p. 74). Furthermore, an online questionnaire allowed participants to respond at a time and place that was convenient to them. This ease of response was intended to maximize the number of questionnaires completed (Fowler, 2012). The questionnaire (Appendix A) was comprised primarily of closed (multiple-choice) questions. Some of the multiple-choice questions were followed by open-ended questions. This provided participants an opportunity to

share their experiences and perspectives in more detail. As stated by Yilmaz (2013), "open-ended responses let the researcher understand and present the world as it is seen and experienced by the participants" (p. 313). The selection of questions was informed by the researchers' own experiences as well as existing studies on this topic (Thomas, 2007; Yilmaz, 2013). The final question in the questionnaire confirmed the participant's informed consent to participate in the study. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. To indicate their consent for an interview, they completed a field in the questionnaire to provide their name and contact information. Confidentiality for those who consented to be interviewed was maintained; if a participant wished to engage in an interview, the researchers immediately removed the contact information from the online questionnaire so that the questionnaire data did not contain any identifiable information. Hard copies of the questionnaire results were kept in a secure location and shredded upon completion of the study. The researchers referred to the hard copies for interviewees' contact information and to prepare for the interviews. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms in this research report.

**3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews.** The option of participating in a follow up semi-structured interview allowed participants the opportunity to provide more details and examples related to their questionnaire responses (Fowler, 2012). It also allowed the researchers to further explore with the interviewees some of the emerging themes from all participants (Creswell et al., 2007). Four interviews were completed. Each interview was approximately one hour in length and took place at a location of the interviewee's choice to allow flexibility and accessibility for our participants. Prior to meeting with the interviewees, we sent them the questions, giving them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the kinds of information we would be seeking. Since administrators were asked to talk about barriers in their experiences as school leaders,

there was a potential risk of emotional or psychological discomfort. The researchers informed the participants at the beginning of the interview that counselling services were available. Contact information for the district's employee and family assistance program counsellors was available to participants upon request. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, a U.S. based app. We informed participants of this and that, while conducting the study, data would be stored on U.S. servers and may be subject to U.S. laws. Transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for their personal reference, the opportunity to provide clarification or elaboration, or to withdraw certain information if they wished to do so. Participants had five days to respond to the researchers. Any non-responses were interpreted as acceptance of the transcript as is.

In preparation for the interviews, the researchers practiced and observed one another asking and answering the interview questions. Dilley (2000, p. 132) emphasizes that "one of the best ways to learn how to interview is to observe and analyze interviews." He states that some of the best interviews are conducted on the radio, thus intentional effort was made to listen to radio journalists (Dilley, 2000). One of the interview strategies Dilley (2000, p. 134) suggests is learning "to talk 20 percent of the time during the interview, and listen 80 percent." As well, specific skills such as making "eye contact, understanding body language, and active mental consideration of both the content (words) and context (emotions) of what is being said, and not being said" are imperative to the interviewers' accurate understanding of the interviewee's experiences (Dilley, 2000, p. 134). Ultimately, interviewing is a very complex process that requires the ability to listen, probe, anticipate, reflect, and read the respondent's spoken and unspoken responses, at the same time as providing a sense of comfort, safety, and being valued to the respondents.

**3.4 Data Analysis**

**3.4.1 Questionnaire.** Responses from the online questionnaire were aggregated using tools provided by Qualtrics, with the exception of the open-ended questions which were coded using the procedures explained in the following section.

**3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews.** Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, Burnard's (1991) fourteen stages of analysis were helpful in unpacking the information gathered in the transcripts. The researchers focused on identifying common themes, understanding that sometimes there would not be any commonalities among those who were interviewed. We then removed information that was unrelated to the purpose, created categories and subheadings, cut up the transcript and organized it by code, and wrote the commentary with links to literature (Burnard, 1991).

**3.4.3 Coding the Questionnaires and Semi-structured Interviews.** When coding, we used both paper-based and computer-based approaches. The framework developed by Strauss (1987), Bogdan and Biklen (1992), Mason (1996) (as cited in Gibbs, 2007) guided us in developing possible codes. These codes were a starting point for the kinds of phenomena we were looking for; however, we maintained an open mind to other codes that surfaced when analyzing the responses. These codes included:

- Specific acts, behaviours – what people do or say

- Events

- Activities

- Strategies, practices or tactics

  - Career Development

- Leadership Supports (either through mentors, professional development, workshops or other)

- Internal Challenges (feelings of inadequacy, confidence, inferiority or other)

- External Challenges

- States – general conditions experienced by people or found in organizations

- Meanings – a wide range of phenomena and what directs participants' actions

  - Past and current perception of equity representation in the district

- Relationships or interactions

  - Strong or weak connection to the importance of representation

- Conditions or constraints

  - Identity has positively or negatively impacted career development

- Reflexive

  - Advice to those aspiring to an administrative role

  - Advice to the district

The data from the responses was coded "with the same label to combine passages that are all examples of the same phenomenon, idea, explanation or activity. This form of retrieval was a very useful way of managing or organizing the data, and enables the researcher to examine the data in a structured way" (Gibbs, 2007, p.39). Once the data was coded, a list of larger categories was created and data was organized into broader themes. The researchers finalized their themes, then reviewed the data looking for commonalities and different perspectives among the responses. They reviewed the common narratives that emerged and reconsidered the themes in relation to the language used by the respondents.

**3.5 Ethical Considerations**

The study was undertaken following receipt of an ethics review certification from BREB and approval of the school district to conduct the study. The researchers followed the guidelines of the Canadian Panel of Research Ethics and the 2nd edition of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2). Participation in the study was dependent upon participants' voluntary informed consent. As "subjects must give free, informed and ongoing consent to participate in the study" (Bryman & Bell, 2016, p. 51), participants were asked to indicate their consent to participate in the study before submitting the questionnaire.

If a participant wished to engage in an interview, the researchers made hard copies of the questionnaire data and immediately removed the contact information from the online questionnaire so that online data did not contain any identifiable information. Hard copies of the questionnaire results were kept in a secure location and shredded upon completion of the study. The researchers referred to the hard copies for interviewees' contact information in order to prepare for the interviews. Participants signed a consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. Interviewees were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed that the researchers had contact information for counselling services available to administrators through the district's employee and family assistance program. This information was available to participants upon request. They were also provided with transcripts for their review and requested to respond within five days. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms in the research report. Participants in both the questionnaire and interviews were informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions.

The online questionnaire was hosted by Qualtrics. Questionnaire data was kept on the website server and accessed by the researchers. The researchers informed participants in advance that interview transcription would use a U.S. based software application, Otter.ai. We deleted the Qualtrics and Otter.ai accounts and all of the online data at the end of the study. Research notes were stored on an encrypted and password protected computer. Upon completion of the study, all data was transferred and stored on a flash drive in the Principal Investigator's office at UBC for a minimum of five years.

## 3.6 Limitations

Some individuals may have chosen not to participate in the study because, regardless of the steps the researchers made to ensure confidentiality, participants may not have been ready to self-disclose (Lee, 2019) information about their professional experiences as members of underrepresented groups. This may be of particular concern to individuals living as members of invisible identity groups. The interviewees were asked about the low response rate. In addition to confidentiality, they suggested that formal leaders may not perceive barriers in their attainment or role as educational leaders. They also cited time constraints and volume of emails as potential factors. Moreover, the research was conducted in a single school district and this specific context could potentially limit the transferability of findings to other contexts (Yilmaz, 2013). Finally, the number of participants in the study was low and the range of identities represented by the respondents varied. Seven out of ten respondents were female, elementary school principals. The respondents not only represented a range of visible and invisible underrepresented groups, but also highlighted the intersecting nature of identity. Women, when applicable, identified being a mother as a significant part of their experiences when interviewed. Furthermore, some identities, such as being Indigenous or being associated with a racialized group, may be visible or invisible.

Such diversity among respondents challenged the ability of the researchers to characterize the experiences for any one identity or individual. Therefore, the researchers analyzed the responses in relation to one another and their commonalities.

**3.7 Sharing the Findings**

The final report will be provided to the school district in which our study was conducted. Additionally, these findings may be presented at professional development conferences and/or published in a scholarly journal and UBC cIRcle, a database of material created by the UBC community and its partners.

# Chapter 4: Findings

The questionnaires and interviews provided insight into the experiences of vice-principals and principals who self-identify as members of visible and invisible underrepresented groups and the opportunities and challenges they faced when pursuing leadership roles. Their stories are shared in our findings below. Respondents' views on representation and a summary of their collective experience are presented first. Then we describe the supports and barriers encountered in their pathways to leadership. We conclude with respondents' suggestions to the district and their advice to aspiring leaders from underrepresented groups.

## 4.1 Profile of the Participants

We invited 243 vice-principals and principals in the Evergreen School District to participate in the study and received 11 completed questionnaires. The overall response rate was 5%. As there is no public data available regarding representation of underrepresented groups in administrative positions in the district, we believe the low response rate could be attributed to a few different factors. First, the actual representation of these groups within administrative positions in the district could be low. Second, for those who identify with underrepresented groups, they may not have experienced or perceived any barriers, so did not feel they could contribute to the study. Lastly, for those who do perceive barriers, they may not feel comfortable discussing these experiences, which may have led them to decide not to participate. When we shared information about the response rate with the interviewees, they speculated that others who identify as members of underrepresented groups may not feel comfortable disclosing their identity and experiences. We acknowledge that representation can be a sensitive topic and that talking about it can be difficult.

One questionnaire respondent was excluded from our analysis because they did not meet the criteria of identifying with an underrepresented group. The remaining ten respondents self-identified as members of visible (9) and invisible (1) underrepresented group(s). They described themselves as immigrants (2), Indigenous (2), LGBTQIA2+ (2), and members of underrepresented racialized/ethnic groups (4). Eight of the respondents identified as female and two as male. All ten of the respondents included in our analysis had been in positions of leadership for five or more years. One respondent was a vice-principal in a secondary school, one was a principal in a secondary school, and eight were principals in elementary schools. All but one spent five or more years teaching before becoming a formal leader.

| Table 1. Participant Profiles (as self-described by participants) | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant Pseudonym | Identity | Visible or invisible underrepresented group | Leadership position | Length of time in leadership | School level | Length of time in teaching |
| Respondent 1 | Female | Visible | Vice-Principal | 5 or more years | Secondary | 5-10 years |
| Respondent 2 (Sue) | Female, Indigenous | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | Less than 5 years |
| Respondent 3 (Jay) | Male, Underrepresented racialized/ethnic group, Immigrant | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Secondary | 5-10 years |
| Respondent 4 (Naomi) | Female, LGTBQIA2+, Indigenous | Invisible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | More than 10 years |
| Respondent 5 | Female, Immigrant | Invisible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | More than 10 years |
| Respondent 6 | Male, Underrepresented racialized/ethnic group | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | 5-10 years |
| Respondent 7 | Female, Underrepresented racialized/ethnic group | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | More than 10 years |
| Respondent 8 (Deena) | Female, Underrepresented racialized/ethnic group | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | 5-10 years |
| Respondent 9 | Female, LGTBQIA2+ | Visible and invisible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | More than 10 years |
| Respondent 10 | Female | Visible | Principal | 5 or more years | Elementary | 5-10 years |

A total of six respondents indicated a willingness to be interviewed but two chose to withdraw before the interview and thus, we interviewed four of the respondents. The interviewees were one male principal in a secondary school and three female principals, all in elementary schools. Interviewees have been given pseudonyms. Participants that completed questionnaires but did not participate in interviews will be referred to as respondents and given codes–for example, R1.

## 4.2 Pathways to leadership

The study participants shared powerful narratives. Due to the sensitive nature of our study, which focused on those who self-identify with visible and invisible underrepresented groups, we have chosen to present the data of our study organized by themes in order to best protect the anonymity of our respondents. Each of their stories is unique and yet, commonalities among their narratives emerged, revealing a pathway to leadership that was influenced by both the encouragement of colleagues and support of formal leaders.

Many respondents recognized "very early on in [their] teaching career … [that they were] encouraged by [their] principals" [Naomi] to "try becoming a VP" [Deena]. They were encouraged, supported and coached by administrators who first "convinced [them] to … assume a leadership [role] in the school" [Jay]. In their schools, there were "teacher [leaders]" [Naomi] who "[developed] some good relationships … [which] were helpful" [Deena]. As teachers, they were identified as possessing potential leadership skills and selected for "acting positions" [Deena], "leadership [roles]" [Naomi] or "prompted … to apply for [a] vice-principal" position [Jay]. Throughout the application and hiring process, the interviewees reported that they were encouraged by "key people in [their] life who [they] respected, professionally and personally … who helped along the way" [Naomi]. All of our interviewees worked in "difficult, challenging

[schools]" that drew upon their "expertise [in] the inner city" [Deena]. Much of their success in inner city schools was attributed to their experience "[working] with a lot of children who had difficult childhoods" [Naomi] and the ability to "see the challenges [of their] learners … and [have] an intimate understanding" [Sue]. Today, they are principals in the Evergreen School District who believe in their ability to affect positive change, not only for the underrepresented group with whom they self-identify, but for all students. They are "so thankful for [their mentors] pushing [them]" [Deena] but also to the district for a "formal leadership position and … entrusting [them] with children and … staff" [Naomi].

The common narrative from our interviewees shows that they were recognized for their skills by both their colleagues and administrators and encouraged to pursue formal leadership. Their careers would lead them all, at one point or another, to work in inner-city schools that drew upon their personal backgrounds and experiences to understand the at-risk youth in their schools. Today, they are principals who take pride in their achievements as well as their staff, students, and the district.

**4.3 Importance of Representation**

Across the board, we found very similar responses from our respondents on both the importance of diverse representation in administrative leadership and their perceptions of equitable representation of underrepresented groups in administrative positions. When asked to rate the importance of diverse representation in administrative leadership from not at all important, somewhat important, important and very important, all of our respondents chose very important. Our data indicates that representation not only impacts students, but teachers, parents and other leaders, as well. We discuss these findings below.

**4.3.1 Impact on Students.** From the perspective of the research participants, the importance of representation seems to be closely tied to a need for diverse role models for students. The perspective that role models and leaders should reflect the student population was widely shared.

Jay described the importance of being a role model for students who share a similar identity to his. One of the students in his school was upset about having recently been detained at an international border and asked Jay what he thought about it. Jay was able to relate to the student's experience, not only because he also happened to be detained at the border recently, but because he understands what it is like to feel marginalized in certain situations. Instances like this highlight the importance of building relationships with students so they do not feel alone. He said, "you know I'm in the hallway, all the time, and it's not about discipline, it's about being visible" [Jay]. He positions himself so that he can connect with and support students. He further stated, "Let us be the role models for our students. [If students] do [not see ethnic minorities] in power, it will continue to be a White man's world." It is evident that Jay believes in not only connecting with students, but also advocates for diversity as a whole. The importance of what Jay is stating is supported by research, as Solomon (1997) indicates students from underrepresented groups are "affirmed by the presence of teachers who shared the experience of difference, of being a part of the non-dominant group" (p. 402).

Sue also believed that role models are very important. She stated, "Indigenous people need to have positive role models at all levels." She went on to explain that it is difficult for Indigenous students to identify with their culture when living in an urban environment:

Being Indigenous, it is all about the land, it's all about the community, it's all about the people. The place. For me to say I'm [X First Nation] and I'm a member of the [X]

Nation, that's my identity. If you take [X] out of that and there's no land base, how do I

know what my culture is? How do I know my practice? How do I know my language?

That's who I am. And that's why our Indigenous people here are really, you know, lost

sometimes, like they're trying to just blend into the mainstream. [Sue]

Sue doesn't "just blend into the mainstream" because she knows who she is: "I … immersed

myself into learning my culture, and my practices, and my language to give me a foundation of

who I was as an individual." While she identifies with a different First Nations group than her

students, she seeks to create a "connection to community" and a "sense of belonging" for her

Indigenous students by inviting Indigenous cultural workers and community members into the

school as role models [Sue]. This practice is supported by Solomon (1997) as he states, "role

models were people with whom respondents could identify, and whose achievements, lifestyles,

philosophies, and/or values had a positive impact on their self-esteem and aspirations in life." (p.

399).

Naomi also expressed the need for role models so that students "see themselves and they

know that they could aspire to be whoever they are, and they feel like they belong." She went on

to speak specifically of LGBTQIA2+ students: "When students who feel marginalized see LGBT

teachers/VPs/Principals (or other marginalized groups) in leadership roles, they know they

belong and have someone they can go to." Recalling her own experiences with discrimination as

a youth she said, "So that's not going to happen to any kids on my watch. It's just not going to

happen." Her identity has given her a deep sense of empathy for others who face similar

challenges. Being able to identify with her students enables Naomi to recognize and advocate for

students who may be vulnerable.

School-based leaders and teachers who share the same identity as their underrepresented students can also inform others about how to support those learners. Sue pointed out the value of having someone with knowledge of Indigenous students in a position of leadership "bringing that awareness and understanding and how to embed more cultural practices and how to be more respectful, [and] know the protocols of Indigenous people." Research has shown that representation in school leadership results in more just and equitable policies and practices (Atkins, Fertig & Wilkins, 2014; Solomon, 1997).

From the responses of Jay, Sue and Naomi, we understand that identification with others who have similar backgrounds and experiences is key to representation having a positive impact on students, not only in their current context, but also in their aspirations (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Pitts, 2005; Solomon, 1997). The findings of our research reflect the work of several theorists on the importance of having diverse role models to build better communities.

**4.3.2 Impact on Teachers.** Representation can influence aspiring leaders in many ways, according to study participants. Naomi felt strongly that embracing diversity is important for inclusion as she said, "we're going to make sure that everybody [knows] it's okay to be who you are and it wasn't just about being gay. It was about all the people who are underrepresented." Respondents also felt that representation sends the message that anyone can pursue and achieve formal leadership roles as one respondent wrote: "It gives the signal to all that, should they wish to play a leadership role, underrepresented groups are welcomed or encouraged to do so" [R5]. When representation is lacking, the opposite effect can happen - when one does not see themselves reflected in those leading, they cannot see themselves in those leadership positions. Jay explained, "[if teachers] don't see [people of colour in leadership] … they get dejected." Our

respondents and interviewees voiced beliefs regarding the influence of representation on aspiring leaders of underrepresented groups.

**4.3.3 Impact on Families.** There is an overall sense among participants that representation allows for greater inclusion by providing a sense of belonging and encouragement for the community as a whole. One respondent said:

> I have a deep understanding of the challenges that come with growing up as a visible minority. In addition, I find that many families that come from immigrant backgrounds can relate to me and find encouragement in the idea that a member of a visible minority can take on a leadership role at their school. [R6]

It is evident that R6 believes she is an effective role model because her identity and experiences are reflective of the students and parents with whom she works and are points of connection between her and the community she serves. Deena also echoed similar sentiments as she explained:

> Not a day goes by without me getting hit by that idea that I was able to help a mother figure out how her child is doing … through my mishmash of Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu … even simple things like it's hot lunch day … maybe we should have some Halal dogs … some Sikhs don't eat meat … little things that make it more inclusive … I think being in the position I am in and visibly the way I am … I get certain access points that other people don't get … I do realize the benefit that me being in this position has had to a lot of families and kids.

Both R6 and Deena have drawn upon their personal histories to connect with and meet the needs in their school community. They pointed out that students need to see themselves reflected in their vice-principals and principals at the school level. It is evident that this reflection

has played an integral role in developing strong and positive relationships with students, parents and other members of the community.

       **4.3.4 Diversity in the Evergreen School District.** All respondents, except for one who said they were unsure, indicated that there did not appear to be equitable representation of underrepresented groups in administrative positions. Respondents pointed out that this was particularly evident in those holding secondary principal positions and those in upper management roles. When asked whether they thought there was equitable representation, one respondent wrote: "Not at the principal level. And until recently, not in HR. 3/20 secondary principals are female" [R1]. It was noted that although there are many women holding elementary principal positions, the percentage of women to men is still not reflective of the proportion of women in teaching positions. Others wrote: "For a school district that has a lot of immigrants, it is surprising that there are so few of us" [Jay] and there are "still low numbers of Indigenous and people with different abilities" [R5]. When discussing the number of Asian principals in the district, Naomi stated, "There are some Asian principals, so I mean it's not unheard of, for sure, but given our student population it's just off. Right?" All of these respondents–R1, R5, Jay and Naomi–expressed the view that there continues to be inequitable representation, particularly when it comes to gender, race, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, LGBTQIA2+, and people with different abilities.

## 4.4 Supports for Greater Representation: Relationships

       Respondents identified specific individuals who not only identified their leadership potential, but explicitly supported them to become school-based administrators. As teachers, the interviewees noted colleagues who identified their strengths and their leadership potential. At the least, they encouraged the respondent to pursue formal leadership positions in the district, and

some of them went further, coaching the respondent through the application process. Other respondents acted upon advice to seek out opportunities that developed their leadership skills in preparation to apply for formal leadership positions.

Relationships were an important source of motivation. The respondents recognized the positive effect of their colleagues and administrators on their decision to pursue formal leadership. These individuals highlighted the respondent's skills and abilities as teachers and the potential for them to become formal leaders. Deena reflected on the recognition she received after working on a district action research project: "everyone kept encouraging [me to apply] and I thought okay I'll try." In these instances, the messaging came directly from individuals who were positioned to observe, inform and encourage potential administrators. The positive messaging Naomi received from colleagues when she was a teacher-leader was confirmed by a former principal: "she talked me through the whole … hiring process [including] the panel interview … She basically gave me the confidence that I could do it" [Naomi]. The encouragement and recognition of their skills occurred at the school level and, then, was further confirmed at a district level.

While respondents never attributed their hiring to the efforts of specific individuals, they did draw confidence and support in subtle ways. For many, they drew strength from the knowledge that there were individuals who were witness to their work and expertise. The presence of a colleague on Naomi's interview panel provided reassurance: "I had some champions … on both [the vice-principal and principal] interview committee, not by design … [They] saw me in action so I [referred] to some specific examples of situations that I had handled." In that high-stake setting, the colleague's presence may have been able to corroborate the answers and examples they were providing. Further, the gestures of Naomi's 'champions'

during the interview provided subtle reassurance: "I could see her nodding. Even if I wasn't looking at [name of person] I could see her nodding, so I was like, okay, I'm doing okay." The interviewees viewed relationships and social connections as an asset. For both Jay and Naomi, relationships with district administrations and educational leaders were perceived to influence the success of an applicant. Jay confirmed that "your references make or break you" while Naomi asserted that "I think it's who you know." These informal social relationships and their role in supporting the respondents became more important as they moved into formal positions. As vice principals, the importance of references and name recognition became more evident:

When I applied I didn't really know anyone, other than I knew people at the school level …then [when I became a VP] it became … making a network of people at the district level because you … didn't want to be invisible. [Jay]

As teachers, the interviewees skills and leadership qualities were observable and known among the staff and administrators in the interviewees school. Despite having proven themselves as teacher-leaders, they believed they had to rebuild their reputation when they entered formal leadership. Now, they were administrative leaders, responsible for an entire staff, no longer working daily with their peers or superiors and separate from the community of peers and mentors from which they had drawn support and encouragement. Social networking and relationships took on added significance for some respondents because gaining recognition for their work and skills was not as easy as before.

While positive messaging often came from individuals, Deena also recognized the ways in which the Evergreen School District provided encouragement, support and training. After two successful acting vice-principalships, Deena was encouraged by her colleagues and principal to

apply for a vice-principal position. Deena did not apply for an administrative position right away, however she began to attend District in-services:

> we had to do an action research project and all that kind of stuff, and it was basically like trying to figure out who were the leaders in the district and trying to kind of train them and encourage them to apply into [administration].

For Deena, this district in-service provided a formal space to examine her practice and effect change for her students and the school, while cultivating her emerging interest in formal leadership. Upon reflection, she recognized the in-service was a forum for Evergreen District personnel to identify potential leaders. In this way, the positive messaging Deena received at the school level was further reinforced at the District level. The messaging for her was clear and explicit – the District provided opportunities to not only identify, but also support and prepare potential leaders. Attending and experiencing success at the in-service served to confirm the messaging Deena received at the school level to pursue a formal leadership position.

The respondents received messages from administrators and the district that communicated a confidence and interest in their leadership potential. This affirmation came after they embraced opportunities to become teacher-leaders and further developed their leadership skills. Such opportunities are particularly important for individuals who may not have the social and cultural capital to be "tapped on the shoulder" [Naomi] or know someone who can help navigate the complexity of the application and interview process that is often a prerequisite for formal leadership positions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 as cited in Pajak & Green, 2003).

**4.5 Barriers to Greater Representation**

While they were not always able to name them, respondents described the barriers that were present in their pathways to leadership. Their perception of the district and its efforts to

address diversity were impacted by various factors, such as discrimination, misrepresentation, stereotypes and double standards, and equitable representation.

**4.5.1 Discrimination.** Discrimination does not exist in a singular form or place; it is prevalent throughout society and in the lived experience of underrepresented groups. Despite legislation and district policy designed to confront and eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, sexual orientation and gender, experiences of discrimination in various stages of their lives were reported by three of the four interviewees. The discrimination respondents experienced manifested itself in a variety of settings and situations throughout their lives: "being a lesbian is huge because I experienced a lot of discrimination, in my family, and as a child and as a young adult" [Naomi].

Sue's experiences with racism and marginalization were overt. When she attained a formal leadership position, she recalled times when she felt her qualifications were dismissed on the basis of her Indigenous identity: "they [saw] me as a minority first and then definitely [wrote] me off as, oh you just got the job because you're Indigenous." She further elaborated that the dismissing of her ability was more than a feeling: "when I started, I definitely felt it from my colleagues and they would say it to my face … I also felt it from my teachers and they would say it to my face … it was challenging." In these instances, the discrimination was overt and directly attributed to her racialized identity. This was consistent with Lopez's (2017) experiences as a racialized administrator. In spite of her expertise, knowledge and skill, colleagues drew upon the stereotypes of her identity to undermine her legitimacy as an educational leader.

Other forms of discrimination, while not aimed directly at an individual, are experienced personally. Naomi acknowledged that she "was very fearful" when she first arrived in the District in the midst of a public debate over LGBTQ themed content in the classroom: "I sort of

went a little bit in the closet, I didn't share too much with people." In an effort to protect herself from more personal acts of discrimination, she was cautious in what information she shared with others.

Sue identified that acts of racism and discrimination are a larger systemic issue: "As a minority, as an Indigenous person, it's always prevalent … it's not one issue and then it's under the carpet. It's daily … people [don't] realize how tough it is to be [an] invisible minority and have that undertone" [Sue]. Ultimately, racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination are systemic and embedded within our society. As a result, discrimination is subtle (Bonnycastle, 2011; Niesche, 2016; Picower, 2013) and part of broader forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression (Barakette, 2000; Gale, 2000; Ryan, 2006; Osborne, 2008; Pajak & Green, 2003). Moreover, the internalization and normalization of racism and discrimination makes it difficult to identify. Perceptions and messaging from the dominant classes unintentionally impacts members of underrepresented groups (Brookefield, 2014; Ryan & Rottendam, 2009). These experiences highlight the difference between intent and impact. While the intent to marginalize and discriminate is not evident, the impact remains. The interviewees perceived that social norms were implicit but they also felt it was not acceptable to disclose their identity or address the wrong.

The ways in which discrimination is enacted has changed over the course of the interviewees' careers and lives. Today, racism and discrimination are more subtle. Respondents also expressed a willingness to "name, address it, bring it up [and] call out the haters" [Naomi]. While it was not clear how the respondents confront racism and discrimination, they did acknowledge that they felt confident in their ability to do so. For Sue, it was a matter of recognizing racism as a part of one's identity and learning how to confront it: "it's not

uncommon for me [to encounter racism] … I know how to confront it. I know how to educate and help support people understand it, as opposed to, you know, when I was younger." There are several factors that may explain the respondents' confidence in confronting acts of discrimination. It may be that they are more self-aware and mature. Alternatively, a lifetime of discrimination may have led them to take action. Finally, as administrators, this confidence may stem from now holding a position of authority.

The creation of anti-discrimination and anti-racism policy within the Evergreen School District, for Naomi, is a step in the right direction. When she first began her career in the district, an LGBTQIA2+ content ban impacted her feeling acceptance: "it was horrible." When asked to describe the change she has witnessed in the district she shared:

> It's totally changed because we have policy to back us up. More importantly, it's openly in the schools. We've got stickers, we've got SOGI, we've got books in the library, we've got two fabulous helping teachers who are helping adults and children alike, with social emotional learning and equity and inclusion.

These efforts mark a shift within the district that not only affirms Naomi's feelings of acceptance, but also the perception that the district is ready to embrace diversity. These actions signal a move towards further systemic and institutional change.

**4.5.2 Misrepresentation.** The practices of the Evergreen district as they relate to the placement of school-based administrators appears, at times, to emphasize an individual's presumed identity rather than their qualifications. Several respondents described times when they were hired for a formal leadership role and, subsequently, were assigned to a school with a cultural profile that aligned with their identities or with identities others attributed to them.

Both Jay and Deena identified times when their school placement corresponded to their own racialized identity in general terms. Jay's principal confirmed he "wanted someone that could identity with the Indo Canadian community." However, both Jay and Deena related that they did not speak the specific heritage language that was predominant in the school community in which they were placed. The cultural traits and stereotypes of the respondent's visible identity appeared to be a factor in both Jay and Deena's placements. Consequently, both respondents felt that assumptions were made about their cultural traits; for example, the ability to speak an additional language which, ultimately, ignore the subtle complexities of their cultural identity

While the efforts of the Evergreen School District may have missed the mark, the respondents acknowledged that they could "understand the cultural context of things sometimes better than another person" [Deena]. For example, as a member of an underrepresented cultural group, Deena understood the importance of respecting the dietary restrictions of the various ethnic groups in her school and how the choice of food could make special events more inclusive. In this way, her identity was an asset. For respondents who identify with underrepresented racialized and ethnic groups, understanding cultural norms gave them an advantage in responding to and supporting students and families in their schools. Similarly, a view of one's identity as an asset was also present in the questionnaire responses of three respondents who noted their identity was having a positive impact on their career and another six respondents who indicated their identity had both a positive and negative effect.

Ultimately, the district's considerations are complex when making hiring and placement decisions. It is difficult to account for the various external and underlying factors shaping decisions as well as individuals' perceptions of those decisions. However, respondents asserted that the hiring of formal leaders on the basis of their identities was never an affirmative action

exercise or tokenistic practice. Interviewees believed they were, first and foremost, qualified applicants who were selected to be formal leaders in the Evergreen school district because they were "bringing something to the table that is valuable" [Jay]. Deena pointed out that efforts by the district to find a formal leader to 'fit' a community, while well intentioned, were also risky: "you don't know if they're going to be able to succeed in that community with the language of the culture, just because they look like it. I don't speak Punjabi. I barely speak Urdu." The placement of formal leaders requires many considerations including, but not limited to the needs of the staff, students, community as well as logistics, qualification of formal leaders and many other factors. At times, formal leaders may have been placed at schools using assumptions about the school community, the formal leader or both.

**4.5.3 Stereotypes and Double Standards.** Challenges to increasing diversity and inclusion of aspiring leaders were most evident when it involved motherhood. Amongst our respondents, four out of eight females, and one out of three males indicated this challenge was directly related to traditional stereotypes of women and motherhood.

One stereotype that surfaced repeatedly in our data was that mothers are unable to handle administrative positions. Difficulty with having to choose between being a parent or pursuing an administrative position was expressed. One respondent indicated that she had "a few negative experiences when I told the employer I was expecting a baby" [R10]. Another respondent said, "When I was thinking of entering admin, I was told to wait because my own children were too young and what would I do if there was an emergency in the middle of the night requiring me to go into work?" [R1]. In analyzing our data, we noticed some women felt a need to hide information from the district about plans to start having children or continuing to have more children, and about childcare responsibilities. One respondent said, "As a VP, [I] was advised by

my principals to not talk about my private life as I might not get a principalship" [R9]. Deena remarked, "I think the misperceptions towards motherhood and the expectations, I don't think that's changed. I think that's still there, that whole having kids is going to be a problem if you take this job." She also remarked that if childcare support was in place during after school meetings, "you don't have to hide that you have daycare issues." These issues could refer to instances where an administrator would require emergency child care in order to attend to emergent situations but feel the need to hide this to avoid perpetuating the gendered stereotype. Deena continued to express strong feelings, saying, "I feel like being a woman, who has had to take two maternity leaves during my work as an administrator, has had an impact on the perceptions of upper management of me being able to take on the role." When prompted about whether there has been change or whether these stereotypes continue to exist in the same manner, Deena said she wished she could say things have changed, but the stereotypes are "definitely" still there:

> I came back after my second daughter, and [a senior manager] who is not around anymore, said to me, "So are you going to be having any more kids? Need to know." [They] said that to me. And my friend who was pregnant, who was coming back at the same time … she had three children. "Are you planning on having any more? You're gonna have a baseball team before you know it," that's what [they] said to her. And she was considering having a fourth, but it really affected her decision. Yeah, that was only eight years ago.

It is evident that this senior manager did not think there was anything wrong with asking female administrators these types of questions. Deena also indicated that this happened eight years ago,

so these were not instances that happened a long time ago, but, in fact, occurred within the last decade.

Unfortunately, not only have stereotypes been a barrier for moms, but a double standard has occurred at the same time. Jay said, "the female leaders in this district have to work harder, and whether it comes out of being over assertive or whatever, they have to work harder to prove themselves." He acknowledged a double standard when he said, "in the end, I'm still male, right? And then that's probably the privilege." He went on to explain how he had heard why someone did not get a principalship:

and the rumor is that she was not hired because she put her family first. So she might be in a meeting and her kid called from [school]. Oh, something has happened so she would leave the meeting to take the phone call, and the rumor is that prevented her from getting a principalship because she put her family before anything else. Yet, when I was hired, [I was told] "Oh yeah, make sure [to] take care of family, take care of family," and that was always *just* with the males …

Jay's description of what he has experienced contrasts with the experiences of his female counterparts. He expressed that he felt supported in being a father and an administrator by district upper management and was even encouraged to prioritize his family's needs above his administrative duties. He did not express any need to hide family issues that would arise which is different from what we heard from mothers who are administrators. Due to his own experience of feeling supported in being both a father and an administrator, Jay firmly expressed that he is also very supportive of his vice-principal who is a mother. However, he points out he knows there are other principals who are not like-minded. He states:

I would never second guess someone. [My vice-principal] has two kids. If there's call,

there's never [a question]. Go, go, go home. And I would never look down on someone.

However, I do know for a fact there are principals that would.

These findings have been supported in the literature where Robinson et al. (2017) state: "Parenthood experiences are starkly different between men and women as well. White female superintendents are the least likely group to have children, followed by female superintendents of color. Both groups are nearly three to four times more likely to be childless than are males" (p. 6). When we asked Naomi her thoughts on this topic, she explained: "It's totally different for male and female … I think it's just historic gender discrimination."

In the end, it was disheartening to hear Deena say, "Honestly, if I had to redo it again, [administration] I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have done it with my kids as babies, you know, because I missed a tonne." Deena mentioned a few times in her interview that there were sacrifices made due to her decision to continue in her leadership role. Our sense is, had she felt greater support for being a mother in an administrator role, she would have viewed the sacrifices she made differently. In our findings, it became clear that there are many challenges within the intersectionality of being a woman and a mom. These complexities seem to be rooted in deeply entrenched stereotypes of the roles of men and women leaders.

**4.5.4 Inequitable Representation.** It appears that the degree of diversity decreases at higher levels in the administrative hierarchy. This suggests that there is a 'ceiling' for members of underrepresented groups, which one respondent describes:

There is clearly not equitable representation, especially at the [district] level. There are 22 district senior educational admin [administrator] positions in Evergreen School District] (1 superintendent, 6 assistant superintendents, 4 directors of instruction, and 11 district principals) and only 2 of these positions are held by a visible minority. There needs to be

a sense of equitable representation in a large public organization from top to bottom and not just to middle-management. Currently, there seems to be a "ceiling" at the school-based admin level. Ethnic minorities are somewhat represented at the school-based administrator level, however, there seems to be a substantial underrepresentation at the board/district level positions, which is still predominantly represented by people of Caucasian background, despite the ethnic diversity in Evergreen School District. [R6]

Deena echoed a similar sentiment stating, "Considering how many women and visible minority teachers there are, that is not represented in management roles … especially in upper management roles." Our findings here affirm that our respondents feel there is a disproportionate number from visibly from underrepresented groups in upper management positions. Another respondent noted that the problem of underrepresentation was more pronounced for persons with disabilities and Indigenous peoples: "Indigenous peoples seem to have leadership roles within the Aboriginal department, but not outside that department" [R5]. These findings reveal that not only is there underrepresentation, but there are barriers to the pursuit of upper management positions in departments that do not match one's visible appearance or heritage background.

## 4.6 Suggestions for increasing representation

Respondents and interviewees presented a variety of ideas when we asked for suggestions about how to increase representation in administrative positions. They suggested valuing diversity, being equipped to support diverse leaders, mentorship and leadership programs, and restorative justice. The first step in increasing representation in educational leadership is to "recognize the problem and start recruiting" [Jay]. One of the challenges to increasing diversity is that people are less likely to aspire to a role if they do not see anyone like them in the position (Campbell-Stevens, 2009; Lee, 2019). While respondents did not like the idea of affirmative

action, they acknowledged that the district needs to be intentional in hiring for diversity in order to attract more diverse applicants.

**4.6.1 Value diversity.** Respondents felt that "Upper management must value diversity" [R5] and several suggested that increasing diversity in senior management positions would be a good first step. They said the district "must be intentional in seeking leaders with various backgrounds" [R5] and that "there needs to be a more active role in hiring for equal ethnic representation" [R6]. Exactly how the district might change their recruitment and hiring practices to be more intentional was unclear. However, Naomi suggested the district show their commitment to diversity by "[hiring] an openly LGBTQ in [a] senior management position (Superintendent or Assistant [Superintendent])" and inspire potential leaders with initiatives like "the RCMP 'It Gets Better' videos'" highlighting the success stories of current leaders.

Naomi stressed the importance of visible representation, especially within the senior management and Board of Trustees:

> It has to get to that level for things to change because it's not just children seeing their teachers, it's not just teachers seeing their school based administrators, it's their school based administrators seeing who the decision makers are and it's the trustees because I'm an agent to the board.

Aspiring leaders need to see themselves represented in positions of leadership. She went on to explain the impact of representation at the Board level: "As teachers live and work in an environment where they are protected/accepted by 'living policies' and district initiatives, I believe that more will pursue formal leadership positions." Representation starts with leaders and decision-makers who reflect the diversity of the population they are serving and act with the knowledge and understanding of their unique needs and experiences. The theory of

representative bureaucracy suggests that representation in leadership results in more just and equitable policies in schools, and improved outcomes for the students and communities they serve (Atkins, Fertig & Wilkins, 2014; Niesche, 2018). Ultimately, demonstrating a commitment to diversity signals to all that that they are welcome and accepted in the Evergreen School District.

**4.6.2 Be equipped to support diverse leaders.** The needs of leaders from underrepresented groups are diverse. Those in senior management positions, particularly those in positions involving hiring and overseeing school-based administrators, could learn from and be aware of the challenges experienced by leaders of all identities and backgrounds so that they can provide the best support possible.

The district needs to celebrate that they have "a growing population of female administrators" and look for ways to support them "especially when it comes to pregnancy" [Sue]. Women leaders, who expect to be valued for their skill, often feel they need to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves. In addition, moms may be impacted by perceptions that maternity leaves and the time they take to care for their children negatively impacts their skill development, career advancement, or even their ability to do their job [Deena, Sue, R1, R10]. The district "being equipped, being aware, having the foresight to understand how people feel, and [addressing] that double standard" [Jay], would go a long way in supporting and encouraging leaders.

**4.6.3 Mentorship and leadership development programs.** Almost all of our respondents said that informal mentorship was something that prepared them for leadership, and they pursued leadership because of the encouragement they received from their mentors. District

leadership and mentorship programs provide spaces where any aspiring leader can connect with role models and be encouraged to envision themselves in the role.

Interviewees pointed out that there were limited opportunities for them to connect with other leaders who share their identity. Deena thought the district should "provide more support for women" and suggested "a formal women in leadership support group with mentors, presentations, workshops." Sue stated that it is difficult to identify and connect with other Indigenous leaders: "I know there's a few other Indigenous principals, vice-principals which is great to see, but unless I go around and introduce myself and get to know them, there's no network for us."

However, Jay pointed out that forming mentorship groups specifically for underrepresented racialized and ethnic groups would be problematic: "I think for the district [to start different groups], I don't think they would succeed that well." Such groups, he said, need to be formed from within. This would avoid the perception that the underrepresented group is being singled out and further segregated from the dominant group. It would be more acceptable for aspiring leaders who share the same identity to create their own social groups and networks. For example, if he felt Indo-Canadian leaders needed a mentorship group, he said, "it would be [up to] myself to bring that group together." Mentorship groups formed by the district to target underrepresented groups only serve to remind potential participants that they are not equally represented and reinforce the idea that they are the 'other' (Jack & Lobovsky, 2016). Sue acknowledged that networks are especially important because the Evergreen School District is so big. All of these responses indicate that the more opportunities there are for potential leaders from underrepresented groups to connect with and learn from mentors and role models, the greater the chances are they will pursue and attain formal leadership roles.

**4.6.4 Restorative justice.** Stakeholders at all levels need to come together and do the work to "make it feel safe and more welcoming and inclusive" [R9] for people from underrepresented groups to participate in educational leadership. As Naomi explained, "Restorative justice is not just about the person because everything ripples through the community. The more people in the community you can bring to restoring a problem, the more supported that person feels and, ultimately, the more healthier communities can be." The practice of restorative justice suggests that the way to bring about equity is to invite the voices of underrepresented groups into the conversation and seek to value and understand what they have to say. The Evergreen School District has already taken steps toward a healthier community by enacting policy and practices that support Indigenous peoples and the LGTBQIA2+ community. This was made possible because individuals from many different groups were willing to work together, to learn from one another, without "shame and blame" [Naomi]. Though "it takes a lot of time … and patience," [Naomi] restorative justice practice is critical to continuing the work of seeking equity for all marginalized groups.

**4.7 Advice to aspiring leaders**

We asked interviewees, after reflecting on their experiences, what words of wisdom and encouragement they would give to aspiring leaders from underrepresented groups. Here is what they said:

*Be authentic.* All of our interviewees were aware of not only the challenges they faced because of their identity but also the opportunities their identity gave them to make a difference in the lives of students. It is their willingness to be vulnerable and share who they are that enabled them to connect with students as role models. It is important to "be comfortable with who you are" [Naomi] so that students who share your identity might be encouraged by your

example. For those considering a formal leadership role, it is essential to ask oneself, "if not you, who?" [Naomi]. Being authentic is being open about your guiding principles and self.

*Be resilient.* If you don't get the interview or the job, don't give up. Keep trying. Evergreen School District "is moving forward in a purposeful way" by enacting policies and initiatives that are more inclusive; and, "the swell of inclusion is building" [Naomi]. It may not be easy, but "it gets better" [Naomi]. Aspiring leaders from an underrepresented group may have to work harder to get noticed. Jay acknowledged that double-standards make it particularly challenging for women and it's unfair but "you prove yourself, you get hired, and then you move on." One of the things that motivated respondents to overcome obstacles on their pathways to formal leadership was a clear sense of purpose. When things got tough, they remembered the difference they were making in the lives of students. For example, Sue draws her strength from her ability to relate to Indigenous students: "I'm doing this because I'm making a difference for Indigenous kids. And that's where my strength was, and so I worked towards connecting with the community … and that was where I drew my strength."

*Pursue new skills and experiences.* Challenge yourself, seek out new experiences that build your skills. Be reflective and strategic. Ask yourself "Okay, what steps have I missed? What experience do I need? How do I put myself in those situations?" [Sue]. Have a growth mindset with the goal of "[creating] a briefcase of tools that are far superior than your next person" [Jay] so that your identity cannot be a factor.

*Build relationships.* Having a network of supportive friends who could also make introductions and open doors helped interviewees attain their leadership positions. It is important to "surround yourself with people who are supportive and encouraging" [Naomi]. You need to "find a mentor" who knows the process and how to get to where you want to go. Whether it's a

formal or informal mentoring relationship, you need to "find somebody who's gonna help you out" [Naomi].

**4.8 Summary of key findings across the research questions**

Respondents noted school-based administrators, mentors and role models who positively influenced their careers. The messaging they received from specific individuals was powerful. They were not only encouraged regarding their ability to be an effective leader, but also mentored as to how to successfully navigate the leadership pipeline. For many, these direct, consistent messages served to counter internalized negative perceptions about the district's openness to diversity or their worthiness as individuals. While respondents did not name specific barriers to their movement into formal leadership, they did recognize challenges. These included discrimination, stereotypes and misrepresentation (placements made on the basis of cultural traits and stereotypes). Furthermore, the senior leadership of the district is not yet reflective of the existing diversity among principals and vice-principals, teachers or students. Finally, the interviewees recognized the district's interest to increase diversity among formal leaders. Respondents were hopeful about the Evergreen School District's willingness to seek greater diversity among its formal leaders and offered several suggestions, including diversity training and supporting informal mentoring networks for aspiring leaders from underrepresented groups. Above all, the respondents possessed a strong sense of self and resolve which was most evident in their advice to new and aspiring leaders. The interviewees identified several personal traits central to the success of an applicant and effective educational leader – authenticity, resilience, a growth mindset, and relationship building.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

**5.1 Introduction**

As researchers, we came together as women with shared experiences who aspire to be educational leaders. With an inquiry mindset, our search began with two main wonderings: Were there others from underrepresented groups who experienced similar struggles? What were their stories? Were there collective stories to be told?

Through this study, we sought to better understand the leadership pathways for aspiring leaders from underrepresented groups. We also desired to gain insight into our own professional lives and experiences and challenge the beliefs we had internalized about identity and leadership. The deeply personal nature of this research brought attention to our own social justice lens. At the beginning of the research we reflected on and declared (in Chapter 1) our views on diversity and equitable representation in leadership. Uncertainty surfaced about collecting research data as we wondered if anyone would be willing to tell their stories and what their stories would reveal. Nonetheless, supportive and reassuring conversations with our colleagues provided us with the courage to move forward. We realized that we had an opportunity to provide a platform for underrepresented voices to be heard and that became the driving force for our research.

**5.2 Implications and Recommendations**

In the process of conducting this study, we found principals and vice-principals who believe in the importance of increasing representation. While respondents faced obstacles in their pathways to leadership, they remained passionate about their roles as formal leaders and role models for students, communities and colleagues.

In the interviews, respondents described how discrimination and marginalization were evident throughout their lives and difficult to attribute to a single event or setting. Interviewees

observed that over the course of their lives and careers overt acts of racism have been replaced with more subtle forms of discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. The administrators in our study indicated that increasing representation, as well as highlighting the experiences and stories of underrepresented formal leaders, helps to 'demystify' the leadership pipeline, breaks down perceived, internalized barriers and empowers others to aspire to leadership positions.

The stories shared by our respondents highlighted the importance of relationships and positive messaging. Respondents who received affirmation of their skills and abilities as teachers, and later, as leaders, felt accepted and supported by the district. Direct and ongoing positive messaging from school-based and district leaders helps counter internalized perceptions and barriers and encourages members of invisible and visible underrepresented groups to pursue formal leadership positions. Formal leaders from underrepresented groups can use their lived experiences to inform others. The respondents were effective teachers who understood their students and the challenges they faced; and, they became administrators who continued to advocate for vulnerable students and communities. Their ability to empathize with at-risk youth positioned the respondents as allies for marginalized students, their families and communities. Their presence, in and of itself, relays a positive message to their communities and other aspiring, underrepresented colleagues. Traditionally, members of underrepresented groups have been absent from decision-making processes. Therefore, having underrepresented groups in formal leadership positions increases opportunities for the realities, including barriers such as marginalization, to be shared with senior management. Moreover, greater representation supports efficacy in creating a system that is more culturally responsive.

A first step is supporting underrepresented leaders to be confident in who they are by creating safe, inclusive spaces, devoid of judgement. Both male and female respondents

acknowledged that gender and racial stereotypes as well as double standards exist for those in leadership positions. Breaking down these stereotypes and double standards will require the work of the district, those who hold upper management positions, all administrators and educators. With all stakeholders working together, the message will be clear. It is our understanding that the district aims to be fully inclusive of all underrepresented groups. Actions could be put into effect for all underrepresented groups to feel included, particularly for women who are parents aspiring to be in administrative roles. As mentioned in our findings, this could mean child care is offered during after school meetings at the board office. If this support comes from an authentic place and is meant for everyone, it could send a clear message to all parents that they are welcome and supported to aspire and hold administrative positions. Unfortunately, this was not the messaging we found in our research. Our interviewee, Jay, pointed out, it may take time to shift the stereotypical beliefs that moms do not have the capacity to be administrators. Women continue to express the need to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves, even after they have been appointed to a leadership position. Thus, it is imperative that the call for action to change the norms of everyday conversation is not just dependent on time passing, but that there is clear messaging from the district on where they stand on such issues. In our interviewee with Reena, she indicated she had made many sacrifices and continues to do so in order to maintain the image of being able to do it all while being a mom and an administrator. We did not hear this from male administrators. It is clear that equity cannot be achieved until we address why male administrators have been encouraged to be family oriented while simultaneously being able to maintain an image of a capable administrator.

Ultimately, the barriers of stereotypes and double standards continue to impact those who have been appointed to administrative positions and affect how they view themselves in their

role. Administrators as a collective group also need to feel comfortable in calling out those who continue to stereotype and perpetuate double standards in their practice. It is important that private conversations do not drive the norms, but rather the norms are challenged, co-created in a public forum, and reinforced. We are thankful that our respondents and interviewees persisted. The key to navigating and persevering through these barriers, both in the past and in the present, was through preparedness and passion for their work.

The leaders we heard from wanted to know that their leadership pathway is being defined by their skills and qualifications rather than their identity. Some respondents perceived district hiring and placement decisions to be based on assumptions about their identity, specifically their cultural traits and ability to connect with underrepresented populations. Identity plays a role in shaping people's perceptions of the world and impacts how aspiring leaders from underrepresented groups perceive the policies and decisions of the school district. For some, a difficult decision or placement left them questioning the ways their identity may have impacted their leadership pathway, but it did not undermine their sense of belonging or qualifications. Others separated their identity from the process and framed it to understand the district's decisions as a part of a complex decision-making process. Countering misperceptions about identity and hiring requires in-depth dialogue. Getting to know applicants, debriefing after interviews, and leaving the door open for conversations with senior management helps affirm leaders and provides them with the information needed to be more successful next time. These practices can help respondents recognize that the district's decisions are not always a response to their identity.

The results of this study show that increasing representation is a complex process and a challenge for the school district. Our last research question asked participants to provide advice

to the district on how to achieve greater representation within leadership positions. As the responses varied for this last question, there are no easy strategies or solutions. We realized the question itself is a difficult one to answer because to increase greater representation is a complex process and there is no definitive answer. Perhaps, the question could have been "What steps has the district taken to achieve greater representation in the district?" We could have also asked, "What observations have you made about the ways in which organizations and communities work to increase representation?" and "How can the community support the district's movement towards increased diversity and representation?

Social justice education places an emphasis on the end results and goals. If the goal of research in diversity in education is to create a system that further reflects the society it serves, it must be the intention of all stakeholders to cultivate a space in which all individuals feel valued. Achieving this goal will demand that more voices are heard. It will require previously marginalized voices to seek out and find the space to be heard while, at the same time, drawing upon and utilizing the privilege of others to amplify those voices so that they are heard. This can only be achieved collectively, and allyship will be essential. Most importantly, achieving greater representation among educational leaders is part of a larger community shift toward equity and inclusion. This was most evident in our conversation with Naomi when she posed a question: "how do you elect diverse people?" Her question pointed to the fact that despite the diversity within the community, constituents tend to elect to the Board of Trustees fewer people from underrepresented groups. The result is that these decision-makers do not fully reflect the diverse identities of those they serve. Increasing the visibility of leaders from visible and invisible underrepresented groups would send a message to voters that those voices are valued and belong

in positions of influence. Bringing awareness about the need for representation and diversity at all levels within the school district also extends to voters.

In the Evergreen School District and other school districts, it is the trustees who hire formal leaders. Therefore, educating educational stakeholders and community members on the importance and benefits of representation is one way to shift attitudes and understanding around diversity. Diversity training for the current Board and district staff could bring awareness to the systemic barriers faced by those who identify with underrepresented groups and such training could lead to systemic changes that impact students, staff and the greater community. The effects of representation in leadership include more just and equitable policies in schools and improved outcomes for the students and communities they serve (Atkins, Fertig & Wilkins, 2014; Niesche, 2018). Finally, being intentional in seeking out qualified candidates from underrepresented groups when hiring for senior management positions would signal to everyone that the district is serious about increasing diversity.

The increased presence of visible and invisible underrepresented formal leaders serves as a message to the whole community that encourages a move beyond the surface to larger systemic and institutional change. It upholds and supports the pursuit of inclusion. Effective change will not happen until more people are in leadership positions where they are able to speak freely about the barriers and marginalization they face. Furthermore, in opening spaces for more stories to be heard, we are also opening spaces for underrepresented students and their families.

**5.3 Future Research**

It became evident that more research is needed about diversity in leadership in BC school districts. There remains a gap in the diversity of visible and invisible groups represented in the research. Our study made evident a number of challenges in researching leadership for diversity

and leadership with diversity. Therefore, we have identified several factors that could be considered when conducting future research focused on underrepresented groups.

We had a low response rate which is aligned with previous studies done in this area. The biggest challenge to conducting research about diversity in leadership is to facilitate safe, open spaces for the stories of individual leaders to be heard. As researchers, we found that identity is a highly personal dimension of leadership that requires a safe space for individuals to self-identify and disclose their experiences. The issues that affect educational leaders who come from underrepresented groups are rooted in systemic and historical structures. Disclosure in and of itself challenges these norms. Although researchers can make efforts to assure anonymity, any disclosures still have the potential to risk disclosing the identity of the participant. Moving forward, researchers will need to keep in mind the high stakes of disclosure. It will require the ability to balance efforts to provide anonymity, while, at the same time, honouring the stories of participants. The unique identities and experiences of respondents will make them easy to identify, especially in smaller districts and communities. Given the personal nature of identity and, potentially, the emotion of a lifetime of marginalization and discrimination, researchers will need to personalize their invitations and interactions with potential respondents. Most importantly, the experiences of underrepresented groups need to be heard and shared with the understanding that a shift in policy and practices can only be effective when it is informed and takes into consideration as many perspectives and experiences as possible.

Another recommendation for future research includes looking at the complexities of intersectionality between race, women and parenthood, gender stereotypes and double standards. Future studies could involve further investigation of the barriers women and mothers face and ways they can feel supported in the pursuit of leadership. We would recommend more qualitative

studies conducted about Asian and Indigenous leaders as we found few studies on Canadian people of colour in educational leadership. Additional research into hiring practices, messaging, and definitions of leadership with relation to race could be conducted in addition to research on mentorship models with a greater focus on diversity and inclusion.

**5.4 Conclusion**

This project allowed us to experience the ways in which research affords an opportunity to open and hold spaces for underrepresented voices. Our ten respondents represent a variety of identities and lived experiences, but there are many others. It is essential to seek out and share those stories. We recognize that these are stories of individuals and that their worldviews and experiences may not be indicative of all people. However, it is our hope that in sharing these stories, those who make connections with these stories may feel a sense of affirmation in that they are not alone and provide greater perspectives to those who have not lived similar experiences.

Our research has made a positive difference to how we identify with others and see ourselves, and hopefully has also made a positive difference to our respondents and interviewees. It is our identity that often informs our work as educators. Moreover, being authentic about our identity further cultivates a space in which others feel safe and accepted. We sensed that respondents to our questionnaire felt a sense of affirmation that someone noticed and was asking questions they have been wanting to discuss for a long time, as well as a sense of relief that they are not alone in their experiences

This capstone project provided each researcher with a space to reflect not only upon their own identity, but also their own place within educational leadership. Like us, our participants wrestled with how their identity impacted their leadership journey. Two out of four interviewees

reflected with laughter and tears. Their tears indicated that our interviewees have faced difficult barriers in their leadership pathway. We draw inspiration from our participants' perseverance and persistence, and strength from the ways in which their identity drove them forward, shaped their purpose, and prepared them to make an impact in their school communities. We now look to our own leadership pathways with greater knowledge and understanding of what lies ahead, and awareness that, though there are barriers, they are not insurmountable. Choosing to move forward will require a commitment to persevere. This research has granted us the privilege of role models and allies to look to for encouragement and guidance. We are honoured to follow them in claiming space for ourselves and creating space for others to embrace diversity.

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Educational Leadership and Inclusion:

Opening Doors for Diversity

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of vice-principals and principals who self-identify as members of visible or invisible underrepresented groups regarding opportunities and challenges faced when moving into their current leadership role. Highlighting and examining the experiences and successes of district administrators may lead to changes in policies and practices that encourage and empower others who identify as underrepresented to move into leadership positions, specifically school-based administrative positions. An investigation of this nature offers an opportunity to educate and empower others with similar aspirations.

For this questionnaire, there are fifteen questions. Please select one answer for each of the multiple-choice questions. Please type in your answers for the open-ended questions. You have the right to not answer any of the questions or withdraw from the questionnaire at any time. After you are finished, please click SUBMIT.

Questionnaire Questions

1. What is your current role?

    a. Principal

    b. Vice-Principal

    c. Other

2. Are you an administrator in:

    a. Elementary

  b. Secondary

  c. Other, please specify

3. Do you identify as

  a. Female

  b. Male

  c. Other

  d. Prefer not to say

4. Do you identify with:

  a. A visible underrepresented group

  b. An invisible underrepresented group

  c. Both a and b

  d. None of the above

5. With which underrepresented group(s) do you identify? (Check all that apply)

  a. Underrepresented racialized/ethnic group

  b. Gender Identity

  c. LGBTQIA2+

  d. Indigenous Peoples

  e. Religious

  f. Immigrant

  g. Refugee

  h. Persons with disabilities

  i. Other, please specify

6. How long have you been in an administrative leadership role?

a. 1-2 years

    b. 3-4 years

    c. 5 or more years

7. How many years did you spend teaching before moving into an administrative leadership

    role?

    a. Less than 5 years

    b. 5 to 10 years

    c. More than 10 years

8. What experiences prepared you for leadership? (Check all that apply)

    a. Prior role(s)

    b. Professional development

    c. Workshops

    d. Mentors

    e. Other, please specify

9. What impact do you believe your identity has had on your career development?

    a. Positive

    b. Negative

    c. Both positive and negative

    d. Neither positive or negative

    Please explain your response.

10. Do you believe there is equitable representation of underrepresented groups in formal

    educational leadership roles in the district?

    a. Yes

b. No

c. Unsure

Please elaborate on your response.

11. In your opinion, how important is it to see representation from underrepresented groups in leadership positions?

   a. Not important

   b. Somewhat important

   c. Important

   d. Very important

   e. No opinion

Please explain your response.

12. Have you taken steps to develop leadership capacity in others from underrepresented groups?

   a. Yes

   b. No

Please elaborate on your response.

13. What do you think the district could do to increase the level of representation in formal leadership positions in the school district?

14. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience or the representation of underrepresented groups in leadership positions in education?

15. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview? [Providing your name and contact information expresses an interest in being interviewed. We will contact you with

more information about the interview and you will have the opportunity to give or not to give final consent.]

    a.  Yes, please contact me.

       Please provide your name and contact information.

    b.  No, thank you.

❏ I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that by submitting the questionnaire I give consent for the researchers to view my responses.*

*Required

**Appendix B: Interview Questions**

An interview protocol will be followed; however, the interview questions are primarily intended to prompt participants to elaborate upon the responses given in the questionnaire. The order of questions may vary and additional questions may be asked to probe responses.

1.  In your questionnaire you wrote, _____. Could you give an example or elaborate more on that?

2.  I noticed there was a common theme of _____ from many of the questionnaire responses. In your opinion, why do you think this is?

3.  Many people responded to question #___ with a similar response of _____, why do you think that is?

4.  Describe your pathway to formal leadership in the district.

5.  Have mentors played a role in your career advancement? If yes, please describe the impact they have had.

6.  With regards to overcoming challenges, what advice would you give to teachers aspiring to be vice-principals or principals?