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Becoming Conscious: An Autoethnographic Study Analyzing the Relationship Between Identity and Leadership

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Becoming Conscious: An Autoethnographic Study Analyzing the Relationship Between

Identity and Leadership

by

Aaron Izzo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a concentration in Educational Leadership
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Lifelong Learning
College of Education
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Dedication

Dr. Maya Angelou once said, "I come as one, but I stand as 10,000". As I continue to grow, live, and learn, I have yet to find a more salient point about how we show up in this world and impact each other. While this dissertation is designed to be my work, especially since I am doing an autoethnographic dissertation, I am only a part of the whole of my experiences that led me to finally develop, write, and submit this work. Everyone I have met and interacted with is a part of this. I am genuinely grateful to be given this opportunity to showcase my experiences and thoughts in this manner. I am here now because all of you provided the foundation and catalyst to do this work.

To my spouse, James, thank you for believing in me, supporting me, and helping me grow into a better person, partner, and parent. This work is also dedicated to our three children. To Maya for bestowing upon me the title of father. One that I intend to uphold to its highest honor. You have taught me first-hand how the impact of words and actions can shape the next generation. To Alexander for showing me the true meaning of unconditional love and perseverance. To Thaddaeus, thank you for teaching me to see beauty even during turbulent times.

Thank you also to the community that rallied behind my family and me to support us in this endeavor, as well as being excellent role models and support for our children. You and many more are part of that 10,000, and I would not be where I am today. Thank you.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

iv

Abstract

This dissertation aims to define the connection between one's perceptions of self and how one conceptualizes leadership. This study first conceptualized my own identity, seeking to connect my past experiences and interactions with others utilizing a term borrowed from Eastern philosophy, samskara, to see how they impact my current practice within leadership. Within the current body of research, various forms of leadership approaches, such as relational, appreciative, feminist, queer, and conscious leadership, were described and explored. What was found to be missing from the current body of work was a connection between who a person is, how they identify, and what connections they have to their leadership approach. This dissertation aims to provide an example of this connection as I have worked to gain a deeper sense of self-awareness (Hayden, 2017) and my conceptualization of leadership. This study will then take it a step further as I draw a connection between my conceptualization of leadership and uncomfortably reflect on how that impacts my interactions with others. Autoethnography is utilized in this dissertation as both process and product (Jones, 2012), as this work is self-reflective and narrative. I invite readers into a world I have created (Ellis, 2004) so that they can understand the connections between my identity markers and the interconnectedness of my conceptualization of leadership. Discussion centers around the findings within his study, such as the connection between the person and the personal identities of a leader, as well as the implications this work has on leaders, the individuals they work with, and the practice of leadership.

Chapter 1:

The Prism of Identity

The world as we have created is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking. Albert Einstein

While observing beams of light with the naked eye, one can discern and document their

various characteristics, including presence, intensity, movement, warmth, and the extent to which

they can dispel darkness. In the absence of further data, one might assume light is just one thing

only: one color with minimal characteristics; its function is directly dependent upon the needs or

bias of the observer. However, when the same observer utilizes a tool, such as a prism, through

which the light is directed, a broad spectrum of previously unseen colors, movements, and

observable characteristics arises. Individuals are similar in this manner. The characteristics of

light as seen in individuals can include gender, race, sexuality, disability, economic status, and

other identity markers or personality traits. These beams of light often interact with certain

existing structures and function to mute undesirable characteristics so that only the filtered,

conforming, plain white light can shine.

Growing up, I remember taking deliberate actions to maintain my personal safety by not

standing out in any given environment, not shining too bright, and conforming to societal norms.

In time, however, it became evident that continuing such a facade in hopes of conformity was

causing significant harm to myself, my children (to whom I act as an instructor and role model),

and others with whom I interacted. Thus, I began unpacking the various aspects of my

personality, dismantling the parts of the person I conceptualized myself to be. From there, I

1

could develop an appreciation for my various personality characteristics and identity markers and begin to interact with others in more meaningful and productive ways. This study stems from the recognition that who I am and how I perceive myself is not the result of any single personality characteristic or identity marker; rather, I am the physical manifestation of my experiences, beliefs, and identity markers. I sought to gain a deeper insight into how this realization impacts my interactions with those around me, primarily through the context of leadership. The data collected for this study utilized autoethnographic methods that collected stories and experiences from my past and present practices. Then, using concepts from intersectionality theory, I aimed to analyze how the various aspects of my identity interact, interconnect, and diverge with each other and influence how I related, interacted, and impacted those around me. In essence, I needed to examine my light: first by removing the structures responsible for filtering my light into conformity and then by utilizing the tool of intersectionality as a prism through which these previously unseen characteristics could be further observed and considered. So that a more thorough analysis of my light and its properties can lead to a deeper understanding of who I conceptualize myself to be as well as how I impact and interact with others.

Coming to the Study

In learning to trust my instincts, I became more self-aware, more reflective, and more compassionate. Connecting with Eastern philosophy, I began connecting with my inner self and seeking to recognize how I conceptualized various aspects of my identity, how these identity markers impact and interact, and how my belief systems connected them. From there, I began to consider the ways in which my perceptions of self were connected to leadership, as well as the impacts I was having on the organizations and people whom I led and supported. Shortly after beginning this work, I noticed that I was attempting to approach situations from one perspective

2

at a time there was a lack of connection be myself and those I was interacting with. For example, when working with someone concerned about a student's safety, I found that it was less meaningful to provide support from a professional standpoint only; there also needed to be a more profound connection that originated from a space of empathy. This empathy stems less from the knowledge of district, state, or federal policy and more from experiences, interactions with others, and a willingness to be wrong. Through this analysis of self, I realized that to be the best husband, father, friend, educator, and leader possible, I needed to begin to understand how all these identity markers interact, influence, and diverge from one another and make up who I am, what I want, and working with the understanding that I cannot continue to compartmentalize my life based on the various roles I have. At any given point, I can be a father and a spouse, a leader and a student, and I am an educator in good times and in bad. I am all these things simultaneously, and they are present in my actions and impact those around me.

This process has resulted in significant personal growth; I have increased my capacity for compassion for myself and others. I now understand what it means to devote time and energy to parts of my life that affirm my beliefs, who I want to be, and what I want for others. I developed the recognition that I do not want to be "the best;" instead, I would rather be the one that creates shared spaces where mutual understanding and productivity ensure that all are welcomed, accepted, and challenged to be more empathic, more compassionate in the practices, and more willing to expand this space whenever possible. There is, however, a fear I have regarding my current practices as an educational leader: I want to study how these practices impact me and those around me. Part of the study aims to consider both the extent to which I have experienced change and to which I impact those around me as intended. I also wish to examine the extent to

which my knowledge base and practices align with what I think, feel, say, and do and who I strive to be as a person and a leader.

Telling and retelling my story, I was able to inductively develop this study based on the following research questions:

RQ 1: What connection exists between understanding the various aspects of a person's identity and how they conceptualize leadership?

RQ2: In recognition of my multiple identities, leadership actions, and interactions with others, in what ways did I engage in conscious leadership practices?

Another aim of this study stems from undertaking the work of understanding one's own identities, the various markers they possess, and how a leader intentionally develops those practices to be able to lead more consciously. This concept is utilized in the work of Brazdau (2015) and Ward (2016) who suggested that leaders need to develop a heightened sense of who they are in relation to how they interact with others and what impacts they have in situations. I aim to expand upon the notion of what it means to be conscious regarding how one perceives who one is. As stated previously, we are not comprised of a single personality characteristic or identity marker; we stand as a collective whole comprised of a multitude of characteristics and markers. By examining these various identity markers through the lens of intersectionality, I intend to explore the multiple aspects of a person's identity in forming their experiences (McCall,2005). In analyzing my own perceived identity markers and the conceptualization of who I am, I utilized intersectionality in analyzing the relational aspects of connection (Cho et al., 2013) I have with those with whom I interact. This is especially true since I recognize the power relations (Bass, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991) between me and those with whom I interact.

4

Acknowledging My Light

Throughout my tenure as a learner, in formal institutional settings and through life experiences, I have noted a personal tendency to analyze an organization's structures and dynamics. This includes seeking to understand the norms and expectations of that which surrounds me. I question and wonder why things are the way they are and what changes are needed to create an environment that is more inclusive, accepting, and inviting to all its stakeholders. I often seek out other peoples' stories to understand their challenges and how they accepted, succeeded, overcame, or failed at them. I support people by gaining deeper insight into their situation, assisting in shedding light on those who need it, and helping them become more than they perceive themselves to be. Admittedly, I have, at times, proceeded naively in this pursuit, thinking it better to help others by pointing out their flaws or attempting to present them with a "fix" to their situations. At that moment, I believed that my actions were justified by my intention to help them by preventing them from having experiences like mine. That way, they would not have to go through hard times… alone… like I did. To date, my body of work stems from pieces of my past that I so desperately wish to change or forget. I assumed that healing the broken pieces of others it would result in the healing of that corresponding piece in myself. I was mistaken. Years of practicing this form of vicarious healing led to a moment in which I realized I needed to be for myself that which I had for so long been trying to be for others. At that moment, I began to question: *Who am I? What have I experienced that has brought me to these circumstances? Who do I want to be?*

Framework and Stances

      Being raised both professionally and personally in the West, I have experienced the Judeo-Christian traditions and the connected masculine authoritarian power structures that permeate throughout the US culture. I have experienced what conditional love feels like from my parents, friends, and other members of the community. The mentality of needing to condition myself for others so that they would allow me within their space has led me to the realization that in order for me to fully understand and accept myself, I would not be welcomed within these rigid and oppressive structures. This led me to wonder what other structures are out there that are based on more feminine, liberal, and inclusive structures that could lead to unconditional love and acceptance of others. I then started looking at Eastern philosophical concepts embedded within Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. First, I sought out how those concepts impacted me as an individual and my concept of self, then what those concepts meant for me as an educator, scholar, and leader. My intention for the incorporation of these Eastern concepts within my study and my leadership approach is first to seek out alternative solutions for the limitations that are connected to Western hierarchical leadership approaches that will be discussed in Chapter 2. I am aware of my status and identity as a Caucasian cisgender male. This study is not an attempt to culturally appropriate anyone's beliefs or identities. The intention is to highlight and celebrate these practices as they are connected to conscious leadership, intersectionality, and autoethnography.

      Within the context of this study and my line of inquiry, I resonated with concepts embedded within conscious leadership, specifically utilizing the concept of the observer-self, as described by Ward and Hasse (2016). The observer-self is the mental state in which an individual can be both the observer of a situation as well as the observed within a situation as it occurs

(Ward & Hasse, 2016). how one is both impacting and impacted in a situation while at the same time noting what happened during the situation. Further, in working with concepts embedded within a conscious leadership approach, I am also incorporating concepts in the practice of being mindful, meaning I am seeking out patterns within the environment and making connections with the problems I am trying to understand and solve (Jones & Brazdau, 2015). As well as expanded consciousness, which is the process of becoming and understanding more of oneself (Ward & Haase, 2016).

These concepts are also similar to those within an autoethnographer who is conducting a study (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2002; Kerby, 1991 Le Guin, 1980). They also align with uncomfortable reflexivity, as described by Alexander (2013) and Pillow (2003). Within this concept researchers are tasked to ask themselves reflexive questions about the positionality within situations, and their commitment in understanding autoethnographic work as both method and product (Jones, 2012), while also creating rich, evocative, and believable stories that represent the autoethnographer themselves but also others to are involved with the story (Alexander, 2013 & Pillow, 2003). Intersectionality is interwoven throughout this study with uncomfortable reflexivity as well as elements from the conscious leadership approach. When intersectionality into the analysis if a study the researcher is seeking to understand the relationship between a person's various social and political identities that diverge and combine to create modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshwa, 1989). Within this study, I am recognizing that in my position as a current working district administrator, I may have more influence or say in the various situations within this study. I so am acknowledging as I am writing an autoethnographic text, I have ultimate control over how I represent myself and others within my stories (Petronio, 2002). In the drafting, editing, and revision stages of this work, I

have attempted to overcome this by asking uncomfortable reflective questions such as; how am I representing myself and others, what am I not sharing or avoiding sharing, and how does this impact the stories being told, and is this story believable?

Attempting to Be Everything for Everyone

Reflecting on my experiences at the University of South Florida, I noticed a pattern emerge in my conversations with various professors and peers during my studies. Most conversations centered around my professional aspirations, what I wanted to do with my body of work, and what I ultimately wanted to do after officially obtaining the title "Doctor." I recall saying once, "I don't want to become known in academia as the researcher who exclusively utilizes Queer Methods or who analyzes data solely through the lens of the LGBTQ+ experience." Other such common phrases that arose in these conversations included, "I don't just want to focus on trauma" or "I don't want to be pigeonholed into just one thing." These responses stemmed from uncertainty, ignorance, and fear, based on the assumption that to be successful in academia, I had to renounce other interests, desires, and pieces of myself to fit into the ivory tower of academia. Such a tower is also associated with the feeling of accomplishment; indeed, few people get to pursue such a career path, let alone hold a position in academia. Envisioning this path forward, I could finally be seen as an expert, a holder of knowledge, and a resource that others could use.

Used and not seen, that is. At the time, I thought I operated better behind the scenes by encouraging others and avoiding personal attention. After all, when things are not about you, you do not need to know who you are, what you want, or how you want other people to perceive you. Indeed, I had my ideal role, and I could hide behind the 20-ton shield of academia. Brene Brown describes a 20-ton shield, often called perfectionism, that allows one to create a barrier between

individuals and one's feelings (Brown, 2012). This barrier allowed me to evade greater personal attention while simultaneously creating an opportunity for others to achieve their goals by utilizing my knowledge and assistance. I could maintain a distance from others in that I could help elevate them and achieve their goals, but they would never have to look too closely at who I was. What better relationship could exist for someone who fears relationships?

My earliest post-secondary experience was at my local community college, where I could take multiple courses in various disciplines, have new experiences, and further explore my interests. This experience profoundly impacted my personal and professional trajectory, so much so that I recommend a similar path to others. I especially recommend this option to people who are undecided on an academic major or a definitive post-graduate career path. I began my studies as a biology major, even going so far as to travel abroad to collect biological specimens from tropical rainforests. I later changed to a medical school preparatory major and again to psychology. I pursued my education knowing I was on a simultaneous course or exploration into who I was and what I wanted professionally. This approach led me to try, fail, and try other things until I could find something with which I felt connected. In fact, during this path of post-secondary self-discovery, I encountered American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language option. The language allowed me to express feelings and intentions with my whole body entirely, and the ability to make meaning and visually represent a topic from a neutral space, as one can with ASL, greatly appealed to me. As my studies progressed in the language, I learned of the professional American Sign Language interpreter program. These professionals had fluency in both languages to the extent that they could interpret in medical, legal, and professional settings. In essence, they used their voices and bodies to express the other participants' communication while maintaining anonymity and neutrality in the conversation. I

had seemingly found the perfect career that allowed me to support others while remaining unseen.

As a professional interpreter, I ultimately became a dually-nationally-certified interpreter and could do so while hiding in plain sight. As a mentor of mine poignantly stated what it means to be a successful interpreter, "You know you have done an excellent job when the people in the conversation remember the conversation and not the interpreter." Given that logic, I reasoned that I had to be the best invisible person I could be to help as many people as possible. With this newfound goal fueled by a desire to help, I entered the field of education. I could now provide access to children who did not have the best interpreters. After all, they needed someone to be there for them: someone who could understand them, someone who speaks for them so that they can be heard, validated, and protected. In essence, the person I was trying to be for them was more indicative of the person I needed to intervene for as a child but did not have.

Working as an educational interpreter, I was exceptional. I was the most highly credentialed interpreter in the district and often the one who would stand up to the ignorant district administrators and IEP teams advocating for the needs of the children. The district swore that they were adequately preparing students for life. That life, in my mind, would be one of success and inclusivity for them. Not long after beginning my experience working in the school system, I realized that my abilities, background, and knowledge could be of better use if applied in a way that could impact more than the one child or few children with whom I was interpreting at the time. I wanted to work with larger groups of children – especially those who need someone to educate them, be there for them, and show them that they can be more than they preserve themselves to be. After realizing this, I knew the next course of action was to become a teacher. I would not settle for a single teaching license: I wanted to be able to do and teach every subject

area to every kind of student represented in our district. And within a short period, I did just that. As an alternatively certified teacher, I worked diligently to add several endorsements to my resume, including ESE, Gifted, Reading, ESOL, Elementary K-5, Middle school, and Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing. I could independently satisfy the needs of any child.

Throughout my tenure as a classroom teacher, I worked at underserved schools in the most unacknowledged places. This is where I thought I could make the most difference. While my performance evaluations rated me as a highly effective teacher every year that I taught, I certainly never felt like it. I always perceived my fellow teachers as better, more proficient, or more knowledgeable than I. Thankfully, I befriended a colleague who became a lifelong mentor and friend. He noted my excellent work but also that I needed to learn to advocate for myself to the same extent that I advocated for children and families. Not only was he present as a longtime educator and administrator, but he is also queer. I finally found a father figure who wanted association without conditions or expectations. After a few years of working with and knowing this man, we discussed educational leadership. As a former administrator, he had great insights into the system and how things can be changed from the inside. We discussed how any meaningful change that the district could see began with individuals willing to pursue top-level positions in a district. Shortly after this discussion, I decided to pursue my graduate degree in Educational Leadership to be a principal like him.

Having earned a master's degree in educational leadership, I secured a position in a large district and have more staff and responsibilities in my department than any other supervisor. After all this time, I was finally in control of my circumstances and could accomplish what I wanted in the position to which I had so long aspired. At least, that is what I thought having this was supposed to do. Instead, it left me feeling something was missing, like there was something

11

else I should be doing. In this regard, I decided to continue my education beyond my master's in securing a Ph.D. How would others take me seriously if I didn't have the most knowledge and the highest possible credentials? I can do better. I just need to learn more and be the best.

Consequences of Being the Best

> The self-righteous scream judgments against others to hide the noise of skeletons dancing in their own closets. John Mark Green

At this point in my journey, if asked to form a visual conceptualization of what it means to be the best, I would have envisioned one standing atop a mountain, winner's podium, or even the top floor executive office. Analyzing each of these visualizations in further detail, in all these scenarios, the individual can literally look down on those who have yet to accomplish what they have. Being the best meant knowing the most, being autonomous, and having others rely on you. The best would have the knowledge and skill to perform any job at or above the skill level of the person they work for. The best is someone waiting to be bestowed the keys to the kingdom. The best are so proficient in their duties that, having arrived in their current role, all previous infractions, past misdeeds, and undesirable details about their life would seemingly disappear. After all, people care more about the position one currently holds than how one got there… right? Moreover, a leader is in a position of authority, able to view others by their misdeeds, and, by proxy, will be able to teach them the errors of their way. Educated, accomplished, and alone. I possessed knowledge and skills to teach those who came before me and those newer in the field than I. I saw myself as an asset to the world, worthy of taking my place amongst the great problem-solvers of society. Armed with self-righteousness and certitude, I felt unstoppable, competent, and entitled. I thought I was ready to move up in this district via a promotion to a position of greater authority. I knew enough about educational leadership. I was even pursuing a second graduate degree in it. My boss at the time only held a bachelor's degree, and it was in an

12

ESE area that was no longer supported by the state. I can undoubtedly lead leaders to be better leaders.

End-of-year evaluations are always a stressful time for anyone, even for those in leadership positions. This is especially true for those who are not sure of themselves. Having achieved a highly effective review for many years in a row, I felt like the evaluation meeting set by my boss would not result in or warrant any particular discussion other than what has historically occurred. It was as unassuming Tuesday afternoon as I readied my documents. I was prepared to prove that I was a model employee. Although a little uneasy, I felt I was adequately prepared for the meeting. However, upon opening the door to her office, I was greeted by my boss, her boss seated beside her, and the director of the ESE department. I immediately knew something was wrong. My stomach sank, my palms became sweaty, and my heart started to beat out of my chest. I felt like a little kid ready to be told, scolded, and invalidated by his mother.

During this meeting, I was presented with a list of concerns expressed by the staff I worked with, including district-based, school-based, and my direct staff. Some such comments indicated the staff member felt I acted in a manner that was authoritarian, brash, unsympathetic, and distrustful. In the descriptions presented, I was referred to as someone so manipulative that I could utilize knowledge of current systems to "cover my tracks," so when doing something seemingly against district policy, there would be no traceable evidence. I was described as someone from whom others fear retaliation, someone who does not belong to this management level, and perhaps in the district itself. I could feel the reality of what was presented, like a sinking weight pressing down on my very bones. Instinctively, I began to excuse or provide greater context for some of the perceived misdeeds from others: it was always my intention to help instead of hurting. Clearly, the perspectives presented to me could not be valid: I have

13

evidence of good working relationships with others. It could not be true: That is not who I am. This defensive posture was not received well by the management team. At one point, the director said, "It doesn't matter who likes you. This is about what those that don't are saying that matters right now." Thus, action steps were created after further conversation: I was tasked to reflect on how others perceive me and how I must rebuild the damaged relationships moving forward. I was given a low evaluation and asked to consider why I wanted to become a leader. However, instead of turning inward and reflecting on the contents of the meeting, I remained on the defensive. Telling others what happened in the meeting, I portrayed myself as the victim and target. The pandemic and the following years have been rough on people, I reasoned, so maybe some of my comments or actions had been taken seriously, and perhaps those who expressed concern were being too overly sensitive. I just needed to continue doing what I was doing, and, in the end, I would prove myself right.

Having trusted friends at work has always been an asset. One friend, who knew the more specific details of the meeting, tried reaching out. She asked if there was anything she could do to help the situation, even if it meant simply being present enough to provide a listening ear. These offers, however, went unacknowledged and underutilized. I told her not to worry; I just needed to think things through. It was not as bad as it seemed. If all else fails, I will wait them out; eventually, when policy or structure changes are made, I will be fine, and my supervisors will be proven wrong. In response to my insistence that I was fine, she told me that she felt our relationship was one-sided and was unsure if we should continue. If she cannot be a support for me, and her attempts to connect and listen are persistently denied, then maybe she was yet another person who could potentially be causing me additional harm. I gave her the same answers to which I had become so accustomed: she was just being overly sensitive. I reassured

14

her that I had gone over what was happening to me. I then helped her sort through her feelings, comforting her so we could be ok again.

I came home late from work one night a few weeks later. I want to say that I was working on my dissertation, but the truth is I was probably late because I took on an extra task at work. My spouse was sitting quietly on the couch when I came in that night. We started a typical conversation: the kids, work, what they had done that day. Suddenly, the conversation shifted. Something was missing from our relationship. They only ever discovered my problems after the fact and could not make sense of the barriers I created between us. They never doubted my support for them, but it was entirely one-sided. My reluctance to share my feelings and experiences left them feeling unworthy of that insight or that I had judged them either unwilling or incapable of supporting me. We were at a turning point in our relationship: either we needed to seek help or determine how to end our relationship. I sat there listening as they spoke those words. I took a deep breath. And I realized, in that very moment, that I had two options: I could make another attempt to excuse or placate them to keep our relationship the same, or I could embrace the reality that, after all my efforts and insistence that everything was indeed fine, that I had to face an uncomfortable truth: I was not who I wanted to be.

A fear-based response can often be described as weightlessness or groundlessness. Suddenly, the room contains less air, the collared shirt becomes constraining, the room's temperature rises, and the heart beats so intensely that one is unsure if it will continue to beat without the other's permission. An eternity passes between words. Staring at the person, you are hoping that you are going to be ok, be safe, and still be welcomed. There are several moments in my life, conceptualized as samskaras, that deeply connected to that feeling – moments such as coming out to my mother as a queer person, opening up to my partner about who I really was,

15

hearing that my sister committed suicide, or being told that no matter what I do I will never be accepted by anyone because I who I was. Once I embraced the experience and identified what I could learn from them, I began to understand the power of choice: who I wanted to be, how I wanted to act, and who I allowed within my physical, mental, and emotional space.

Seeking to Find a Solution for Separation within a Community

As a current practitioner working within the K-12 education system, especially post-COVID-19 school closures. There has been a rise in divisive practices and a fractioning of various groups who support ideologically opposed value systems that aim to seek control of not only their circumstances but the circumstances of others. Specifically within the state of Florida, there has been an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, banning of Critical Race Theory (CRT), as well as the added requirements to vet all curricula, materials, and books that students have access. Groups such as Moms of Liberty, Equality Florida, the Ku Klux Klan, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) groups are assembling at board meetings to promote their agendas, disenfranchise other groups, and emphasize that their way is the best way. Interactions there seek to gain unity or minimally slicing of adversaries only leave space with flustered community members and victims, as well as a splintered system that limits unfavorable options to all parties. Little room is left for collaboration, perspective-taking, and compassion to be developed.

In understanding my personal journey of discovery (Dyson, 2007) and working on my own practice of expanded consciousness (Ward & Haase, 2016), learning to understand oneself, what one desires, and what one is connected to the realization of what is and is not healthy to be around. Developing and setting boundaries (Petronio, 2002).is then recommended in order for one to hold oneself in a space that allows for personal growth and psychological safety and for

16

one to positively be of support to others. At times, in one's private life, a need may arise to set a boundary with others that entails the dissolution of a relationship. As the individual has found it established the boundary that this is neither something that is beneficial for them nor it is something they want to continue with. While these boundaries are important for individuals in their personal lives to establish and maintain, they are also impossible in the professional setting. Especially in the public education setting, all children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE, 2012). Here, the term all really does apply to all, not just the families of children that we agree with or the ones that are on the fence that are either bystanders or individuals that can be swayed with the group majority. The work then of school and community leaders needs to be centered around not the loudest majority beliefs but rather what the needs of the whole community are, as well as to look at the history of the established beliefs and values of the community. Seeking to answer how they arrived at such a place of division, what is the connection and the need that connects the community, what perspectives need to be shared, who needs to be protected, who needs to be supported, as well as what needs to be healed, worked through and what structures need to be established so that everyone within the community is valued. While the aim of this study is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all solution to one of the problems described above this dissertation aims to offer an alternative path in which leaders are tasked to become conscious about who they are as individuals, as leaders, to then seek to understand others that they are in relations to and note how their interactions with others impact those relationships as well as to communally develop process, spaces, and structures that bring people together to work productively together.

17

Usage of Autoethnography

The methodology for this dissertation is autoethnography: I am telling a story of change and growth, combined with lived experiences and the utilization of narratives with explanations (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). This is done to have the reader bring the same level of careful attention to my words in the context of their own life (Lewis 2007) as they will do to mine. This narrative approach fosters an inviting and enticing aesthetic, allowing writers to organize their thoughts and experiences into temporally meaningful s (Ellis 2004). These literary asides, or episodes, allow for information to be relayed and for world-building and deeper connections to occur. Berry (2006) used the term "interpretive anchors," which shape how we constitute ourselves with our experiences. Referencing Eastern philosophy, I used the term "samskara," or mental impressions that one experiences throughout one's life that shape how that person perceives the world around them and who they conceptualize themselves to be. I tell stories that center around samskaras, offering perspectives on events and permitting memories to be fully present during the reading of this text with the intent of shaping future practices and perspectives (Lewis, 2007).

In choosing autoethnography, I am asking readers to experience my story's truth and become co-participants, engaging in the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Ellis, 1996). In drafting this dissertation, utilizing autoethnography as a method, I am focusing on the usage of metaphor, critical incidence, and reflexivity within these narratives. Metaphor brings imagery and scenery into the story that words alone cannot describe (Dyson, 2007). Dyson (2007) appreciates this viewpoint of the metaphor; they contend that the qualitative researcher using metaphor is ordering thought and experiences and constructing a reality about

lived experiences rather than using pre-established procedures to generate or establish formal and

empirical truths. They state:

> It is my understanding that metaphor has the power to take us to where we have not been,
> or ever perceived we could go. Metaphor, because it generates lifelikeness, seems to have
> the power to move a human being to new levels of consciousness and perception as the
> various parts of a journey story unravel, are investigated, and pondered. (p.41)

Further, using the works of Dyson (2007) and Lakoff (1990), the metaphor for my study is the

"journey of discovery" metaphor. Indeed, the journey metaphor applies here because it provides

an essential ingredient for my study: Freedom (Dyson, 2007). In using the journey metaphor,

Lakoff (1999) notes that freedom alludes to undetermined destinations and discoveries yet

unknown. I also contend that this freedom can be defined more broadly as freedom from

heteronormative expectations, freedom to voice what was previously silenced, freedom from

shame, and freedom to exist.

My experiences and samskaras were analyzed using Goodall's concepts of reflexivity.

These state that autoethnographers use reflexivity to trouble the "relationships between

researchers, themselves, and others; being reflexive means taking seriously the self's location in

culture and scholarship (Goodall, 2000). Reflexivity consists of turning back on our experiences,

identities, and relationships to consider how they influence our present circumstances and

thoughts. Schon (1983) further expands upon reflexivity by referring to two types of reflection:

reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action refers to reflection that occurs

simultaneously with the event in question. This concept will be further discussed in chapter 5 of

this dissertation. Reflection-on-action refers to the process of reflecting after the action has taken

place to improve the future implementation of the action. This concept will be utilized in Chapter

4, as well as the Eastern practice called Union of Mergence.

Many self-reflective questions emerged in performing this autoethnographical work. Such questions include: *Who am I? What do I have to say? What does it mean to lead?* And *how do I want to lead?* When these questions surfaced, I could see why I had been drawn to this methodology. Life experiences left me feeling silenced and voiceless for being sick, queer, young, different, intelligent, observant, an advocate and lost. This sense of voicelessness was ever-present. I assumed allowing others the opportunity to speak, grow, learn, and love required and necessitated my silence. I must be silent, not expressing my needs, feelings, and heartbreaks. However, within the journey of discovery and the usage of autoethnography, I have come to the realization that my voice does have a place. My voice is "a gift to readers" and a "self-reflective meditation on the nature of ethnographic understanding" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.920). Freadman (2004, p.20) states that autoethnography is more than a research method; indeed, it is a way of living. Autoethnographic stories enable writers to make our research and our lives better so that we can, in turn, become better educators and leaders who work from a conscious and intentional place that allows for a response grounded in compassion and the understanding of how actions impact others. Working through this autoethnographic study has allowed me to accomplish something meaningful. I have learned about writing, writing through uncertainty, writing through pain, letting go of control in my writing, and the ethics of writing autoethnography, all leading to writing a new plot about my life (Richardson, 2001). At a certain point, I realized I was tired of being angry, feeling lost, and needing to establish control by any means necessary. I am ready to heal, engage, and move on. Autoethnography is a medium through which that can be accomplished.

Combining a Conscious Approach to Leadership with Intersectionality

Identifying and analyzing my samskaras and performing this autoethnographic work, I have been tasked by Change (2008) to determine the window of interpretation through which I will explore my story and in the development of implications for others. In looking at literature pertaining to the use of autoethnographic work and leadership theory, I was drawn to Conscious Leadership. Conscious Leadership is defined as the practice of maintaining a state of heightened awareness of thought, emotion, and experience on a moment-to-moment basis; to be a conscious leader, the individual must choose to lead from a place of mindfulness and expanded consciousness (Ward & Haase, 2016). Delving further into this leadership approach, Ward and Haase (2016) state that one needs to become what they referred to as an "Observer-Self." That is, one needs to perform a closer analysis of one's self-conceptualization (identity), actions, and reactions to discover where these originate and what lessons they provide. The aspirations of this leadership theory also align with the purpose of autoethnography, as it intends to recognize the stories of self and the implications of others while attempting to make an impact for the better (Lincoln & Guba 1995; Red-Danahay 1999).

Working through a conscious approach to leadership leaves some potential gaps within this research. One area warranting further clarification is, during this study, what exactly have I become conscious of? Focusing solely on the leadership role and identity marker leaves a limited opportunity for growth, understanding, and implications for others. As stated in this chapter, I am not defined by one characteristic or identity marker. This led to the inclusion of intersectionality as defined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). Crenshaw (1989) described this feminist framework as one that understands the relationship of a person's various social and political identities that combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Recognizing that one is not

simply just queer, or just cisgender, or just white. Instead, a person can be queer, cisgender, and white. This combination of identity markers impacts that individual differently than someone who may be queer, transgender, or white. Researchers utilizing intersectionality when analyzing complex social situations should not reduce understanding to a singular category; rather, it should facilitate the understanding of substantively distinct experiences from the effects of inextricably connected roles and situations (Crenshaw, 2000; Hill-Collings, 2004). This is especially poignant for this study, as I am interacting with various individuals. I need to recognize my formal and informal roles within these relationships and consider the implications of the power dynamics during these interactions. One critique of utilizing intersectionality is that researchers tend only to focus on the culmination of an individual's factors (King 1988). For example, when seeking to gain the experiences of someone who is Latinx, gender nonconforming, and disabled, some researchers will not try to separate those identity makers individually in relation to the person's circumstances or in relation to the combined effect those markers have on the individuals' experiences.

King (1988) stated that there was a need for research to consider "multiple jeopardy," or how an individual's identity markers lead to compounded discrimination and oppression. This leads to the notion that individuals can be fully aware of their various identity markers and how they are victims of the multiple systems of discrimination (Hill Collins, 2002; Harnois, 2015; King, 1989; Ward, 2004). In seeking to understand how various identity markers influence how they interact in the world (King, 1989). I approached utilizing a conscious leadership approach that incorporated concepts from intersectionality theory. I posit that this process is similar to what Ward and Haase call expanded consciousness. Both conscious leadership and intersectionality align when they state that an individual cannot identify as only one identity

marker; conversely, only through the culmination of all their identities can they recognize how these various identities impact them both individually and together. I am acknowledging that while I am working in a leadership capacity, I am also a parent, Caucasian, queer, able-bodied, bilingual, a caretaker, an advocate, a friend, and a scholar. I am all these simultaneously and concurrently, and they present themselves according to my various interactions. I sought to clarify how they, individually and combined, affected how I conceptualized my identity and influenced me as a leader.

Road Map of the Study

Chapter 1 sets the groundwork for the study, establishing a space for me to begin to introduce my background, how this study was conceptualized, the aims of this study, as well as the introduction of method utilized through this study, autoethnography, the window in which I will begin to analyze the data from (Chang 2008), intersectionality, as well as the foundational concept of leadership in which I ascribe to, and conscious leadership. Moving forward, I reviewed and analyzed the literature, the method of autoethnography, the data collected in this study, and what implications this study has for others. I then worked from a perspective that sought to understand how my identity makers, both individually and combined, affect how I conceptualize my identity and influence me as a leader.

Chapter 2, "Conceptualizing Leadership," explores how leadership can be conceptualized. Chapter 2 then explores various leadership approaches, including Ethical Leadership, Appreciative Leadership, Relational Leadership, Conscious Leadership, Queer Leadership, and Feminist Leadership, within the current literature to seek an operational definition of what it means to lead and to lead ethically. I then conceptualize intersectionality and describe its position within existing research and its implications for educational leadership. The

next section of this chapter is organized to identify and define how these leadership approaches can be quilted together (Chang 2008) to explore how a leader can lead consciously and intentionally.

Chapter 3, "Coming to Know Autoethnography," is intended to describe the autoethnographical method. This chapter explains how it is used in qualitative research, how it is defined as a method, how it involves and impacts others, how other scholars in other disciplines have used it, and how it is used within educational leadership. I then draw from literature to illustrate how I utilize autoethnography with a foundation based upon the concepts presented in Chapter 2, showcasing how this autoethnographic study will be conducted and how the gift of autoethnography is meant to impact oneself and others. This chapter sets the parameters of this study and provides the context regarding the data that has been collected and analyzed.

Chapter 4, "Leading Consciously," was drafted to connect my experiences as a current practitioner within the specific context of leadership as defined in Chapter 3. This chapter focused on the samskaras or autoethnographic episodes that emerged from the inquiry process that had been collected and analyzed utilizing intersectional theory and the Ethic of Care within the defined parameters of leadership theory and uncomfortable reflexivity. Autoethnographic episodes were also drafted to provide additional context and ethnography for this study. This attempted to solidify the connection between one's perceptions of self, how they conceptualize leadership, and how this impacts those they are in relation to.

Chapter 5, "Moving Forward Productivity Together," discusses the implications and recommendations based on what was learned throughout this study. It provides an example of what it is like to work from a conscious and intentional leadership approach as defined within this study, paired intersectionality theory. It offers suggestions for how this work can be further

explored and implemented. This study is not exhaustive, nor is it the final discussion of these topics. On the contrary, this work can serve as a discussion point within a dialogue of work that desires to be cultivated, grown, pruned, and implemented further. In this way, others can lead from a place of self-awareness and create meaningful opportunities for others to connect, collaborate, and create inclusive, proactive, and beneficial structures for those with whom they interact.

Critical Concepts

Conscious leadership can be described as the practice of maintaining a state of heightened awareness of thought, emotion, and experience on a moment-to-moment basis; to be a conscious leader, the individual must choose to lead from a place of mindfulness and expanded consciousness (Ward & Haase, 2016).

Observer-self isolate aspects of themself from emersion in their ongoing life, standing apart to see the sources of their behavior and thinking and to note the effects they have on others (Ward & Haase, 2016).

Queer is a term incorporated from the gay liberation movement. It is an umbrella term used in radical acts of defiance and pride again homonormativity as well as heteronormativity (Loue & Sajatovic, 2008). Queer, within the context of this text, is an umbrella term used to represent all members of the LGBTQ+ community. . Pryor (2021) also states that queer can be used as an inclusive term that respects the multiple dimensions of sexual and gender diversity, challenging hetero/cisnormative practices.

Samskara describes mental formations or impressions that develop after interactions with others (Fowler, 2002; Kalupahana, 1992; Philips, 2009).

Chapter 2:

Conceptualizing Leadership

A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be. Rosalynn Carter

This chapter explores established concepts of leadership, intersectionality, and the Ethic of Care. In reviewing current literature, I have organized this chapter to first lay the foundation of how leadership can be conceptualized, considering the act of leadership itself and its purpose and ethical implications. Knowing that leadership is an active and ongoing process that is highly dependent upon situational circumstances, I looked to expand upon some selected approaches that aligned with my practices and experiences, exploring the benefits and risks of each practice. I then transition to exploring how intersectionality theory can be used within the context of leadership and understanding one's own identity. Then, utilizing current research, I explore the impacts a leader's identity and associated practices can have on the organization for which they work. Finally, I quilt these concepts together (Chang, 2008), further defining leadership, intersectionality, and their implications for practitioners.

Conceptualizing Leadership

Leadership does not exist within a vacuum: it is a social structure that manifests within a specific context and community, also consisting of various subgroups made up of individuals with different perspectives, needs, and desires. Conflict ensues when these groups interact. While conflict is not always a negative aspect of the human condition, it necessitates communicating with others, understanding the perspectives of others, and finding solutions that are amicable to

both parties (Koltz, 2019). However, this assumes that both parties have the same scope of power and influence over their environment and are willing to maintain that equitable balance. When this is not the case, leadership is then needed to represent and work within communities. As a function of their role leaders are then tasked with finding solutions that are mutually beneficial to implement. However, power imbalances cause leaders to navigate the tensions between groups, communicate in productive ways, and find solutions that aim to balance the imbalance of power. James MacGregor Burns (2004) argues that a leader's role is to exploit tension and conflict within people's value systems so that they can then, in turn, raise people's consciousness. This not only provides the opportunity for a solution to be reached but also allows the opportunity for followers to grow in their knowledge and understanding of each other and the issue at hand.

Burn's conceptualization of leadership postulates that a leader needs to be clear about their role and the role of their followers (2004). This collaboration aspect of leadership is also essential because it relates to the leader's sense and use of power. Power need not be dictatorial or punitive; instead, it can be used in a non-coercive manner to orchestrate, direct, and guide members of an organization to be inclusive in selecting the best choice for the organization. Burns emphasizes this point by stating that leadership is not just about directed results but also about offering followers a choice among alternatives (2004). These choices should come not from the leader but from the followers themselves, ensuring that multiple perspectives are being utilized and understood. This also fits Burn's theory of being a leader when they task leaders to elevate their followers so that they can then, in turn, become leaders themselves (2004).

Leadership often rests on two principal ideals that conflict: trust and authority (Ciulla, 2014; Leypoldt et al., 2021). Trust becomes synonymous with transparency, understanding how one uses power, and willingness to meet in the middle. The leader needs to be transparent with

27

their actions, showing what they believe and why they believe it while allowing others to do the same with their beliefs. This then allows for critical conversations to be had while the leader is also ensuring safety and boundary development and maintenance. If someone violates their ethical and moral boundaries, they are disciplined accordingly. Leaders acting in this manner evoke trust in others as clear expectations are set and a collaborative decision-making culture is created. One that aims to seek not what is convenient but a balanced and inclusive solution within their community.

Authority is synonymous with a lack of communication, an imbalance of power, and a lack of perspective-taking. Trust needs to take the place of authority, which is a modern foundation of traditional masculine hierarchical leadership. It is then within the balancing of these two concepts that an ethical leader needs to utilize more empowerment responsibilities: trust, respect, loyalty, patience, fairness, and forgiveness (Abdollahi et al., 2002). Structures such as these occur in the relationships between followers and leaders (Burns, 2004). This also originates from the concept of morality. Trust needs to come from an honest place and provide a space for transparency (Ciulla, 2014; Starr, 2016). It is within this space that the leader-follower relationship can develop. In accomplishing this, a leader must also possess the ethical capacity (Larkin, 1999; Moorhouse, 2002; Trevino et al., 2003) and efficacy to foster and maintain these relationships.

Butcher and Gary state that leaders need to encourage participation within an organization and assist in active problem-solving measures. They also empower those around them to ask critical questions, allow individuals to support one another, and have a sense of ownership within their organization that is mutually beneficial (Butcher, 1997; Gary, 1996). Warhurst (2011) further corroborates these concepts described by Butcher and Gary, stating that

in a productive, ethical organization, there is always room for questioning and challenging the status quo for the system to improve. This shows that leadership is not a top-down mindset but a communal approach that empowers others to be active participants who can lead within a system.

Newkirk (2007) recognizes leadership as both a psychological and a sociological phenomenon with the leader's identity representing the psychological component. Currently, literature focused on leadership identity has largely focused on developmental stage theory, which is a human development concept that defines development sequences common to all human beings involving hierarchical integrations of ability and skills with all stages unfolding in the same sequence for all cultures (Newkirk, 2007) and not the background of the leader or how they identify in the larger socio-political context. In the consideration of a leader's identity, researchers also need to include the attributes of race, context, and profession (Brungardt, 1996; Komives et al., 2006) as well as who the leader interacts with is the sociological element of leadership. The existing literature has focused on organizational identity as influenced by leaders (Curry, 2002), development (Kegan, 1994; Komives et al., 2006), and organizational stages (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993).

Begley (2006) specifically noted the highly social nature of school leadership, wherein leaders are required to focus on and understand how the nature of individuals' experiences underlie a leader's problem-solving intentions, processes, and outcomes. That is, a leader needs to be connected to those around them. It is a false notion that a leader is or should be the one who makes all significant decisions impacting the organization they are a member of. Rather, decisions should be based on a communal approach that includes others in all decision-making processes. To avoid such notions, Fluker (2011) suggests that leaders need to follow three

virtues: integrity, empathy, and hope. They must establish a way of practice that is inclusive and genuine in its attempt to involve others and provide hope within the decision-making process. Hope being conceptualized as a positive outcome for individuals, one that is inclusive, productive, and sustainable. When this occurs, Rao (2019) notes that the organization has shifted from an efficiency mindset, focused on the day-to-day operations, to a sustainability mindset, focused on the long-term success of the organization and the individuals that make it up. In this context, sustainability means the organization is working to preserve its future needs without compromising its present needs.

In reviewing the work of Karl Weick in 1996's *Fighting Fires in Educational Administration,* Weick utilized a poignant metaphor comparing the decision-making process of school administrators with the decision-making process carried out by fire rescue squads during a time of crisis. Weick noted several similarities between the two groups, including taking on heat, having the potential to get burned by their decisions, needing to suppress rumors, assessing where the actual fire is coming from, and having to learn to deal with explosive situations (Weick, p.565, 1996). Weick also states that there is a need for both groups to change their current practices so that the actual fire can be addressed and extinguished (1996). Otherwise, the fire will keep burning and will create reiterations of itself.

Weick suggests that in order for educators to extinguish fires truly, educators need to gain an accurate assessment of events both large and small that created the fire and understand that every situation is different, so even if an educator has experienced what appears to be the same fire as before they need to trust themselves. At the same time, they also are critical of their experiences, be willing to keep an open mind for new possibilities, aim to solve problems rather than resolve issues, and establish practices and structures to monitor, communicate, and solve

while having a safe space to do so (Weick, 1996). I suggest we go even further when analyzing such fires: educators also need to consider their role in the fire, how previous fires have impacted them, and how they perceived and experienced the fire. Only in this way can they move forward productively in dealing with subsequent fires that will arise, this time more grounded in their approach based on an expanded awareness of self and others.

Allison (1993) also suggests when leaders state that there is a problem, teams are often forced to not only immediately address needs but also related issues to the fire that were there before the fire started. There is also an additional problem within the alertness of staff on facing systemic issues, the trust or lack thereof for one another, the trustworthiness of responses from leadership, as well as the respect, candor, and will to have proper communication (Allison, 1993). Yes, there are imminent fires that require immediate extinguishing. However, if we do not address the conditions of the fire, our contributions in starting the fire, and the aftermath of the damage, the fire will return.

Weick provides an analogy that parallels the task of putting out fires to educational leaders' decision-making. It is an interesting concept to explore and may lead to some resolution of some systemic problems K-12 education faces. Personal experience indicates simply extinguishing the fires is insufficient: the problem is rarely resolved entirely. Fires leave only the ashen and damaged remains of what previously existed. The educational leader, then, is responsible not only for extinguishing the fire but also for evoking and initiating healing (their own and that of others around them), acknowledgment of grief, perspective taking, and the process of creating something new post-fire so that not only what was the immediate issue is resolved, but also something new, responsive, and supportive can be grown from the ashes of what was left behind.

Acknowledging Other Approaches of Leadership

Some leadership approaches are based on notions of Western hieratical approaches that suggest a singular one-size-fits-all solution, which leads to reactionary structures and processes. In reflection of my practices as a leader and leadership approach, I reject that notion. Instead, I looked to expand my knowledge base and sought leadership perspectives and approaches based on feminine, Indigenous, and/or Eastern ideological ideas. I searched for peer-reviewed articles utilizing key concepts such as Ethical Leadership, Value Oriented Leadership, Appreciative Leadership, Relational Leadership, Conscious Leadership, Feminist Leadership, Queer Leadership mindfulness, negative capability, othering, inclusion, empathy, suffering, forgiveness, healing, recovering, and rebirth/starting over. Seeking to define the parameters of various leadership approaches such as Ethical Leadership, Appreciative Leadership, Relational Leadership, Feminist Leadership, Queer Leadership and Conscious Leadership. Establishing not only a definition of these stances but also what these stances promote and inhibit.

Relational Leadership

Context is one of the most critical elements of relational leadership (Uhl-Bein, 2006). Context, as described here, means not just time and place but also who is involved in the organization, the leader themselves, each individual member, and who they are in relation to each other and their families (Deware & Cook, 2014). Leaders need to seek a deeper understanding of the context in which individuals of the organization are in each situated. Doing so not only to resolve the issue at hand but also to learn who they are as individuals. Uhl-Bein further elaborates, stating that relational leadership is about re-conceptualizing the notion of who can be deemed as a leader (2006). Power dynamics, day-to-day social interactions, intentions behind interactions, and how the organization's individuals are interconnected are accurate

32

indicators of where leadership can be found (Uhl-Bein, 2006). Formal and informal leaders can be driving forces that influence an organization and need to work collaboratively to be successful. When informal leaders are not recognized, division, disconnection, and faction can occur.

Deware and Cook (2014) state that an element of care is required for each interaction within an organization: care for each other, care for the organization, and care for those that the organization serves. It is then up to leadership to focus on these social interactions so they can establish reflective and engaging interactions that shape the culture of the organization with the intention of creating compassionate, care-focused relationships that contribute to the whole of the organization (Day, 2001; Leicester, 2009). Working within the parameters of relational leadership, a symbiotic relationship exists between the well-being of the organization and the maintenance of the relationships between its members.

A thorough analysis of these relationships shows leaders are tasked with understanding the various roles of the relationships in place, who members are in relation to one another, how the context impacts the situation, and how the whole person is being engaged within the organization and their relationships (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Thus, leaders are also tasked with seeking to understand what relationships are being formed and maintained and how individuals utilize the space within the organization to be in relation with one another. Then, leaders can provide additional support to develop change agents within their organization. Gergen (1978) coined the term generative capacity, which describes members of the organization gaining the power to challenge the status quo and create new alternatives through social action.

It is also the aim of the relational leader to empower the individuals involved within the organization, provide collaborative opportunities to develop new ideas for change, be receptive

to these new ideas within these inclusive practices, as well as implement them (Sim, 2019). This is so that the individuals of the organization can network and cohesively work as one with a shared vision and intention. It is also during this process that other leaders may emerge. Turnbull (2011) states that another intention of relational leadership is to build other leaders within specific contexts so that real change can occur. That is, leadership emerges naturally as well as can be transferred to those who meet the criteria for the specific needs within an organization. It is also important to note that as the organization evolves due to its challenges, it needs to continue to develop new committees and new leaders. The single "heroic" leader advancing the organization is something that will not sustain the organization in the long term (Cooperrider et al., 1995).

Critically reflecting on relational leadership, it is noted that the intention is to develop a strong community of leaders who work toward the same goal. The critique here is how consensus is determined and what structures are in place to support individuals in disagreement with the organization's goals. It is also worth noting how power dynamics are balanced between the various subgroups of an organization and for those that history minoritized. Intersectionality theory suggests that leaders need to recognize, consider, and aim to dismantle any imbalance of power embedded within relationships (Bass, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991) before a true balance or transfer of power can occur.

Appreciative Leadership

Appreciative leadership is rooted in the appreciative inquiry process. A process that seeks to identify the positive structures already present within an organization and to continue to build upon them so that the organization and its leader's work is based on a sustainable positive mentality (Black et al., 2017.) Within the positive mentality, the appreciative leadership

approach is trying to establish any deficit-based thinking or practices, as well as any negative

emotions that are evoked are factors that are not fully incorporated as they can distort what

occurs during an experience (Katz-Vuonincontro, p.30, 2015). Rather than explore those

negative practices further, appreciative leaders offer a counternarrative that focuses on the

growth of an organization, a narrative of opportunities, exemplars of excellence, and positive

progressive interactions (Black et al., 2017). They do this rather than in narratives of decay,

inequity, mediocrity, and aggression.

Hope, enthusiasm, and positive energy here are expanded on and utilized for the purpose

of growing the organization. Fullan (2005) suggests that leaders should focus their energy on

positive and progressive interactions to enable, develop, and sustain system thinkers who can

lead continual system changes fueled by capacity and innovation rather than on regressive

interactions that diminish organizational intelligence and positive climate. Fullan (2001) further

suggests that five central factors are associated with positive organizational change: the

development of a shared sense of moral purpose, the need to understand the change process,

building and maintaining relationships, and creating and sharing knowledge. When leaders focus

on these five factors, internal accountability (Elmore, 2002) can be developed and maintained

because members of the organization understand its goals and what it has to offer.

Within appreciative leadership, leaders are also tasked with challenging the

predominance of deficit thinking about their organization's community, as well as the

surrounding communities that impact their organization, including students of color and those

who live in poverty (Valencia, 2015). Black, Burrello, and Mann (2017) suggest that by focusing

on assets rather than on gaps and deficits, the organization's community members will create

more significant opportunities for success and prosperity. This not only roots the success of the

organization within its culture but also reinforces sustainability in practice because it is an acknowledgment of what historically has been there and what will continue to be promoted through the shared experiences of its members. This creates the resiliency needed to challenge and change school environments and communities (Christman & McCellan, 2008).

When working from an appreciative leadership approach, there is an underutilized acknowledgment that the organization and its members have experiences that are not always positive. Of the various pressures present today: safety, obligations, shame, or fear. Roy (2018) would suggest that they are linked in one way or another to man-made suffering and the deadening of knowledge and the lived experience and how we do not acknowledge it. Man-made suffering is defined as something that occurs when practices of subjugation and supremacy occur within an organization that are justified by leaders (Roy, 2018). What prolongs this suffering is when it goes unacknowledged by those who have caused such situations to happen and by those who have the power to change it. A critique within the application of appreciative leadership is that by not acknowledging, discussing, and removing suffering within an organization the organization will not continue and grow.

Roy (2018) believed that while suffering is a part of life, it is something that should be endured and worked through to make impactful changes that can unify and build strong relationships between those who were previously divided. Roy (2018) states that for inhuman social arrangements, misery and pain need to be overcome. Serious reflection and recognition are critical for any emancipatory praxis to being. Discussions and reflections can occur in which those in positions of power make amends; only then can true healing and change begin. These realizations of past incidents are not something one comes up with in the spur-of-the-moment decision-making process. These realizations occur only when one is allowed to sit and reflect

36

upon what has happened, what the causes were, the part in these practices and what the consequences were not only for themselves but to the others impacted by the situation. In this process of sitting in, suffering occurs within the utilization of negative capability. Clarke (2016) expands upon the utilization of negative capability within leadership, stating that a leader using negative capability will take the time to analyze, pause, reflect, pace, take the head, and hold steady while making decisions aimed at ending suffering. It is again the acknowledgment and the shared responsibility of an organization's members to work through the negative experiences of its members so that they feel validated, honored, and heard. After that, individuals within an organization can appreciate the work that needs to be done, as well as the process a team takes to build functional relationships based on mutual trust and understanding.

Feminist Leadership

Batilwala suggests feminist leadership is designed to leverage within people a sense of agency, a way of thinking in problem-solving and decision-making within a specific content to arrive at a just, responsible, and appropriate choice that takes into consideration those that have been marginalized, ostracized, or oppressed (2017). It tasks those working within feminist leadership to make visible what the organization's issues are and to ultimately resolve those issues with collaboration and strategic action rooted in the context of the situation. Working from this approach, leaders are challenged to seek humane, participatory, democratic approaches that create sustainable change (Batliwala, 2017). Leaders here need to evoke a sense of working in conjunction with one another as allies and agents of change that seek to improve local communities, institutions, and individuals.

Feminist leadership provides a space to acknowledge and problematize women's culturally ascribed roles as caretakers in the home and the community, as well as their roles as

activists (Cosgrove, 2010). This empowers feminist leaders to develop other spaces that question, challenge, disrupt, broaden, empower, and encourage more effective ways of engaging in learning in a troubled world. Within these spaces, engagement in learning is geared toward gaining a deeper understanding of how gendered experiences have been shaped by discrimination, marginalization, misogyny, violence, colonialism, racism, and poverty while fostering the commitment and determination to make positive changes to the organizations in which individuals find themselves members of (Batliwala, 2017). The aim of working within the parameters of feminist leadership is to develop ongoing, dynamic, and evolving conversations about equality and to work towards an organization of "full self-actualize individuals that can create a beloved community together that foundation that stems from personal freedoms, justice, and equality (Hooks, 2000).

The concept of power is critically and essentially tied to the feminist leadership perspective. Recognition of the power one holds is a task that leaders must undertake and analyze. One working from this approach seeks to assess not only who has the power but also how the power is being utilized to assist and empower others. Feminist leadership encourages us to imagine how we lead, learn, and educate ourselves and each other for social and institutional change (Batliwal, 2017). Clover and McGregor (2016) suggest this is done through political resistance, an action-oriented practice of anti-oppressive reflexivity that dares to confront injustices with the intention of dissolving them.

Feminist leaders also work with a sense of urgency and advocacy. Leaders must continually seek out and attempt to correct any injustices. However, when operating from such a critical and political stance, one must be aware that there is the potential for divisiveness, dualism, and the blaming or shaming of others. While such structures may prosper within this

process, there is a requirement to acknowledge, discuss, and move past divisive structures so the group can work together unitedly and cohesively. Within this approach, there is limited opportunity for the opposition to find common ground and work productively together, especially when one group seeks the demise or dissolvement of another.

Queer Theory

In my experience, describing Queer Theory like nailing Jello to a tree; just as a researcher thinks, they have a grasp of it and can finalize their idea. It slips through fingers, the nail and leaves a deconstructed mess in the grass. Gedro and Mizzi (2014) stated that queer theory can be understood as a method of problematizing and deconstructing fixed identity categories. Wiegman and Wilson (2015) stated an even simpler queer theory exists to critique normativity. They further explain that queer there can be better understood as a shared commitment to an antinormative critique than a formalized system or method (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). It does not seek to create a general culture; rather, it desires a culture that is challenged by its marginal history (Berlant & Warner, 1995). Within this history queer theory is intended to challenge the heterosexist underpinnings and assumptions (Halperin, 2003). Butler further posts that queer theory can only become itself when it refuses itself, resists itself, perceives that it is always somewhere else, and operates a fore of displacement and disappropriation (1991). Meaning that queer theory is not just one thing. At times is operates to deconstruct and challenge established structures while at the same time reinforcing them. For example, individuals who are against a gender binary and identify as nonbinary are stating that they are refusing to embody preestablished gender norms and expectations. However, they also reinforce the binary of gender, as they are still substantiating its existence while at the same time reinforcing other

binary systems because they are stating that they are at the opposite of the spectrum, thus creating another binary system.

Halperin (2003) suggest that the foundational works of queer theory are Judith Butler's Gender Trouble and Eve Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet. Both of these works problematized identity categories and critiqued normativity in ways that became central to queer theory (Canfield, 2019). Within Sedgwick's work they propose an alternative approach to understanding gender and sexuality. Rather than arguing for or against constructivist and/or essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality, queer theory would suggest that researchers seek to understand the cultural genesis and history of the norms around these categories. Similarly, Butler's work focused on destabilizing norms and identity categories through an analysis of gender through the lens of performativity. In arguing the performative nature of gender, they challenged both essentialist and constructionist concepts of the ontology of gender (Butler, 2006). Queer theories tend to focus on narratives of oppression and liberation, empiricist methods that make claims on objective truth and reality, as well as challenge the concepts embedded within fixed identity categories (Duggan, 1995). Thus queer theory aims to challenge established norms, roles, and expectations, suggesting that they are not set in stone, nor are they naturally occurring or within someone's DNA they are performative and depend on who is directing the music at the time the performance can change.

Queer Leadership

Pryor (2021) defined queer leadership as the intentional process to advance equity for sexual and gender minoritized communities through grassroots leadership strategies, specifically championing social change through institutional policy and practice. Queer leadership is situated within the field of higher education in which there is a limited body of research. Within Lugg

and Tooms' (2010) work, they demonstrated strategies for exercising queer leadership through the implementation of inclusive practices by challenging heterogenderism in education systems. Their exploration of queer leadership focused on challenging institutional norms of professionalism, most notably through expectations of dress based on gender and the resultant panoptic gaze queer school leaders often encountered (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Renn (2007) further noted that queer leaders "embraced a public gender and/or sexual identity in opposition to normative, straight culture and moved away from a positional view of leadership to an approach that incorporated a commitment to change social systems for the purposes of decentering power" (p. 323). Queer leaders also challenged traditional notions of leadership with the pursuit of transformational change (Renn, 2007).

Queer leadership also has it organization from the advancement of grassroots leadership in higher education (Kezar & Lester, 2011). This approach of leadership is centered on how leadership is developed and conceptualized based on the micro (individual), mezzo (group), and macro (organization) levels. For example, within the micro level, a leader may arise within a group based on their identity as well as motivation for taking action with and for a group (Kezar & Lester, 2011). Within the mezzo level, Kezar and Lester identify tactics one uses in order to engage in and move forward a group agenda. Finally, at the macro level, Kezare and Lester consider the climate and culture of the group and how the individuals within the group establish and utilize space and develop other leaders (2011). Pryor (2021) further suggests that within this grassroots approach of leadership, the queer leadership approach includes: queer advocacy, queering leadership, and queer policy and practice. Placing queer viewpoints at the center of leadership (Dilley, 1999) creates room for the exploration of LGBTQ+ equity and disrupts normative leadership strategies, even within the grassroots movement. Queering leadership

centers queer identities in leadership practice and extends grassroots leadership efforts in disrupting power dynamics in higher education institutions. Thus, centering queer identities in leadership practices necessitates a disruption of heterosexist and cissexist culture embedded in institutional leadership and practice (Pryor, 2021). Queering leadership also aims to dismantle traditional roles between leader and follower. Allowing for a more fluid structure to take place that can change depending upon the needs of the organization. While Queer leadership has primarily been seen within the setting of higher education, there are implications for leadership in the K-12 education setting. Advocacy work, community involvement, as well as blurring the lines between formal and informal leadership, disrupting the leader follower binary, as well as dismantling traditional identity roles based on gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Conscious Leadership

Conscious leadership can be described as the practice of maintaining a state of heightened awareness of thought, emotion, and experience on a moment-to-moment basis; to be a conscious leader, the individual must choose to lead from a place of mindfulness and expanded consciousness (Ward & Haase, 2016). Mindfulness is a theory of socio-cultural knowledge of reciprocity, which enables a leader to detect patterns in the environment and connections among several problems that they are trying to solve (Jones & Brazdau, 2015). In the development of mindfulness, a leader will focus on improving their inner strength, cooperation, care for others, and sustainability of decisions (Zohar & Marshall, 2006). Expanded consciousness can be defined as the process of becoming and understanding more of oneself, finding greater meaning in established relationships and practices, and reaching a new level of connectedness with others (Ward & Haase, 2016). Expanded consciousness requires viewing the experience or action from a less judgmental position to determine the benefit or positive outcome (Nagendra, 2022).

Cohen (2018), Crosswell (2010), Hayden (2017), and Nagendra (2022) identify four key elements within a conscious leader. The first is that a conscious leader is self-aware and self-sufficient (Hayden, 2017). They know who they are, their belief systems and values, and their connection to others. Another element is that conscious leaders know their relationships and understand how to build and maintain them (Crosswell, 2010). They are physically and mentally present, understand their role in situations and when working with others, and aim to create opportunities that elicit cooperation (Nagendra, 2022). Conscious leaders have a highly developed mindfulness towards all participants, which leads to strong systemic intelligence and the tendency to think and create opportunities that benefit the more comprehensive system and the individual (Cohen, 2018). Lastly, a collective awareness stems from the internal sense of responsibility a leader has within themselves that steams for a positive impact with lasting effects (Hayden, 2017). Nagendra (2022) further iterates that conscious leaders exhibit humaneness. This means they accept all aspects of themselves, including who they work and interact with, and strive to create an equitable and inclusive environment.

Leading Consciously

Utilizing the concepts from conscious leadership, there needs to be an understanding of the theory that is grounded in the sociocultural knowledge of reciprocity, which allows leaders to perceive patterns in the environment, see the interconnectivity of multiple problems, and subscribe to participatory leadership styles, which incorporates the idea of shared responsibility and problem-solving (Hayden, 2012; Jones, 2012). Leading consciously also requires leaders to have a heightened sense of awareness, cooperation, individual and group awareness, reflection, decision-making, and a deep understanding of one's emotional capacity (Jones & Brazdau,

2015). Leaders are asked to develop and maintain a heightened awareness through mindfulness and expanded consciousness within this approach.

Mindfulness can be defined as the awareness cultivated by paying attention sustainably and intentionally (Ward & Haase, 2016), being present and aware during interactions, and listening emphatically and nonjudgmentally. Expanded consciousness is the process of becoming more of oneself in your awareness and reaching a new dimension of connectedness with other people (Ward & Haase, 2016). Leaders also need to understand who they are so that they can know themselves and start to recognize others; finally, the leader needs to realize that the self in relation to others has always been directly connected. For example, a site-based team vs. a district team vs. caretakers. Really and truthfully, when it comes down to it, there is just one team working toward developing services for a child. Leaders are asked to connect deeper with their emotions and core beliefs by utilizing mindfulness and expanded consciousness. This is because they are ultimately interconnected to the decisions that one makes (Ward, & Haase, 2016). When confronted with an issue, these tools also allow leaders to shift from a lens that seeks to determine if something is good or bad to one that asks, "What can I learn from this situation, and how can I be of assistance?" This also establishes intentions prior to interactions so that leaders can seek out information and learning and set clear and positive intentions for interactions.

While there is no single all-encompassing list of qualities, one must exhibit while working from a conscious leadership approach. Ward suggested a leader must have the ability to bring mindful awareness to situations, view experiences from multiple perspectives, maintain equanimity and neutrality by seeking to accept and understand instead of blame. To glean insight and information, facilitate clear and intentional discussion, take and facilitate a shared sense of

44

ownership of actions, and be honest and open in communication with the intention of growing and learning in a positive direction (2016). Such a mindset requires a commitment and willingness to participate in the process.

A conscious leader seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the individuals involved in personal circumstances, surroundings, and goals. In this way, one can gain a deeper self-awareness to promote group consciousness for the purposes of embracing suffering and promoting understanding (Jones & Brazdau, 2015; Marinčič & Marič, 2018; Ward & Haase, 2016). Embracing suffering helps leaders transition from an approach utilizing only positive capabilities to one that focuses on negative capabilities as well. French, Simpson, and Harvey (2009) describe positive capability as the mental process leaders go through with the intention of directing their followers toward a particular form of action rooted in "knowing." The time one takes to undergo this process is limited by how much time a leader provides to create new knowledge and communicate decisions related to this knowledge. French, Simpson, and Harvey (2009) next state that while the term "negative" often has a less than positive connotation, the word negative in context to that of negative capability has a different operational definition.

The word "negative," as utilized in the context of negative capability, is characterized by the absence rather than the presence of distinguishing features. This means that one practicing negative capability will not immediately respond to a situation. Instead, one aims to resist dispersing inappropriate knowledge and using it to initiate actions. Negative capability seeks to take time to gain various perspectives and feedback on potential decisions and then takes the time needed to reflect on the potential consequences of a decision. Simpson, French, and Harvey (2002) also state that negative capability is a means by which leaders can create an intermediate space that enables them to continue to think in difficult situations. This search for new insight is

exemplified in psychoanalysis. It is aimed at engaging in a non-defensive way to apply change without being overwhelmed by the ever-present pressure that is present today.

To lead consciously, one must be willing, committed, and able to devote a significant amount of time to developing the necessary skills, first for themselves and then, in turn, with those with whom they work. This approach may not be perceived as productive or conducive to successfully resolving a problem, especially when the issue is urgent or the organization is transitioning to this perspective. One must also consider the challenges associated with implementing these changes when others are unwilling and not committed to such a shift. There is minimal information in current research regarding conscious leadership, especially data that focuses exclusively on implementing and utilizing this approach. Showing what this shift could look like for an organization and the long-term effects of this change are both areas warranting further inquiry.

Leading with Care

In my 16-year tenure as an educator in the K-12 system so far, I have had students from a variety of backgrounds who have experienced a wide array of circumstances, including the loss of a classmate, loss of a teacher, loss of a guardian, sexual violence, medication issues, drug additions, bullying, mental health issues, immigrating to this county, LGBTQ+ students losing spaces/individuals that they perceive as safe, Trans students losing the right to come out on their terms, use the bathroom of their gender, or seek life-affirming care. This is in addition to facing the reality that intruders can come on school campuses, necessitating schools to develop complete lockdown procedures so that the proper authorities can hopefully apprehend the intruder. I worked at schools of both High and Low socioeconomic status that had safety, referral, and support procedures in place; most of these policies were reactionary, short-term, and

aimed to extinguish the issues in a way that allowed the school community to focus back on academically relevant learning rather than on an inclusionary growth mindset that allowed for more proactive practices to be established.

In conceptualizing leadership and some of its intersecting concepts, I noticed that care is one of the driving forces behind why leaders decide to lead. Care of the self, care for others and care for the implications our actions have on each other. This rationale is in accordance with Noddings' Ethic of Care. Noddings (1984) states that the Ethic of Care is, most importantly, situational and relational. That is, how one acts in a situation is contextual and dependent upon who the other actors are. Noddings (2012) further elaborates that what tends to drive interaction is based on the types of relationships each person has with one another. This does not mean every relationship is reciprocal. Rather, it is rooted in relatedness and responsiveness to others (Kordi et al., 2012). Simply put, just because you do something for another person does not and should not establish any expectation of receiving something in return. Noddings (2012) states that people are solely responsible for their actions, especially when facilitating and developing caring relationships. Koggel and Orme (2010) posit that individuals should integrate the ethic of care within their practices as a normative approach that establishes a criterion for what is right and what is wrong in how you interact with people. We are morally obligated to acknowledge and meet each other's needs (Sander-Staudt, 2011). We need to be able to find, acknowledge, and meet each other's needs, not because we will get something back but because they exist. The ethic of care calls for individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the varying degrees of dependence and interdependence individuals have with each other, to seek out the circumstances of those involved within a situation, and to attend to contextual details of the situation to safeguard and promote the specific interest of those involved (Noddings, 1984). This contrasts

with simply looking at an event in isolation, deciding what is right or wrong in relation to a universal standard or code of conduct. The ethic of care calls for the development of empathy and action to support one another. This mentality is an alternative to the traditional Western hierarchical leadership structures as it focuses the leaders on developing empathy and seeking mutual understanding.

Katz-Vuonincontro (2015) defines empathy as the ability to understand other people's feelings. Katz-Vuonincontro further states that the skill of empathizing is imperative to develop within leaders so that they can be more sympathetic to student and community needs and also so that they can be more proactive in their problem-solving styles. Katz-Vunincontro also discusses the need to stop quantifying or valuing hard skills (content/technical knowledge) over soft skills (empathizing/negotiating) (2015). Katz-Vunincontro argues that soft skills, often deemed more feminine, can be as effective as hard skills once developed and implemented.

This dualism between hard skills and soft skills, or masculine and feminine, often leads to the objectivation of one over the other, creating a false sense that one is more valuable to an organization than the other. Eagly (2007) notes that within our male-orientated leadership styles, one common misconception is that leaders are to be perceived as powerful, invulnerable, and removed from feelings of doubt and weakness so that others can approach them in times of need. However, this is counterintuitive to the ethic of care, which suggests that there is a need to empathize to build trust and mutual authority between participants to create a greater sense of interconnectedness and respect for each other and the organization. Zhou, Valiente, and Eisenberg (2003) further emphasize that empathy is critical to being an ethical leader, especially in helping an individual. Empathy provides space for leaders not only to want to resolve an issue but also to assist them in their healing and growth. Within the aim of helping an individual,

48

leaders must also understand how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. The holistic view of the individual connects to the concepts embedded within intersectionality theory.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, to the social movements which analyzed existing inequalities found within political, social, and economic structures, including education, employment, and legal system (Anzaldua, 1987; Collings & Bilge, 2016; Combahee River Collective, 1981; Harlan, 1957; Shoben, 1980). According to Delgado Bernal (2002), intersectionality focuses on the intersection of oppression, which is vital in the development of an understanding of one's identity. This is because one's identity is not based solely on the social construction of race, socioeconomic status, religion, position, or county of origin. Rather, one's identity is based on the multidimensional intersections within various experiences (Bernal, 2002). An Intersectional analysis also aims to examine how both the formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained, and reinforced in social structures, policies, and practices through notions of race, class, and gender (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Collins, 1998; Moorosi et al., 2018; Showunmi et al., 2016; Weber & Bore, 2007) and sexuality (Bush, 2010; Strayhorn, 2013).

Hancock (2013) further stated that empirical research using intersectionality has gone beyond the politics of identity (i.e., gender and sexuality) power relations, especially when they are uneven, that shape structural manifestations of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, and heterosexism). Researchers also utilize intersectionality theory to analyze the following issues: a lack of attentiveness to the historical context of the experiences of the participants, the marginalized aspects of the social locations, and the privilege and agential aspects of their social locations (Hancock, 2013). In studies, researchers used intersectionality to understand

experiences at the individual and interpersonal levels (Bass, 2009; Horsford, 2012; Jean-Marie,

2013; Liang et al., 2016; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Lopez, 2016; Peters, 2012; Reed, 2012;

Welton et al., 2015; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010; Witherspoon & Taylor, 2010). Currently,

there is a gap in the existing research. Studies examining the interaction of multiple factors in

leadership style have been rare, usually focusing on only one or two attributes as well as they

traditionally suppress and neutralize "difference," including race/ethnic dimensions (Harrison et

al., 1998; Jackson et al., 2003; Parker, 2005) and noted that intersectionality is increasingly being

used to understand complex social situations, seeking to analyze how an individual is located

within the socially as well and in the context of their own lives (Crenshaw, 2000; Hill Collins,

2004; Weber & Fore, 2007). McCall (2008) also recommends the usage of intersectionality

theory within research, especially in the analysis, as it allows the research to be more complex as

it considers multiple social identities within participants. The premise of intersectionality theory

is that people live in multiple layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the

operation of structured power.

The Interconnectedness of Identity and Context

Intersectionality theory is based on the premise that most people do not experience the

world through a single identity (Romero, 2017). In an analysis of current literature regarding

identity in terms of educational leaders. Many studies linked professional identity development

within site administrators and analyzed how it was connected to the context of their school

environment. Bolívar and Ritacco (2016), Carpenter, Bukoski, Berry, and Mitchell (2017), and

Bahous, Busher, and Nabhani (2016) explained that school culture is crucially linked to the

successful practice of leadership within that school and is also contingent upon the

characteristics and ways of working among its professionals. Individual professionals can and do

contribute to their organization, but it also shows that they are affected by it as well. Carpenter, Bukoski, Berry, and Mithcell (2017) further observed that site administrators working in challenging environments developed an identity that enacted values of social justice, which drove them to adopt innovative leadership practices. Similarly, Bahous, Busher, and Nabhani (2016) found that, in challenging schools, pedagogical leadership is exercised by assertive principals who can develop a positive collaborative climate and establish team spirit through professional development. Ritacco Real and Bolívar Botía (2018) found that a strong leadership identity builds a solid and active collaborative environment based on a shared vision and goals for the school. As the context of their school determines the teaching practices of principals, school leaders adapt school management and teaching accordingly to the needs of their school (Spies & Heystek, 2015). Additionally, leaders focused on facilitating relationships and building communities connected with the commitments and efficacy of the individuals they support (Jo, 2014). Notman (2017) additionally notes that it is the combination of personal and professional identities that helps leaders develop a flexible style of leadership based on values that favor adaptation to structural and educational changes. That is, a leader's work to develop and understand their own identity will impact their practices and approach to leadership and those with whom they interact.

Quilting Leadership Approaches

After a detailed review of the literature and gaining a deeper understanding of the various leadership perspectives and approaches through an intersectional lens, one can see a benefit, at times, of working within their parameters individually as well as working from a place where they intersect. There are concepts within these leadership approaches about which one can become conscious and thus lead from a more conscious and intentional space. From the

51

realization that there is no singular approach that can extinguish existing past of potential new fires. I sought out how all the various leadership perspectives were interconnected and divergent while also considering how they could be used in conjunction with one another to promote growth, healing, and rebirth. In this way, when a leader intentionally chooses to work from an intersectional perspective, they seek to recognize, appreciate, and acknowledge the individual in relation to the group and set the intention for positive results for its members and the communities served. After I reviewed the literature, I developed the following intersections between these various perspectives. First, leadership is foremost a relational practice: one that is dependent not only on the leaders but also on those who choose to work in relation to them as well as those who do not (Day, 2001; Deware & Cook, 2014; (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Leicester, 2009; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Pryor, 2021; Uhl-Bein,2006). Ciulla (2014) emphasized this point when they stated, "We are in need of each other" (p.33). Whether we survive or not depends entirely on the relationships we have between people. These relationships are maintained between our choices in relation to one another. Whether we listen to each other, support each other, or are willing to work for a common good rests entirely upon those involved in the relationship. Suppose an organization finds it challenging to establish relationships because of past histories of maintaining the traditional masculine hierarchal leadership structures. In that case, Ciulla offers a means by which one can start to resolve this tension. Ciulla (2014) suggests the practice of honesty, then through that honesty, one can develop trust; this trust allows the organization to develop a stronger foundation upon which they can build (p.100).

Leadership is also a highly participatory, action-orientated process (Batilwala, 2017: Black et al., 2017; Cosgrove, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Pryor, 2021). This is reiterated by Ciulla (2014) when they state that participation is essential in a successful and positive

organization (p.10). Deware and Cook (2014) further elaborate when they state that there is a need for leaders to be courageous, connected to and willing to express their emotions, be curious when considering other's perspectives, and collaborate to compromise and celebrate the successes of each other. Transitioning from a masculine stance to a more feminine one, where the soft skills are encouraged, developed, and reflected upon.

Collective responsibility for each other. Burn also stated that this is a necessary reconceptualization of how organizations function, where they not only focus on the relationships between members of the organization but also motivate and build the capacity of other's practices (2004). Kezar and Lester (2011) expand upon this concept within queer and grassroots leadership. Recognizing the importance of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of an organization. Motivating, gathering, cultivating, and developing leadership is critical, especially if the aim of the group is for systems change ((Kezar & Lester, 2011; Pryor, 2021). This emphasizes that leaders within organizations need to not only be democratic but also provide opportunities for their members to build their ethical capacities and develop deeper senses of self, the other members of their organization, and their negative capabilities.

Leaders within organizations also need to be aware of context. Focusing on the various qualities as previously stated, organizations working from the leadership perspectives described above need to become conscious of the importance of knowing, understanding, and working within the context of their organization and the contexts outside of their organization. For it is within the context of organizations that time, space, and people are present. It is then, when working and developing relationships between people, that leaders need to instill the values of their organizations by providing opportunities to listen as well as to speak and reflect on what is

being discussed. Only when individuals are fully present can communities of learning, growing, and reflecting be built.

No single solution can ameliorate the historic and systemic issues facing the current education system. Deware and Cook alluded to working from leadership perspectives that have been derived from multiple approaches and do not follow what has been previously conceptualized. They suggested a possible solution and, in doing so, coined the phrase "doing things differently rather than doing different things" (Deware & Cook, 2014). Simply put, educators need not seek to find a solution from what is externally out there that is novel and "guaranteed" to work but rather to look inward at ourselves and our responses, assessing how the individuals that make up the organization interact and make meaning together. Then, within the practice of developing multiple positions, intersectionality is utilized within the functions of an organization to make visible what relations and power relations are present within an organization (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). Then, leaders and those they work with become intentional about their interactions and seek how they collectively make these practices sustainable (Hayden, 2017; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Pryor, 2021; Ward & Haase, 2016)

Leading from a hierarchal, micro-managerial, and authoritative organizational and managerial structure tends to utilize a more consequentialist or deontological ethical basis emphasizing universal standing and impartiality. However, there is an alternative: a more feminist-based Ethic of Care based on the context of one's situation, one's level of privilege and power, and choice (Noddings, 1984). Noddings (2012) further elaborates, stating that people are solely responsible for their actions to facilitate and develop caring relationships, and we have a moral obligation to acknowledge and meet each other's needs. This, further explored, means that for leaders to understand and care for others, they must first care for and understand themselves

(Hayden, 2017; Crosswell, 2010). This provides an avenue to find, acknowledge, and meet each other's needs, not because we will get something back but because we exist in a shared space. Working from a feminine, Indigenous, and/or Eastern ideology, it's important to emphasize how the concept of care is interwoven through these perspectives. The Ethic of Care also calls for individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the varying degrees of dependence and interdependence individuals have with each other, seek out the circumstances of those involved within a situation, and attend to contextual details of a situation to safeguard and promote the specific interest of those involved (Noddings, 1984). This contrasts with simply looking at an event in isolation and deciding what is right or wrong in relation to a universal standard. The Ethic of Care calls for the development of empathy, perspective-taking, and critique.

Bochner warns on the failure not to do this work. Bochner suggests that making the other out to be a monster only leads to an increase in the degrees of separation between them, perpetuating defensive aggression in response to those others' perceived aggression (2012). Victimizing, oppressing, and othering not only hurts various members of the impacted communities but also does harm to the aggressors. Abuse teaches abuse, violence teaches violence, and neglect teaches neglect. Care, compassion, and acknowledgment break the cycle and allow for agency. Autoethnography as method will be the vehicle I use to go on this journey of discovery, to be able to do this work and seek the answer to the question, "What connection exists between understanding the various aspects of a person's identity and how they conceptualize leadership?" Before delving into that question, the following chapter aims to define autoethnography and further elucidate the utilization and implementation of this method within this work.

Chapter 3:

Coming to Know Autoethnography

Create whatever causes a revolution in your heart. Elizabeth Gilbert

During the conceptualization process for new research ideas, I am rarely drawn to analytics, which includes analyzing numerical participant data, sifting through self-reports using Likert scales, or finding the statical significance of data in relation to other data sets. While such methods and research are, of course, necessary, my interest lies in seeking out why events occur, the antecedents to such circumstances, how people reacted and perceived such events, and, ultimately, how the findings could be used to improve the lives of those directly and indirectly impacted by an event, as well as those who are reading the study. Qualitative Methods were a natural fit with my ideologies and my way of perceiving and rationalizing the world to gain a deeper understanding of my role in it. Bogdan (2007) states that one goal of a qualitative researcher is to better understand human behavior and human experiences. Their use of the word human in this context is key. Terence (170 BCE) once said, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto." This, when translated, can be read as, "I am a man; I consider nothing that is human alien to me." That is, everyone is capable of whatever another human is capable of, and thus, whatever someone can learn or unlearn, so can I. With the deeper understanding that individuals can and do take up more than one role at a time. The villain to one can be the savior to the other. The callous, uncaring supervisor can be the most compassionate and understanding parent to their children. Context, relationships, and intentions matter (Darity, 2008). In recognizing these concepts, the focus shifts from others to the self. Seeking to expand

perceptions, particularly how I have conceptualized my own identity based on the lessons I was modeled as a child, my own current experiences as well as the critical incidents, samskaras, or defining moments in my life that are tied to strong emotions that impact my perceptions of self as well as how I perceive the world around me, that impact the decisions I make and how I interact with others.

This chapter is organized in a manner that first conceptualizes autoethnography as both a method and a product. This chapter then transitions to discuss the implications of autoethnography, not only as it relates to the impact on a growing body of research but also on the researcher. This is done via a thorough analysis of the hesitations and potential pitfalls associated with undertaking this study, as well as the benefits. This chapter then discusses how autoethnography has been utilized in various contexts, including within the K-12 educational context, especially among educational leaders. I provide further context for this study, as well as the design of the study and how the information gathered over the course of this study has been analyzed and arranged in later chapters to derive more profound meaning and serve as both evocative and inviting (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000).

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography is a form of research and writing about the self (Ellis, 2004). Ellis (2004) explains that autoethnography is writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. The personal aspects presented within this study are represented by my current and past perceptions of self and how these relate to leadership. This relationship to culture indicates ties between autoethnography and ethnography. Autoethnography is defined as a form of ethnography that positions the researcher's life and experiences as the focus of the research (Reed-Danahay, 1997) while recognizing where and when (context) these experiences are

occurring. Autoethnography also embodies self-consciousness, feelings, emotions, and dialogue; it can also be described as personal narratives, narratives of the self, personal experience narratives and self-stories, first-person accounts, and personal essays (Ellis-Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further expanded on this subject, describing autoethnography as a genre of writing and research that connects the personal through multiple layers of consciousness. This parallels concepts embedded within intersectionality. As Intersectionality aims to reveal the multiple identities and personas of social actors, exposing the connections between those points, it also suggests that an analysis of complex social situations should not reduce understanding to a singular category; rather, it should facilitate the understanding of substantively distinct experiences from the effects of inextricably connected roles and situations (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Autoethnography also provides a broader lens through which one can perceive the world, disrupting long-standing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps in understanding who individuals claim to be, influences interpretations of what researchers study, how they study it, and what they say about our topic (Adams, 2005; Wood, 2009).

Autoethnographic texts point out the necessity of narrative in our world and the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world (Holman & Jones, 2005). The purpose of this autoethnography is to detail, explain, and make meaning of my experiences (Ellis, 2004). I examine how I have conceptualized my identity, how that impacts my conceptualization of leadership, and how it was implemented in my practice. Autoethnography allows me to illustrate new perspectives on my personal and professional experiences and epiphanies by finding and filling "gaps" in existing, related storylines (Couser, 1997; Goodall, 2001).

Honoring Ethnography

Whereas autoethnography seeks to explore an individual's experiences set within a specific context (Ellis, 2004). It is important to recognize that context within an autoethnography study is just as important. Time, place, social, and political norms impact the situation just as much as the individuals within the interactions do. Ethnography, as part of an autoethnographic study, then situations this study within a larger setting that leads to implications not only about the individuals involved but also the larger social and political groups in which they are a member to (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Within the context of this study, I will be utilizing the context of educational leadership, as leadership does have socio-political implications (Tullis, 2009). This is because leadership focuses on community (Black et al., 2017), based upon a relationship that is reciprocal in nature (Ward & Haase, 2016), and situates a leader within a socio-political context (Newkirk, 2007). The leader's identity and experiences are also directly tethered (Jillian, 2009) to their environment, and the experiences are fit for the research (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Further experiences do not occur in a vacuum, and neither does leadership. There needs to be context, others, as well as a need within a community that impacts their surroundings, socially, politically, and physically. Honoring ethnography is an extension of autoethnography, part of the analysis, and part of the development of stories. Consideration of the context will be embedded throughout this study.

Defining Samskaras

Throughout this document there is a term samskara. The term samskara is traditionally used in Western philosophies such as Buddhism and Hinduism. In Sanskrit, the term samskara describes mental formations or impressions that develop after interactions with others (Fowler, 2002; Kalupahana, 1992; Philips, 2009). These physiological imprints can be based on negative,

positive, or neural interactions with others. Once formed, samskaras can manifest as our

tendencies, dispositions, perceptions of others, and our sense of self (Kalupahana, 2005; Phillips,

2014). Within the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the belief is that samskara development is

cyclical (Kalupahana, 1992), meaning that as we live and interact, we are developing new

samskaras while others are developing theirs. Buddhism emphasizes that one is not avoiding,

trying to forget, or simply accepting (Philips, 2009). Instead, one is tasked with purifying them

through a process like the Union of Mergence (Appendix A) to seek to understand what can be

learned, how it impacts one's actions and interactions, as well as how to benefit themselves and

others more positively. Figure 1 further details how one's interactions with others can lead to the

development of samskaras and what it may result in.
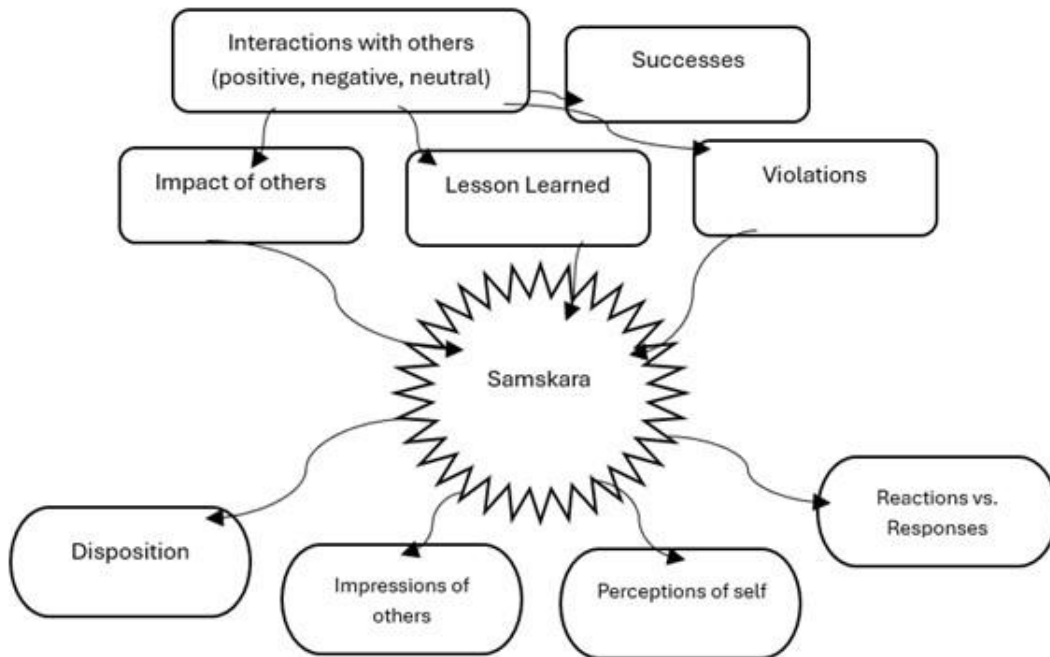
Figure 1: Development of Samskaras

The samskaras recorded within this study center around my personal experiences that

have been recorded as personal narratives, which are described as stories about authors who view

themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives, explicitly focusing on their

academic, research, and personal lives (Berry, 2007; Goodall, 2006; Poulos, 2008; Tillmann, 2009). Storytelling in this way is not only intended for another but has also been equally beneficial for the researchers. In the reciprocity of storytelling, the teller offers themselves as a guide to the other's self-formation. The other's receipt of this guidance recognizes and values the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that the teller and listener enter the space of the story for the other (Frank, 1995, pp.17-18).

The Intersectionality within Autoethnography

Autoethnography stands at the intersection of three genres of writing: native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). That is, autoethnography is not just one thing. It is a blurring of genres, methods, and traditional roles between the research being done and the researcher. Geertz (1983) further states that autoethnography also blurs genres because it overlaps with writing practices in anthropology, sociology, psychology, journalism, and communication, borrowing from each genre to be dynamic, impactful, and engaging. Ellis (2009) suggests that autoethnography does this by starting with personal experiences and studying "us" in relationships and situations. There is an ongoing balance between examining a vulnerable self and observing the broader context of that experience. Autoethnography has also been written in times of existential crises, allowing a person to attend to and analyze their lived experience (Zaner, 2004). Autoethnography is inherently a self-reflexive research method exploring the self and society (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Stories within autoethnographic works have been used to dispossess and malign, but these stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Joan Didion (2005) expands on this concept by stating that the reason individuals tell stories is to live: to enable us to live and lead more

reflectively, meaningfully, and justly in our lives. People also tell stories to relay information to others about what occurred and how the person survived it.

Autoethnography is intended to be aesthetically pleasing and evocative, engaging to readers, and to use conventions of storytelling such as character, scene, and plot development (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000) and/or chronolectal or fragmented story progression (Didion, 2005; Frank, 1995). Chang (2008) poignantly states that autoethnography has become a powerful source of research for practitioners in the fields of humanistic disciplines such as education, counseling, social work, and religion. Because autoethnography is not content-specific, it also seeks a deeper meaning of an individual's micro or personal experiences and the implications those experiences have on the mezzo (group or organizational) and macro (larger community) structures. It also analyzes how others were influenced and impacted by the experience. Autoethnography has close ties to phenomenology and hermeneutics, as phenomenology rejects scientific realism and the view that empirical sciences have a privileged position (Schwandt, 2001). Nehamas (1983) states that one enlarges one's capacity by assuming responsibility for oneself by engaging in "a continually broadening process of appropriating our experiences and actions" (p. 410). This unique combination of identities is based on social constructs such as race, gender, age, ability, and others. Together, they impact how one views the world, as well as how the world views them. Autoethnography is a tool by which the researcher can unpack this uniqueness within a social context. It starts with the self as the data source, reflecting on current circumstances, and then requests that one dives deeper into the root causes, reactions, feelings, and consequences of their actions. McCall (2005) suggested that this reflective process connects the tenets of intersectionality theory, as it intends to examine the multiple aspects of a person's identity in informing their experiences (McCall, 2005). Context, history, relations, and power

structures become supporting characters in one's journey following the recognition of one's various identity markers, as well as aspects that need to be accounted for in the analysis (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). The autoethnographer also seeks to model this process for their reader, engaging them in recognizing their own story and subsequently performing this process within themselves.

Autoethnography as a Qualitative Research Approach

This dissertation utilizes Autoethnography as both a method and a product. Autoethnography is a qualitative method (Chang, 2007; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as it offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography also takes a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation of self and social phenomena involving oneself. As it is self-focused, context-conscious, and a form of narrative writing that invites and engages the reader in their cultural experience of the writer (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is then this narrative that the product of autoethnography is created. This story is then told, and an interactive process is initiated between the author and the reader.

Autoethnography as a qualitative research approach involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world, indicating that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Further expanding upon this qualitative approach, Creswell (2003) states that qualitative approaches utilize data collected as words or written concepts, focus on the process of development versus the result of the study, and focus on making sense of the lived experiences of self and others. Throughout this work, written forms of narratives, reflections, and reactions were collected, reviewed, and sensitized into the final draft

you are reading now. Also, it was in drafting this document that learning, healing, and understanding began to occur.

The researcher is the subject of autoethnographical works, and the researcher's interpretation of the experience is the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The data is so personal to the autoethnography that no other sources or participants were needed to be interviewed or analyzed. Thus, the "n" here is truly the "n" of one (Ellis, 2004). To further analyze the type of questioning associated with autoethnographic works, I utilized phenomenology, which describes the experience a person encounters. Phenomenology is also used to identify and describe the subjective experiences of the researcher on a daily level, not by constructing a theory of explanation but by offering the possibility of insight that illumines experience (Van Manen, 1990). This was then coupled with hermeneutic approaches with the aim of connecting such personal experiences with reality as well as other people's ideas (Raudenbush, 1994). Autoethnography is not only a method but also a product, utilizing data about the self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context and cultural constructs such as the leader/follower relationship. This data is then utilized to tell a story that is both impactful and a catalyst for change.

Autoethnography as Method and Product

Autoethnography is epitomized by the reflexive turn of fieldwork for human study by repositioning the researcher as an object of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experiences. This form of work orchestrates fragments of awareness apprehended/projected and recalled/reconstructed into narrative and alternative text forms, which represent events and other social actors as they are evoked from a changeable and contestable self (Crawford, 1996, p.167). The reflexive process of researching and writing autoethnographic

stories allows scholars to perform and understand themselves as cultural beings in ways that were unavailable prior to enacting the inquiry. By reflexively conveying "subjective terminologies" of lived experience, many autoethnographers use storytelling techniques to intersubjectively create the conditions that make possible a coming together, a call for communion between writer and readers (Crawford, 1996). Autoethnography asks us to acknowledge our research in relation to power explicitly; as Bernadette Calafell (2021) explains, reflexivity means "skillfully and artfully recreating the details of lived experiences and one's space or implication" in control contraction and privilege. It also requires us to hold relational concerns as high as research (Ellis, 2009). I must make choices of what to include and exclude, what privacy boundaries to keep, and which ones to cross (Petronio, 2002).

Jones (2013) notes that autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world – one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that researchers examine their lives and consider how and why they think, act, and feel as they do. Autoethnography requires that individuals observe themselves, interrogate what they think and believe, challenge assumptions, and assess repeatedly over the course of the analysis, dismantling as many layers of our defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that researchers rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be, and, in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful. Authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living, and autoethnography as a research method utilizes a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences and acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others (Ellis, 2009).

Autoethnographers can accomplish these tasks by drafting lengthy descriptions to facilitate an understanding and critique of cultural life by encouraging readers to think about taken-for-granted norms, experiences, and practices in new, unique, complicated, and challenging ways (Ellis, 2004). This writing process can also be defined as "showing" and "telling." "Showing" (Adams, 2006; Lamott, 1994) is designed to "bring readers into the scene,", particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis, 2004) of the author to experience an experience (Ellis, 1993; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). "Telling" is a writing strategy that works with "showing" by providing readers distance from the events described so that they might think about the events more abstractly. (Ellis, 1993, p.711; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also state that autoethnographers typically foreground personal experiences in research and writing, illustrate sense-making processes such as the conceptualizing of one's identity and its relationship to the practices of a leader, use, and show reflexivity, illustrate insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon/experience, describe and critique cultural norms, experiences and practices, and seek responses from audience members. At the same time, they work to critique, make contributions to, and extend existing research and theory, embrace vulnerability to understand emotions and improve social life, disrupt taboos, break silence, and reclaim lost and discarded voices (in these cases like my own) to make research accessible to multiple audiences (Ellis, 2004).

Jillian Tullis (2009) also suggests that autoethnography "tethers" authors to their experiences, participants, and texts and requires "contextual, contingent and primarily relation" ethical engagement. Autoethnography uses deep and careful self-reflection, typically referred to as reflexivity, to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political. Autoethnography also offers novel ways to meet

the call of applied research, not just to understand communicative worlds but also to change them for the better (Cissna, 2000; Frey, 2000). Bochner (2012) further states that "the call of these stories is for engagement within and between. Autoethnographers use their research to facilitate "social consciousness and societal change," aid "emancipatory goals" and negate "repressive" cultural influence. As Bernadette Calafell (2021) says, these can be used to "create spaces of resonance, possibility and activation for the reader," and to write to acknowledge their own "privilege, disempowerment, and accountability" in cultural life. As I worked through the inquiry process of this study, I first had to understand how I conceptualized my identity, drawing from previous experiences and assessing how they were connected to my personal biases, privileges, and relationships with others. I then aimed to create a space for myself to engage with my current approaches to leadership, aimed at expanding ideas and dismantling and replacing oppressing and limiting beliefs.

Ethics of Autoethnography

Autoethnography assumes the writer has allowed themself the freedom to relive these experiences again to write and share them with the world. This freedom comes with a cost: the necessary reformation of the way an individual views what they have experienced. Autoethnography provides insight into social experiences that outsiders cannot observe directly because the experiences occur in their own time, uninterrupted by a researcher's presence. Autoethnographers intentionally use personal experience to create nuanced, complex, and comprehensive accounts of cultural norms, experiences, and practices. Access to sensitive issues and innermost thoughts makes this research method a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding (Ellis, 2009). The goal of autoethnographic projects is to embrace the vulnerability of asking and answering questions about experiences so that researchers, as well as

our participants and readers, might understand these experiences and the emotions they generate. There are three main ethical concerns associated with performing this work. First, the researcher is inviting criticism and others' interpretations. Within this study, I provide examples from my life and the lives of others; such a candid discussion evokes interpretation and criticism. This is true not only as a researcher but also as a leader: I am assessing my motives and interactions with others; I recognize that as a white cis-gender male queer administrator, I may not be aware of all my biases and contributions I have made to oppressive structures. The second ethical concern involves others without gaining consent. In this study, I have directly referenced my family, colleagues, parents, and students with whom I have worked. I discussed death, suicide, negative interactions, and organizational toxicity to the extent that individuals who are inexplicably linked to this study may not want me to share. This leads to the third concern within this study: the recognition that I am risking negative implications on my personal and professional relationships. As I worked to expose and understand who I am, as well as how I want to lead, I have also shown others how I perceive them. This may not only be an uncomfortable situation for the readers of this study, but it also means that within this is an interaction between myself and others that is one-sided as well as an oversimplification of our relationship.

Hesitations and Limitations Regarding the Use of Autoethnography

Utilizing autoethnography as a method in this text and working within the conscious leadership approach, I want to ensure that there is space to discuss the ethical implications of doing this work as well as the inherent limitations of this study. In further expanding upon the ethical concerns connected to this study, I cannot ignore some potential pitfalls and negative consequences that may occur because of undertaking this work. One of my biggest hesitations is to spotlight some of the experiences I have endured but chose not to share. Previously, I have

operated from the mindset of looking outwardly to others with problems. In doing this, I can assist in finding the solution while maintaining a level of separation from my problems. If the solution to the problem was either unsuccessful or did not produce the intended results, it was part of "the research," and the person made the ultimate decision. Until recently, these were private boundaries I chose not to cross (Petronio, 2002). However, as I drafted detailed descriptions of my interactions with others, I must acknowledge the extent to which distancing myself from the limitations of not telling these stories has affected my healing. In recognizing that I am opening myself up to criticism and others' interpretation of the events, I have established a boundary between the readers and me, creating a conditional relationship that is not true to this method. By its very nature, autoethnography challenges this habituated tendency to take a backseat. Indeed, it requires that I do what I fear the most – not only to hold my experiences in the spotlight of analysis but also to lay bare many aspects of myself, not just my successes. Diana Raab (2013) also warned of just a pitfall within autoethnographic studies when she warned that since trauma is a consistent theme, many autoethnographers face reliving difficult moments during their study. Not only can this bring to the surface unrepresented feelings such as survivor's guilt, anger, or sorrow, but it can also substantially limit what is being shared if the autoethnographer is unwilling to do that work and go deep into those feelings. I am also recognizing that I am still within the grieving process, and that may also inhibit my ability to be as transparent as I am willing to put down on paper the true extent of my feelings. As autoethnography also tends to bring up other traumatic events (Raab, 2013)), I also need to be wary about how much it is coming to the surface of this study. As I have made progress in my own self-knowledge (Ward & Haase, 2016), I do not want to inhibit or regress in my own development.

Jones (2013) further elaborates on this concept when they discuss the cost of autoethnography. Jones suggests that through the writing process, readers must assume that the writer has allowed themselves the freedom to reenter their lived experiences to write and share them with the world. While this is an essential step in performing autoethnographic work, this freedom comes with a cost: not only reexperiencing these negative events but also making them public. This cost is the necessary reformation of the way individuals view something that they have experienced (Jones, 2013). Bochner (2004) further postulates that when researchers make themselves vulnerable like this, they also risk exposing themselves to cruelty from others. However, Bocher would also suggest that such a risk is necessary since, through this process, they will gain a more profound sense of compassion, tenderness, and love (Bochner, 2004). Ruth Behar (2009) describes this more profound sense of compassion, tenderness, and love as an internal destination - a place that allows both the reader and writer to go. This vulnerable space takes down the 20-ton shield (Brown, 2012) and allows for conversations between people that may not have occurred without this opportunity (Ellis, 2004). These conversations can be helpful and productive but can also lend themselves to unproductive, victim-blaming, and gaslighting discourses that can do more harm than good.

A potential catalyst for these nonproductive conversations occurs because performing autoethnographic work requires that the researcher not simply write about themselves but all others who have impacted their circumstances (Berry, 2006). In other words, when I tell you my story, I am also, in part, telling the story of my mother, father, sister, brother, spouse, children, and many others with whom I have interacted with. The platform I have created for myself, therefore, must be shared with all others, for I did not exist in a vacuum. When one opens their platform to others, several concerns regarding the autoethnographic process are triggered. First,

bias and subjectivity are ever-present in an autoethnographic text. Petronio (2002) recognized that autoethnographers make choices throughout their work: what to include, what to make vague, and what to combine. Being the author of such a text, I need to realize that each keystroke is a decision I am making. Indeed, if I am writing from an isolated space, I am silencing others, not member checking, nor am I obtaining any kind of consent. I also recognize that I am still a current working administrator who is directly speaking about and for the staff that I am still connected to. I am an employee of an organization, and I cannot reflect the best light on it, nor am I sharing what others may want me to share. The insider knowledge (Alexander, 2013; Pillow, 2003) assisting in making my stories evocative and rich (Chang, 2008) may also be limited as I do not want this to negatively impact my job or my working relationships.

As a result of this study, I am opening myself up to critique and feedback from others involved in my story. Since I am not asking any of them, I do not know how each individual will respond or be triggered by my work (Ellis, 2004). One critique of autoethnographies is that they are often written without showing the struggles that took place during the writing process (Tamas, 2008). The struggles experienced in conveying the message can also exemplify the life they are trying to represent. Some authors also address the ethics of writing an autoethnography in terms of how they represent others who may be implicated in their stories (Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2009; Etherington, 2007; Medford, 2006; Poulos, 2008). Recognizing this, scholars need to realize the impact others have had on the autoethnographer's life. Then, by the creation of such work, a place in the "middle" is created with the purpose of gaining an understanding of someone else's perspective. Le Guin (1980) claims that telling stories always takes place in the middle," continuously circulating back to previous situations and repeatedly referencing future projections. Kerby (1991) further states that autoethnography as memory work consists of

representative images and thoughts (p.28), ideas and images that adequately stand for the past based on and influenced by the "now" present in the act of recalling itself.

Autoethnographers must consider what is important, fair, and just to say, but also what risks the researcher will endure to our relationships, reputations, positions, and personal safety (Ellis, 2004). Danahay further observes that writers of autoethnographies can no longer assume a voice of objective authority or self-righteous certainty; instead, the work is a form of interpretivism and, at best, our interpretation with which others might disagree. The stories autoethnographers tell are connected to memories that currently impact the present (Kerby, 1991). Le Guin (1980) called this storytelling from the middle; the past and present meet to reflect on how they may impact the future. Lastly, it needs to be recognized that in my description of other people, I cannot fully describe their internal motivations, thought processes, or previous experiences that prompted them to act the way I perceived they did (Josselson, 1996).

Impact of Autoethnography

While autoethnography begins with one's own experiences, feelings, and reflections, it is as much about others involved in the reflected upon experiences, feelings, and reflections. Chang (2008) further states that focusing on self does not necessarily mean "self in a vacuum." For the analysis of this work, it is the recognition that the experiences an individual acknowledges about themselves are directly connected to those with whom they have interacted. Thus, one of the drawbacks of doing autoethnographic work is the recognition of how others might react to the stories that are told (Ellis, 2007) about ourselves, which, in essence, is about them. Ellis (2007) further acknowledges that, in doing such work, researchers are vulnerable with their thoughts about and what they think of other people with whom they have interacted.

72

Josselson (1996) stated that part of the language researchers use in describing others, especially their life experiences, is a violation because they are not seeking the other person's permission to talk about them.

Autoethnographers must also consider the ethical implications of their work, especially as they relate to working with others. To accomplish this, Ellis suggests incorporating the concepts of relational ethics, an ethical perspective closely associated with the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), Feminist ethics, and feminist communitarian ethics (Christians, 2000; Denzin, 1997; Denzin, 2003; Oleson, 2000; Punch, 1994). Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researchers and the researched and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work (Brooks, 2006; Lincoln, 1995; Reason, 1993; Tierney, 1993). Slattery and Rapp (2003) further describe relational ethics as doing what is necessary to be "true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on others (p.55). Relational ethics also require researchers to act from their hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations (Bergum, 1998; Slattery & Rapp, 2003). These conversations include those between what is written and the author, as well as between what is written and the audience reading it.

Goodall (2000) also contends that autoethnography is an "enlarged conversation" and is "constructed out of a writer's ability to hold an interesting conversation with readers" (p.13). Readers of autoethnographic literature can enter the inner workings of the social context studied and are invited to intermingle their experiences with the author's collaborative journey (Patten, 2004). Autoethnographers invite readers to "read with" and "read themselves into stories" or to juxtapose them with the stories of their own lives, no matter how different or displeasing (Ellis,

2007). Autoethnographers also dwell in a relational space, wherein "each, teller and listener, enter the space of the story for the other (Frank, 1995, pp. 17-18). This is for the intention of connecting the self with the other (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wolcott, 2004).

Autoethnography's Therapeutic Benefits

Further exploring the applications and impacts of autoethnography, I studied how other researchers have utilized this method, as well as their purposes and desired applications. One intention of autoethnographic work is clear: it has been used for therapeutic benefits. That is, the process can heal, resolve, or find solace in personal and professional relationships as well as within critical life events. Writing in this manner is a form of knowing while simultaneously a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). This rationalization, coupled with intersectionality theory and multi-conscious theory, allows us to gain an understanding of self, as well as some aspects of life as it intersects with a cultural context, connecting to others as potential co-researchers, and invites readers to enter the author's world and to use what they have learned there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (Ellis, 2004). A relationship is intentionally created in this manner between the writer and the reader. The term "witnessing" utilized by Denzin (2004), Ellis, and Bochner (2006) is defined as the ability of participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience (Greenspan, 1998; Rogers, 2004). Writing allows a researcher, as author, to identify other problems that are cloaked in secrecy (Goodall, 2006). For example, this may include the isolation a person may feel after being diagnosed with an illness (Frank, 1995) or experiencing harmful gender norms (Crawley, 2002; Pelias, 2007). These critical autoethnographies often are informed by feminist, critical race, queer, postcolonial, indigenous, and crip sensibilities that focus intentionally and fiercely on identifying and remedying social harms and injustices (Berry, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014;

Briscoe & Kalifa, 2015; Zibricky, 2014). As witnesses, autoethnographers validate the meaning of their pain and allow participants and readers to feel validated, evoking either the ability to cope with or the desire to change their circumstances.

Autoethnography for therapeutic purposes was also utilized by authors to make sense of themselves in relation to others, their pain, and shared experiences (Kiesinger, 2002; Poulos, 2008). Autoethnography has also been used to purge one's burdens (Atkinson, 2007) and to question canonical stories, conventional, authoritative, and "projective" storylines that "plot" how "ideal social selves" should live (Bochner, 2001; Bochner, 2002; Tololyan, 1987;). Autoethnographers also seek to improve and better understand relationships between individuals (Adams, 2006; Wyatt, 2008), reduce prejudice (Ellis, 2002; Ellis; 2009), encourage personal responsibility and agency (Pelas, 2007; Pelias, 2000), raise consciousness, promote cultural change (Ellis, 2002; Goodall, 2006), and give people a voice that, before writing, they may not have felt they had (Boylorn, 2006; Jago, 2002). Some autoethnographies are more analytic and socially scientific (Anderson, 2006). These treat the personal experience as tangential to the fieldwork experience (Heath, 2012), code and thematize personal experience (Kestenbaum et al., 2015), or adhere to traditional academic writing structures and practices (Zibricky, 2014). The experiences analyzed within this study are both personally and professionally rooted in the context of leadership. Moreover, I posit that for a researcher to analyze a leadership approach and the implications it has on others, the inquiry needs to begin in the analysis of how an individual conceptualizes themself through their various personal identity markers, as a leader, and data collected on the interactions they have with others in a specific context.

Autoethnographies that utilize more of an interpretivist or humanist framework use personal experiences to offer "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of cultural experiences to

promote an understanding of these experiences (Boylorn, 2013; Richardson, 2016; Speedy, 2015). These "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) are drafted in a way that describes not only what occurred but also the context of the situation. How people felt, how ideas were crafted, and how those ideas impacted others as well as themselves. For example, college professors have explored their experiences within academia as instructors, in addition to how they navigate the classroom as minority faculty (Rodriguez, 2009). Autoethnographers have also studied the development of faculty identity in a Spanish university (Hernandez et al., 2010), unique experiences of academic culture (Pelias, 2003; Walford, 2004), experiences within teaching qualitative research or other subject matter (Borochowitz, 2005), and spirituality in higher education (Chang & Boyd, 2011; Cozart, 2010). Emotional experiences are particularly popular topics within which faculty explore their "lived experience" of specific phenomena, including depression (Jago, 2002). Autoethnographers have also explored their experiences with grief (Lee, 2006), dealing with loss and illness (Ellis, 1995; Lee, 2010), and other areas related to health. Jago (2002) deals with depression in the context of the academy, and the interconnectedness of some sources of her depression was associated with personal relationships outside of work.

Conceptualizing Identity Through Autoethnography

Autoethnographic studies have included stories of coming out at the university level (Ettorre, 2010) as well as how sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is experienced and perceived within the higher education environment (Mitra, 2010; Mizzi, 2010). Gender identity is also explored by various autoethnographers, sometimes in relation to other aspects of their social identity and other times in isolation. For instance, masculinity in relation to sports (Drummond, 2010), femininity (Averett, 2009), and Black masculinity (Alexander, 2004) serve as examples of explorations of identity using autoethnography. White privilege has also been a

topic of personal autoethnographic exploration at the individual level of analysis (Boyd, 2008; Warren, 2001) as well as within a dialogic framework (Toyosaki et al., 2009). Others have looked at their racial or multiracial identity (Alexander, 2004; Gatson, 2003), including the impact this has on research (Pompper, 2010). Such emotions are revealed in autoethnography by Lewis (2007), who sought to shed light on individuals with disabilities in her autoethnography about tragedy, travail, and triumph. Goodall also emphasized that autoethnographers do this work not to take from or to get notoriety but instead to cultivate readers a means to communicate with them, and not for them, above them, or beyond them (Goodall, p.42, 2000).

Class consciousness is another topic of autoethnographical exploration (McIlveen et al., 2010), as well as family relationships, critical personal life events, and interactions, including father absence and family secrets (Jago, 2006; Poulos, 2009). Jago's autoethnography is a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry about her own experiences and those of her participants with absent fathers. Collaborating as coresearchers in working through such stories, where one acts as both researcher and research subject, along with other participants, may help the researcher gain empathy for each other and themselves. Goodall (2000) suggests that autoethnographers create a textual space for taking back to neglected cultural experiences and, simultaneously, offer accounts that allow others to "bear witness" to these experiences. Autoethnography does not have to deal only with trauma or with an individual's experiences. Instead, it is a method utilized for many intended purposes, such as amplifying stories, bearing witness, and being an example to others.

Diana Raab (2013) stated, "Because many autoethnographic studies relate to painful experiences, the researcher may encounter difficult moments during the course of the research and writing" (p. 14). A great deal of vulnerability is required from the authors of this work to

share experiences and relive and share traumatic events from their private lives. Such conversations about these writings can result in additional growth and healing. The therapist here need not lay you down on the leather couch or call in via video conference for a session; rather, it can be from the willingness to open your heart and analyze what's inside. Spry (2001) discussed this as an emancipatory process that frees one from the expectations of others, social labels, and even family limitations.

Using Autoethnography to Care and Lead

Educational leaders have also used autoethnography to develop, reflect upon, and strengthen their practice. Within the current body of autoethnographic literature, educational leaders are taking a reflective look at their current practices, their past experiences, and the implications their actions have on others. Leaders are asking themselves to examine and navigate how their various roles and character traits influence each other. For example, Ramsey and Ricket (2020) analyzed how new and incoming leaders are tasked with understanding their aims for their organization and how they conflict with or enhance the organization's stated goals while simultaneously analyzing its actual practice. This concept was echoed by Lowery (2018), Skousen (2022), and Williams (2021) in their studies assessing how leaders at various levels have the potential to shape their organizations into systems that benefit all stakeholders. Especially when they do not simply seek to include people but also when they validate everyone's experiences, thoughts, and desires for school improvement. This validation occurs when the leader understands their role and what brought them to become a leader, and then asks how they impact the operations of the organization where they lead but then do the same for the other members.

This is an example of how one's perception of self directly relates to leadership performance, as well as how they interact with those around them in the field of educational leadership. Hunter (2020), Knapp (2017), and Lowery (2018) task educational leaders with intentionally examining current and past lived experiences for the purposes of morally understanding what brought them to this current state of being and how it impacts others. Then, these leaders must seek out those answers for those with whom they interact and connect. Seeking the other's perspective regarding the work of an organization can be more impactful and sustainable. I have done this in this study by unpacking my various identity markers and analyzing their significance in my life. For example, I am a father of adopted children who are of a different race than my own. My whiteness plays a role in the recognition that I will have a different experience than my children regarding safety and social assumptions based on race. Delving deeper, I realized that my children would not be able to learn everything they need to know about race and race relations from me: I need to immerse my children, as well as myself, within the black community, black history and learn how my privilege can both promote and suppress their success in this world. The implication for me as a leader follows a similar vein of realizations. I am not only leading individuals with experiences and beliefs like my own. Thus, success in my position depends upon learning from others and supporting the various communities I work with. I need to consider what impacts, if any, my presence has on multiple groups and the dynamics of my involvement: my focus should not be on how I can help and support them but instead on how I can step back and foster opportunities for growth and relationship-building that strengthen and unite instead of weaken and polarize.

Autoethnography can also be used as a tool to model, demonstrate, and explain how leaders perceive themselves and others and how they can change their practices.

Autoethnography includes clear and tangible examples that connect theory and practices, providing an individual account of real-life events within a specific context that is analyzed through specific theories or frameworks. Another concept that emerged through the literature was intersectionality, mainly that each leader identified their identity as both an intersection of all of their various identity markers as well as fluid (Hunter, 2020; Knapp, 2017; Lowery, 2018; Ramsey & Ricket, 2020; Skousen, 2022; Williams, 2021) depending upon their experience, size of the organization, staff attitudes, knowledge, drive, and support they had at various levels of the organization. For example, I recognize my identities as a leader, father, cis-gender male, Queer, Millennial, and spouse all at the same time. There are times when I need to depend more on one characteristic trait than another. During contentious meetings, for example, I am still the parent of a child with a disability; however, I also need to be an instructional leader who understands the federal and school board policies, upholds the laws that govern the K-12 education system, and avoids becoming overly emotionally connected to a parent whose child is not demonstrating success within our current system. This humanizing element connects theory and practice and exemplifies that leaders are also people who sometimes struggle, seek help, fail, and succeed in their endeavors.

What Autoethnography Is Not

Social scientific standards have historically dismissed autoethnography as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and is too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic (Ellis, 2009; Hooks, 1994; Keller, 1995) to be considered "real" research. I often find myself explaining the topic of this research, its implications, and even more so, its worthiness to be considered research at all. Autoethnographers also experience criticism for doing too little fieldwork, observing too few cultural members, and not spending enough time with others

(Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009; Fine, 2003). Furthermore, in using personal experience, autoethnographers are thought to not only use biased data (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 1997; Gans, 1999) but are also navel-gazers (Madison, 2006), self-absorbed narcissists who do not fulfill scholarly obligations of hypothesizing, analyzing, and theorizing. According to this logic, a researcher cannot deem their journey of self-discovery as research; instead, someone else must make that determination for us. However, autoethnography is a method that allows the academic and the practitioner to become one and the same, thus tightening the relationship between current practitioners and those who work within higher educational institutions.

Quality Criteria

Traditional forms of research use terms such as generalizability and validity to refer to the possible duplication of findings in similar studies and the degree to which a study accurately reflects or assesses the specified topic. Autoethnography, though, does not seek what can be duplicated or evaluated; instead, it seeks to connect with the audience and spark an interest in their own life to reflect on their circumstances and identity deeply. Feldman (2003) contends that duplication and assessment should be replaced or augmented with quality indicators when referencing autoethnographic work. Feldman suggests that "researchers must study themselves to understand the ways that they construct who they are and to change those ways, if necessary, in becoming better researchers" (p.27). To put it simply, a researcher must learn to understand themselves, their position, and their impact on others before they can base any analysis on others' experiences.

Autoethnographic texts also encourage autoethnographers to consider the accessibility of their text in asking what value or benefit their work might have for our participants, readers, and themselves (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As I become increasingly aware of the importance and

81

impact of this work, I need to recognize my position in relationships, assess the power dynamics at play (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006), and consider the effects this work may have on myself and others. This necessitates considering questions such as: Why should I do this work; who am I to do this; how will this knowledge of me impact others; and, finally, what can someone learn from my experiences? Frank (1995) supports this line of questioning by recommending that researchers are tasked to think about a story, reduce it to content, and then analyze that content. Thinking with stories assumes the story is already complete/finite with a beginning, middle, and end; furthermore, there is no going beyond it since the story doesn't exist in the world. To think with a story means to experience it, consider how it affected the teller's life, and find how it affected one's life (Frank, p. 23, 1995). Autoethnographic work is not about reading the story and seeking results but experiencing and connecting with the story.

Lincoln and Guba (1995) state that the quality and rigor of autoethnography is to be able to capture the reader, who authenticates the literature's believability, credibility, and coherence, thereby replacing accuracy as a warrant for validity. The acceptance of validity and quality of autoethnography is championed by Reed-Danahay (1997), who suggests that autoethnography is more authentic than straight ethnography because the insider's voice is assumed to be truer than that of the outsider. Ellis (2004) also indicates that a story's generalizability is always being tested; however, not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or the experiences of others they know. Bochner (2000) poses that autoethnography takes on the rigor of any legitimate qualitative research because many autoethnographic projects have produced various methodological strategies incorporated into other forms of qualitative research.

Gergen (2014) states that good autoethnographic reporting approximates works of literature, provides insights into the lives of a particular group, and links personal experience to broader theoretical issues (p.56). Autoethnography should be enjoyable and accessible to the reader and should feel like a work of literature instead of a technical manual. While drafting this form of work can be difficult, it also should evoke feelings from the author as they are writing it. During this study, I have often found myself deep in thought, not about the mechanics of writing, but about how much I have overcome and what I have accomplished. Thus, readers of this work have a challenging responsibility to consider autoethnographies more comprehensively and the ways in which individuals can respond in passionate, honest, and direct ways. The reader is invited to relive the writer's experiences rather than interpret or analyze what the writer has written (Stinson, 2009).

Truth and Autoethnography

Autoethnographers value narrative truth based on what a story of experience does and how it is used, understood, and responded to for and by us and others as writers, participants, audiences, and humans (Bochner, 1994; Denzin, 1989). Autoethnographers also recognize that what is referred to as "truth" changes as the genre of writing or representing experience changes. If I do not articulate my perspectives for a given project, I risk others evaluating my work in unfortunate and untenable ways (Adams, 2005). For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a sense that what has been represented could be true. Autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or the author's own

(Ellis, 2004, p.124). Autoethnographers ask: "How useful is the story?" and "To what uses might the story be put?" (Bochner, 2002).

Framing this Study

As mentioned, Reed-Danahay (1997) stated that autoethnography is rooted within a larger body of work known as ethnography. Ethnography, in its simplest terms, is a study of the context of a situation (Dewan, 2018). As I am elected to study my identity formation regarding my leadership, I recognize that I cannot do either of these things in a vacuum. Not only are other individuals involved in this study (Berry, 2006; Ellis, 2009), but there needs to be a recognition of the greater sociopolitical climate, the location, and the time these stories are being generated. Also, within this work, I have provided space where I have unpacked some of my identity markers, especially those that directly impact this study.

While undertaking this research, I have lived in the state of Florida. Historically, the state has been politically moderate, with most constituents leaning conservative. Those of us who are more politically liberal and those who are more conservative had a space for discussion; logic, data, and the rights of individuals were considered in making larger, more impactful decisions. However, since the Trump administration was voted into power in November 2016, during my first semester in my doctoral coursework, the state has seen a deeply conservative, far-right movement rising in influence and power. This, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting isolation, and the expectation of returning to in-person work as if nothing ever happened, has undoubtedly led to these turbulent times. The state of Florida's current governor, Ron DeSantis, has pushed forward legislation over the past two years that is both self-serving to some and dangerous to others. For example, House Bill 1069, termed the "Don't Say Gay Bill," has been implemented in grades K-8. Teachers are no longer allowed to teach or discuss anything

84

outside cisgender heteronormative relationships and expectations, including being prohibited from using a student's preferred pronouns. Moreover, suppose an educator has inclinations that a child might be outside the cisgender heteronormative. In that case, they are now mandated to report this directly to the parent without providing any resources for support or for concern for the right of the student to come out to their parents on their own accord. Staff are even required to call child services and report gender-affirming care, as such care is now considered by state law as child abuse. House Bill 1521 also criminalized transgender people from using a public restroom that matches their gender identity and prohibits locations from having gender-inclusive bathrooms. Senate Bill 170 discourages cities from passing non-discrimination ordinances; Senate Bill 254 prevents physicians from providing gender-affirming care. Ron DeSantis has not only focused on the LGBTQIA+ community, he also is targeting any "woke" ideologies, stating, "Florida is where woke goes to die." The ideologies referenced here include Critical Race Theory and any ideas that ask others to consider how white privilege has impacted our society and work focused on unpacking and dismantling systems of oppression.

The state of Florida is also in its fourth year after returning from lockdown after the initial outbreak of COVID-19. People transitioned between phases of worry, panic, isolation, and uncertainty, and finally, to a state of forced normalcy under uncomfortable options: a mentality of "business as usual." However, this mindset was accompanied by leaders simultaneously ignoring traumas, concerns about health and safety, and any mention of the need for training and support. Individuals have forgotten how to interact, respectfully communicate concerns or disagreements, and see each other as individuals. In fact, as of May 2023, the National Association of Advancement of Colored People issued a travel ban on the state of Florida because of its policies and treatment of the LGBTQ+ community, migrants, and people of color.

Equality Florida issued a similar ban in April of 2023. Recent weather patterns indicated the hottest weather in recorded history; in addition to the occasional hurricane, one can see the need for us to take the time to unpack our experiences and to seek to understand how individuals impact one another.

As an individual, I identify as a queer, cisgender spouse, father of 3, educator, leader, scholar, advocate, and able-bodied white male who is sure he forgot to mention something about himself. Looking at these identity markers and utilizing concepts through the lens of the conscious leadership approach and intersectionality theory, I tasked myself to analyze these markers individually and how they intersect and diverge. For example, as a leader in the public school system, I understand policy changes and what it means to implement, express expectations, and hold people accountable. However, as an educator, I am at odds with the previously discussed legislative bills, especially when I do not see how this is educationally beneficial to children, much less as a queer person who is aware of The Five Faces of Oppression (Young, 2009). My community is slowly being hidden and even erased, and I feel as though I am part of the problem as a member of the organizational structure perpetuating these dangerous policies. I worry about when I will be asked to take down pictures of my family, if my spouse and I will not be welcome at parent nights when I will no longer be welcome, or if I need to find other employment. If that happens, will it be too late to do anything about it? I am also the parent of three black children; two are male, and one has a cognitive disability. As Florida pushes further ahead toward an anti-Black and anti-Queer environment, I worry not only for their safety but also for their opportunities. My family and I are considering our options but must also consider self-preservation.

Inquiry Design

Becoming Conscious of My Identity

This study considers the following questions: What connection is there between understanding the various aspects of what makes up a person's identity and how they conceptualize leadership, and thus, In recognition of my multiple identities, leadership actions, and interactions with others, in what ways did I engage in conscious leadership practices? The data collection process occurred in two phases. The first phase centered around the first research question focused on conceptualizing my identity within my current circumstances. This phase of the data collection process was a culmination of the self-interviewing strategy called "event listing," in which I facilitate recall, organize memories, and list events relevant to the study (Chang, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to create an autoethnographic timeline (Figure 2). In creating this document, I first deconstructed my identity through self-reflection and critical analysis, assessing where I came from and how these factors present themselves in my current interactions and my conceptualization of self. This included reflection on my past hesitations, struggles, successes, and goals. I realized several critical moments in my life emerged when conceptualizing how I perceived myself as a leader and how I had arrived in the position. Indeed, if I wanted to continue to grow and move up in my career, I would have to store away some of my other identity markers so others would find me more alike than different. I performed an analysis of this thought process: what lesson was I taught early in life that promoted this line of thinking? Careful consideration of this question led to a connection between this line of thinking and several critical experiences. First, I hid my Queerness from my family and friends for fear of shame and rejection. Secondly, I have a brother with cognitive disabilities who attended another school and traveled on a separate bus. Third, I am not safe in my own environment. What my

siblings and I had experienced growing up taught us that we had to work hard at hiding aspects

of our everyday lives to assimilate, or we would either be isolated socially or punished. Doing so

created and developed gaps in our relationships. Within me, it created the need for complacency

with the status quo. I prioritized assimilating and avoiding conflict over acting out and

challenging those that were supposed to be providing a safe and neutering environment. This is

an example of how I invoked this insider's viewpoint (Chang, 2008) within the readers while

immersing them in my situation. In this way, a relationship between the reader and the writer is

formed in which the reader can see that they are capable of healing and gaining a deeper and

more defined sense of self.

Phase one of the data collection process also utilized a method that involved a Hindu

practice called Union of Mergence (Appendix A), in which one focuses on each chakra, or

energy center, moving from the base of the spine to the top of the head, focusing on releasing or

clearing up any energies or thoughts. According to the practice, doing this can help one gain

access to the higher self, referred to as kuṇḍalinī. This process asks a series of questions that

connect with the internalized fear, shame, guilt, and anger we possess within ourselves and our

experiences. It then moves us to stages of forgiveness, acceptance, and healing to become more

intentional and compassionate in our personal and professional lives. In my experience, after

going through this process, a calm permeates through processes, providing the opportunity to

detach from previously conceived problems so that you can focus on the core value or belief

system instead of its physical manifestations. The effects of this practice can be observed for a

finite amount of time before our minds are distracted again by the day-to-day demands of life. I

underwent this process once a week for the eight weeks (approximately two months) of the same

period discussed in phase two. During each session, I focused on how my past manifested in my

present, blurring my vision for the future. I recorded my responses to the guiding questions, feelings, connecting thoughts or experiences that surfaced while answering the questions, and images that came to mine.

The Union of Mergence protocol (Appendix A) refers specifically to the researcher's experiences (Ellis, 2002). As I am the primary data source, I utilized self-observational and self-reflective data recounted by memory to capture past and present perspectives of my lived experiences. It is important to note that these experiences are limited to perspective and my current recollection of what happened, what I am currently learning, and how I am reacting to them. As I write this dissertation, I am taking time to reflect, recount, and process what happened prior to drafting it in words. Feelings, retellings, and reactions are data sources I am collecting. I turned to autoethnography as a process and product to further analyze my experiences, assembled using hindsight" (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004).

Becoming Conscious of My Leadership in Context

The second phase of data collection involved my actions and reactions pertaining to my experience as an educational leader. The timeline for this data collection was July 1st, 2023, through August 31st, 2023. The data was collected via journal entries, personal messages from staff, letters, texts, notes, and any public documentation that provided additional context for the situations I encountered. During this study, I journaled at least once a day. The journal entries centered around events of the day and the interactions I had with various staff members I work with. I focused on events that involved either conflict, change, or those that evoked a strong emotional response that I was responsible for responding to as the formal leader in that situation. Within this data collection phase, I utilized four categories outlined by Chang: personal memory data, self-observational data, self-reflective data, and external data (Chang, pp. 71-107, 2008).

Chang states that personal memory serves as a "building block of autoethnography" since memory can serve as a bridge from the past self (identity formation) by providing context and a "richness" to the experience of the present (p.71). From the exercises suggested by Chang to access memories, I created an autobiographical timeline (Figure 2) that involved significant life events and critical incidents from my early stages of development until I was a young adult. I followed up by writing about events on that timeline (p. 74). Chang (2008) also noted that gathering artifacts can help foster memories, so they suggested selecting artifacts that trigger reflection. For this study, I selected artifacts such as past leadership evaluations, emails from staff, text messages, and family photos, including those of my father and sister.

During the journaling process and in collecting self-observation data, Chang (2008) suggests that the autoethnographer also record observations that were related to their topic--- "actual behaviors, thoughts, and emotions"—collected during the time of research, in a natural setting (pp.89-90). At the end of each week, on Sunday morning, I would review what was previously written, and during the study, I collected eight weeks (two months) worth of journaling data. I recorded my positive and negative emotions, assessing my response to situations, and further sought to make the connections of how the behavior or response was linked to my previous experiences, as well as how my actions aligned with who I perceived myself to be as an individual and as a leader. Chang (2008) refers to this data as "self-discovery through other self-narrator," which allows the autoethnographer to write in response to another narrator's experiences; in analyzing their reaction to it, the researcher can delve into "belief, values, perspectives, and emotions."

External data is the final area of data collection utilized within this study and was significantly important in this autoethnographic work as it allowed the researcher to gain

"additional perspectives and contextual information" from which to "investigate and examine" their subjectivity (Chang, 2008). Textual artifacts are defined by Chang (2008) as "formal or informal texts written by you or about you and your cultural contexts." I collected my external data using artifacts. This external data will be previous year-end evaluations, emails, and personal notes or cards I received from staff communicating the level of our relationships and how they perceived me as a leader. Some of these artifacts highlighted my flaws, my growth over the years, as well as my kindness. I mined my personal and professional archive to enhance my understanding of self and context of my life (Chang, 2008). The gathering of these pieces of data for an autoethnography is what Hughes and Pennington (2017) refer to as an assemblage, or "a data collection method designed to represent a multilayered moment." It relies on literature, items, and accounts assembled in a unique form. An assemblage is like that of the traditional method of triangulation utilized in research and data collection (where the researcher gathers at least three sources on the same subject). It involves a collection of multiple items that fit together to provide multiple perspectives and a rich, multilayered account of time, place, or moment in the history of the autoethnographer and their profession. Assemblage can be considered analogous to assembling artifacts from an archaeological site made up of different forms and modes of representation. (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Analysis

When engaging in the analysis of autoethnographic texts, Bochner contends that the author of these texts should read and reread the story being drafted; after multiple reads, the author needs to ask themselves if they believe what happened (Bochner, 2002). As discussed previously, the drafter of these documents has more control over what is and is not reflected on the keyboard. As I read, re-read, and drafted the texts found in later chapters, I made sure to cut

or obscure content for the purposes of anonymity and that the themes and emotional responses that were provoked within me would still be upheld. Ellis (2004) and Feldman (2010) recommend that authors also need to engage in a dialogue with themselves, considering how the story presented speaks to them and connects to their experiences, as well as others that they know and do not know. Richardson (2000) also contends that after the autoethnographic text is drafted, the reader should be trying to answer, "How has this impacted me? Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does this generate new questions that move me to write or move me to try new research practices? Does this move me to action?" (Richardson, 2000). To honor the stories presented within this text, I read and re-read the autoethnographic episodes and asked myself these questions directly and indirectly from Richardson. I also asked if the story I had drafted rang true. Or if/how it provoked an emotional response or drew a connection to my own experiences? I also pondered if this text motivated me to want to keep reading or want to know what happened next. I wondered if this document would move me to want to begin to analyze my own identity and leadership approaches. I then recorded these responses in a journal.

I moved forward with data analysis and opened the window through which autobiographical data are interpreted (Change, 2008). I recognize that one critical aspect of analyzing data is through the lens of reflexivity, or, more specifically, uncomfortable reflexivity. Reflexivity, as used here, refers to a "continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project" (Dowling, 2008). This reflexivity can range from research conducted from a more objectivist approach by a researcher utilizing bracketing methods in their analysis to researchers who keep journals nothing their "assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes" as researchers (Dowling, 2008). In a study utilizing autoethnography, I am obligated to engage in what is referred to as the "strong reflexivity" of autoethnography, or the awareness and open

acknowledgment of the "reciprocal influences" between the autoethnography, their research, and their researcher participants that leads to a co-creation of knowledge (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Berry (2006) postulates that, even though I am the only one actively participating in this research, I am still involving those with whom I have interacted and the experiences I have chosen to write about. Additionally, Pillow (2003) described the co-created knowledge of reflexivity as a reciprocal exchange - a way to conduct research "with" instead of "on "participants. Pillow cautioned that autoethnographers need to be aware of unequal power structures present within autoethnography and that remain within reflexivity and more traditional forms of researcher methodology as it is still the researcher who bestows the invitation upon their participants to engage. Pillow proposed an "uncomfortable reflexivity" instead; this type of reflexivity seeks to gain knowledge while acknowledging that gathering knowledge is "tenuous." Guiding my uncomfortable reflexivity, I adapted questions offered by Alexander (2013) and Pillow (2003), in which the researcher asks themselves whether the reflexivity includes an awareness of:

- The findings as believable, rich, and evocative
- The "social, culture, and political milieu/context" of the events I am documenting
- The power structures at play in these moments and my own relationship to or within these structures
- My "positionality in the story" and my "sense of empowerment or entrapment"
- The roles, relationships, and identities within the story and how they impact/interact with one another
- How I "intend to represent or characterize these particular others in the story"

In conducting the analysis of this study, I engaged in critical reflection, open to Pillow's uncomfortable reflexivity, to achieve greater success at my intention of engaging readers in dialogue with the text, with themselves, and with the culture and conceptualization of leadership in a reciprocal exchange that seeks knowledge that challenges present-day structures. After several readings of the data, it has been organized into chronologically based thematic piles and

93

identified if it occurred because of conflict, change, or emotional response. I then drafted the events in a narrative style to encapsulate salient points from my experiences that impact my various identity markers. For example, after drafting a narrative, I followed it with an analysis utilizing intersectionality theory to identify which characteristics within my identity resonated with the passage. I then spoke to how those characteristics converged or diverged. Lastly, I analyzed the narrative utilizing previously conceptualized leadership approaches to provide rich contextual information and show how it was connected to the literature. Chang called this work a shift from a "scavenging" and "quilting" work of data collection to the transformation of the data into a "text with culturally meaningful explanations." The aim is to make a personal experience meaningful to me and the reader (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; Hooks, 1994).

The stories that emerged during the second phase of the analysis process have been presented in a way that utilizes a narrative approach as I have gathered the experiences gained during this study to create rich, thick, descriptive narratives that both tell a story and aim to resonate with readers of this text (Adams, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Lamott, 1994). These narratives centered around what was experienced during the eight-week data collection timeframe, the data that emerged during the Union of Mergence self-interview, and what was determined to have a direct connection(s) to the autoethnographic timeline and samskaras associated with how I conceptualized my various identity markers during the time of this study. This was done by performing several close reads of the data. The first reading focused on collecting the salient points within each document. The second round of reading looked for interconnectedness within each of the documents collected and how the salient points were connected and divergent. The third round of reading was performed with the intention of creating autoethnographic episodes (Ellis, 2004) that personified the realizations and understandings that

were beginning to unfold. When a draft of the episodes was written, I performed another close read, utilizing uncomfortable reflexivity developed from the work of Alexander (2013) and Pillow (2003). The stories that emerged from the data are related to experiencing change, both affirming and unwelcome, as well as how I lead during these times of change. The experiences will first be presented and defined by autoethnographic episodes (Ellis, 2004) or samskaras, which are italicized, followed by analysis utilizing concepts within intersectionality theory and conscious leadership. The intention is to connect past and present experiences in a manner that honors my various identity markers, as well as to provide rich descriptions (Chang, 2008) that allow for analysis and deeper understanding. For example, when responding to change, I analyzed it from the perspective of the educational leader, a parent, an advocate, and a teacher while simultaneously drawing the connection to past experiences that potentially impact these current perceptions.

The following chapter of this dissertation is a discussion of the data collected, how it was analyzed, what themes emerged, and how previous experiences are connected to current situations. This aimed to provide deeper insight into how my previous experiences influence my current conceptualizing of my identity and leadership approaches while uncomfortably reflecting on what has occurred.

Chapter 4:

Engaging Consciously in Leadership

> You may have heard the world is made up of atoms and molecules, but it's really made up of stories. William Turner

Engaging with this Study

The initial purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how I conceptualized who I was as a person and elucidate the identity markers that make up who I am, what influenced me, as well as my understanding of the world around me. The next step was to analyze my perception of self and how that affected my conceptualization of leadership in my responses and interactions. When pairing the conscious leadership approach with intersectionality for analysis of this autoethnographic work, I utilized the concepts set forth by Alexander (2013) and Pillow (2003). It became evident that when responding to various stimuli within my environment, such as conflict, interactions with others, and change, my perceptions, understanding, and reactions changed as well. This response, defined by the work of Alexander and Pillow, was directly related to the core tenets of intersectionality, a conscious leadership approach that aimed to highlight and analyze first the conceptualization of one's identity and then the relational aspects of human connection between individuals, as well as the context surrounding them (Cho et al., 2013). The task, then, was to analyze why I was perceiving and responding the way I was and to connect that perception with my samskaras through the Union of Mergence protocol (Appendix A) paired in conjunction with uncomfortable reflexivity (Alexander, 2013; Pillow, 2003). The analysis also focused on the various identity makers

96

present in my perception of self and my relationships with individuals. Recognizing that each

relationship influences the decisions and responses I took (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). The

aim of this work also was to be able to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: What connection exists between understanding the various aspects of a person's identity

and how they conceptualize leadership?

RQ2: In recognition of my multiple identities, leadership actions, and interactions with others, in

what ways did I engage in conscious leadership practices?

In answering these questions, data was collected through the development of an

autoethnographic timeline (samskaras), journaling, Union of Mergence/self-interview, and

collection of external data. This information has been collected, analyzed, and presented in a

format that is inviting to the reader (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000) while also honoring the various

identity markers discussed previously within the samskaras presented within this text.

Autoethnographic episodes (Richardson, 2000) were developed and conceptualized after the

second phase of data collection occurred so that time could be given to reflect and derive

understandings and implications from my experiences so that the stories presented in this chapter

can be explored further.

Understanding Current Perceptions

This study's first phase centered on how I conceptualized my identity within my current

circumstance. I utilized event listing and organized my memories relevant to this study (Change,

2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). After these memories were recorded and organized, I then

utilized hindsight by rereading and recounting them, combining and organizing them in a way

that was directly linked to this study (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004). During the

development of the autoethnographic timeline (Figure 2), I began using uncomfortable

reflexivity (Dowling, 2008; Pillow, 2003) embedded within the Union of Mergence (Appendix A) to assess not only what was learned during these experiences but also how feelings, perceptions, and reactions were showing up in my current practices. Then I assessed what I was teaching and modeling for others as well as what I needed to unlearn or relearn about my perceptions of self and others. These lessons are embedded within my autoethnographic timeline as they influenced my perception of myself and others at the time of this study and how I reacted/responded to situations connected to the interactions I had with others.

The autoethnographic timeline (Figure 2) is organized into four main sections: my childhood, teen years, post-high school, and living independently from my family. In developing this document, I first organized my samskaras, which are the foundation of my current perceptions (Fowler, 2002). The samskaras, personal milestones, and professional experiences are listed above. This shows not only how my life has changed from one of isolation and disconnection to one that is more community-based, but it also shows how my responsibilities have developed over time while at the same time showing what lessons I have been taught throughout my life and how I have implemented those teachings within my perceptions of self and others. See figure 2.

This timeline also acts as a visual representation of the window in which I view myself and others around me (Chang, 2008) in my personal and professional life. This window has been developed after a life of interactions and experiences rather than a specific framework or epistemology based on traditional scholarship, which is what Chang calls for when analyzing autoethnographic data. Of course, in academic work and scholarship, researchers need to know what or how they are developing their questions and data (Chang, 2008; Dowling, 2008; Kerby, 1991).

Became a Certified Interpreter   Became a Teacher   Became an Administrator

Got into College   Graduated College   Met my Spouse   Started a Family

Graduated High School   Started Learning Sign   Started Working with Students   Built a Community

Living with grandma after abuse allegations

Moving around to escape; NY, NH, FL, NC, AZ FL

Father leaves once and for all

I get a car while my brother gets to ride the short bus

Nominated for biggest closeted homosexual at work

Sister joins our father's side

Introduction to death

Hitting rock bottom

Childhood 1986-1999   Early Teens 1999-2004   Post High School 2004-2010   Adulting 2010-Present

Lessons	Realizations	Lessons	Realizations	Lessons	Realizations	Lessons	Realizations

• You are not safe
• You don't have to forgive or seek forgiveness
• I am an outlet for other's rage
	You must get other's attention by any means necessary	• People Leave
		• Don't be different
			Become what they need you to be so they don't leave
			
			I can leave too
				• Secrets can be used against you
				• Hide your struggle
					I can be cruel too	• People Die
						• One can move on
						  • Find love
						  • Find Acceptance
						  • Find hope
							There are consequences when one seeks to control
							
							We can choose how we impact and influence each other

Samskaras   Personal milestones   Professional experiences
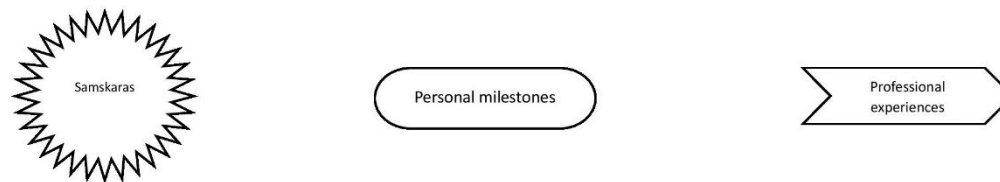
Figure 2: Autoethnographic Timeline

For autoethnography, this window also has to be recognized and embedded within every part of the development and implementation of a study as autoethnography welcomes the researcher's insider perspective (Reed-Danahay, 1997) as well as when attempting to utilize other windows that are paired with more academic approaches such as conscious leadership and intersectionality (McCall, 2005; Richardson & Loubier, 2008) because my perceptions are still there and influencing how I perceive and interpret concepts and interactions.

The stories are presented in four episodes in the following order. The first centers around my own experiences and contributes to a larger narrative that encompasses my experiences. I am intentional about how these stories have been formatted. I am utilizing minimal references and limited analysis within the telling of these stories as I want them to be viewed from the perspective of a practitioner and not of a scholar. The humanization of myself and of others is a concept embedded with a conscious leadership approach (Nagendra, 2022). These stories, then, reflect the human experiences intended to be felt when read. After the stories have been presented and read, I will follow up with the final section of that chapter entitled Connecting Literature and Practice. This is where I quilt in (Change, 2008) intersectionality and conscious leadership with the autoethnographic information that was collected during the time of this study. The first story, Only a Policy Implementer, centers around my experiences identifying as a queer person working in a state that has recently passed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. This legislation not only affects me and my community privately but also in the workplace. This episode is meant to exemplify how one's identity can and does intersect with one's place of work within an organization. This is especially difficult when that organization is taking a stance that is unsupportive of your identity and values. The next story, Leading Through Loss, showcases the personal support that staff require during times of trauma. This also speaks to how leaders have

to prioritize their trauma when intending to support others. I, as a queer leader, during times of uncertainty about my own personal safety and job security while at the same time experiencing grief, must find a balance in experiencing my thoughts and feelings in order to support those I work with while at the same time continue working and fulfilling my everyday responsibilities. Recognizing the Rainbows in the Clouds shows that even in tribulation, there are moments of joy and success for the excellent work one puts in. The experiences that occurred during this study also exemplify the saying, "Grief is the price we pay for love." As I do this work, I love and recognize them in our shared moments. There is also a reminder that times change, and people leave in one way or the other. Finally, Leading Through Change demonstrates how organizations keep moving forward even when individuals who make them up are not ready to. I, as a leader, need to lead, even in times when I don't feel safe and secure, even when I am grieving, even when I am unwilling.

Stories of Change

It is commonly understood by educators working within the K-12 education setting that the summer is often the time for change. This is the time announcements are made pertaining to site-based administrator reassignments, retirement, transfers, promotions, and demotions. While district administrators typically do not transfer to new locations, staff are often told about current positions and role changes, including which programs or faculty we supervise. These conversations are usually one-sided and lack emotionality: the discussion focuses on allocations and numbers, not people and individuals. Often, senior leadership will use phrases to neutralize any hurt feelings, resentment, or concerns brought on by those directly impacted by the decisions; such phrases include "as a district," "a cog in the machine," and "it is what's best for everyone." Professional relationships forged over many years can be severed in an instant, and

101

those charged with picking up the fodder are tasked to do so as quickly as possible without expressing dissent.

During the inquiry process, I was involved in two of these transition meetings at my current place of work. The first of these meetings was held to discuss restructuring roles: I was to lose two groups of people in programs with which I had worked for years. I was told the reason for this transfer of programs was to reduce my overall workload, giving me the opportunity to focus on the other programs I supervise. Then, after accepting these circumstances and developing a new support plan for my staff, I was called into another meeting the week before school started and was given even more areas of responsibility than I had previously. In addition, I was unfamiliar with the programs I had just been assigned, and several staff I would typically turn to for guidance were out on leave for various reasons. There was also an event that triggered a sense of loss at work among staff, as one of my teachers was diagnosed with an illness and given a poor prognosis. This staff member was hopeful they could return to work in the fall. As this was still in the summer, there was little communication happening with the other staff, so this information was kept between just a select few. However, as time progressed, hope in this matter faded as the focus changed from treatment methods to palliative care. After a thorough analysis of these unwelcome changes, there became an apparent connection between my various identities – a key component of intersectionality (McCall, 2005). The following sections describe the culmination of the data into three main categories: first, focusing on working times of uncertainty and encountering unwelcomed change, second, as it is connected to affirming my past practices and showing the need for connection. Finally, I analyze my leadership while experiencing these changes, discussing how my practices were out of alignment with who I perceived myself to be as a person and leader. After discussing each of these and working with a

102

heightened sense of awareness (Jones & Brazdau, 2015), an unrecognized feeling emerged that

related to a discussion of an underlying desire for control. Control being connected to a change, a

loss, an unknown outcome, and/or my perceived safety.

Unwelcome Change

Only a Policy Implementer?

> First, they came for the Communists,
> and I didn't speak up,
> because I wasn't a Communist.
> Then they came for the Jews,
> and I didn't speak up,
> because I wasn't a Jew.
> Then they came for the Catholics,
> and I didn't speak up,
> because I was a Protestant.
> Then they came for me,
> and by that time, there was no one
> left to speak up for me.
> -   Martin Niemoller

During the 2021-2022 school year, to be inclusive, the student services team

(Psychologists, social workers, and school counselors) facilitated a movement to be as gender

inclusive as possible. In one of the seemingly smallest ways, they requested that staff place their

preferred pronouns within their email signatures. As someone trying to do better, I immediately

amended my email signature to reflect my chosen pronouns (he/him/his). As someone who sends

and receives hundreds of emails a week, I had not received any direct feedback, either positive

or negative. As I saw it, the email signature was a way to show support for those uncomfortable

in stating their gender pronouns, and my recognition of and inclusion of my pronouns was to be

included and feel at least a little safer speaking with me. That stance, however, was not

supported by the district. An email arrived in the middle of September that included phrases such

as "business appropriate," "spreading the brand of our district," and "maintaining our

recognized and respected image across the state" was utilized to separate the professional from

103

the personal, the work from the workers, and to appease those that do not share the same line of thought about gender inclusion as those that do. Neutrality was the district's goal, and in doing so, presented a position that aimed to be benign in nature. Ignoring the concerns of those directly impacted and those who support them, I deleted this from my signature in compliance with this directive. I said nothing.

A year later, at the beginning of September of the 2022-2023 school year, the focus shifted from pronouns to that of the safe space stickers used to represent a safe place for the LGBTQ+ community.   The email utilized phrases such as "focus on tolerating everyone," and we don't want to "trigger" anyone into thinking that we are either safe to talk to or willing to promote ideas about different "lifestyles." The email also discussed the importance of being neutral in the face of new legislation. Further stating that it was within the best interests of all parties that we support "all students and families." It was then stated that all safe space stickers, any mention of them, or any other paraphernalia be taken down immediately. Working at the district office, I was confident that the safe space stickers and posters I kept outside my office were fine to keep displayed. With this rationale, I did not remove it. However, coming to work one day, I noticed that my door had a new blank space on it. While spatially, there was minimal impact on the environment, internally, I began to question whether or not certain parts of me belonged there anymore. How much would I be asked to "tone it down" or not mention about my private life? I wondered how indivisible I would need to become so that the messaging of the district could remain benign. I also wondered how I could begin an organization when very acknowledgment of my existence and the existence of my community if something goes against board policy. After all, aren't I here, don't I have impacted Aren't my experiences an asset to the

organization? There was no mention of it again, no follow-up email, no conversation, just

silence and a blank wall. I said nothing.

It wasn't until a third email was sent during the summer of the 2023-2024 school year

regarding a ruling from the 11th Circuit United States Court of Appeals, Drew Adams v. School

Board of St. Johns County. The court's ruling in this case centered around the need for students

to use the bathroom facilities that corresponded to their biological sex as assigned at birth.

Schools were immediately tasked to change any "inclusive gender policies" and to contact

parents and students directly impacted by this change. Also, the body of the email included this

warning: "It is essential that you refrain from engaging in discussions and conversations with

students, parents, community members, and staff members centering around this issue." I then

decided to call a meeting.

As felt by many historically oppressed groups of people, a Queer person is all too

familiar with the need to shed light on a topic that was for so long hidden comfortably in the

shade. I can only recall a few times in my life in which I have felt it. The first time was when I

came out of the closet to my family and friends. The feeling of fear and uncertainty, wrapped

with the expectation of being unwelcomed in certain spaces moving forward, having a backup

plan in case the conversation with family turns into one of faith-based anger and judgment

instead of acceptance and love. This feeling is not easily forgotten and is not something I would

wish for anyone. I felt this feeling again at another point when I had hit rock bottom

professionally and personally, and the third time was when I asked for a meeting to discuss these

legislative changes. I went to this meeting not as an employee or a subordinate. I arrived as an

advocate and concerned queer individual that did not want to be erased. The meeting started like

this.

"You took our pronouns; I didn't say anything.
You took our safe space stickers; I didn't say anything.
You are forcing students (and eventually staff) into spaces that they do not feel
safe in.
I need to know what's next on the agenda and if I and other queer members of staff have
a place here?"

As these words left my mouth and traveled through the air to the ears of my director, I saw who

they impacted and then manifested on the director's face with a look of concern, frustration, and

dismay. No direct answer was provided, no comfort, no connection was formed, nor were my

experiences within the district validated. I was alone in that office, and in that feeling of

isolation, questions started and were centered around why I would even bring this to them and

spoke about how they have gay friends and how they were indeed allies at heart. They just were

unable to say or do anything about these policy changes in our system. The conversation then

shifted. If the queer community was so concerned, they should come to board meetings, protest,

contact the governor's office, and advocate for themselves so that the supporters of such actions

can become more aware of our concerns. Recognizing at that moment that I was being

gaslighted and tasked with something that should be the responsibility of those in majored I

responded. My response was that it is unfair to ask those of the oppressed and silenced minority

to be responsible for also serving as the moral compass of compassion shown by the majority. I

stated that people are being hurt by these decisions, feeling that they have no place here and no

one with whom they can discuss these matters. We are scared for our jobs, safety, and families,

and want reassurance that we will be ok here. I was told that the positions of individuals

currently employed are safe and that if there is a direct concern with myself or others, we will be

supported. While I did feel that my words had some impact in this situation, I worried that it was

too late. I left the meeting. A month later, a new policy was enacted that if a staff member was

caught using a restroom that was contrary to their gender assigned at birth, they could be

written up and subject to other disciplinary action.

       Living in Florida at this moment in time evokes a certain level of fear. This fear stems from a lack of power and agency a minority group member has over their circumstances and opportunities (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). I am afraid for myself, my spouse, my children, others' children, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and all those negatively impacted by Governor Ron DeSantis' radically conservative and oppressive agenda. I am afraid for not only our physical safety and access to resources, but I am also fearful of what this is doing psychologically to all members of our society. While I do recognize my privilege as a white cisgender male, I am concerned that by the time I am directly impacted, it will be too late for so many others. An emotionality comes to the surface in working from a conscious leadership approach, seeking to gain deeper insight into the interconnectivity from multiple perspectives and advocating for shared responsibility (Hayden, 2012; Jones, 2012; Jones & Brazdau, 2015). As a district employee, there is an expectation to follow board policy. If there is a disagreement with the established board policy, one is to say nothing, have a private meeting with those of influence, or speak out publicly. However, if one elects to speak out publicly, they must ensure they speak as an individual and not as a district representative. This would include not mentioning work location, not wearing any identifying school or district information on your person when making a statement, and not even having your place of employment listed on a social media account when drafting or sharing posts about critiques of established board policy. As an employee, this makes sense: when we sign our contracts, we state that we will follow district policy and hold others employed by the district to the same level of expectation. We must be a united front with clear and enforceable policies and protocols. This means leadership is

charged with communicating and maintaining expectations of the district among all staff. This includes following a progressive discipline plan to ensure compliance in some circumstances. I have found in recent history this has been easier said than done.

Utilizing concepts from a conscious leadership approach and intersectional, I first need to understand the various perspectives within me and understand the impact this suffering is causing me and others with whom I interact (Jones & Brazdau, 2015; Marinčič & Marič, 2018; Ward & Haase, 2016). Then, through an intersectional lens, the power dynamics at play must be recognized (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). I, as an administrator within my district, have some privileges in my experience. I, working at a central office, do not interact directly with students or parents on an everyday ongoing exchange. My interactions are scheduled and intentional, and if there is any concern, I can end the conversation, reflect, research, and get back to the individual or team when I have an established answer. In considering how these experiences are different than others with whom I interacted with. I recognize how they are experiencing these changes and systems of suffering is not only drastically different. This difference also creates tension in our relationship because there is a perception of protection and distance between those who are being directly affected and those who get to sit behind a desk all day. This tension was affecting me in my relations and interactions with others. I acknowledge that I am not only an administrator and employee of a district, but I am also a queer person who grew up being ignored, silenced, and who knows what it is like to have one's identity used to ridicule them and force them out of a position so there is a part of me that has felt how others have felt as well as wants to advocate or all. The uncomfortable reflexivity (Alexander, 2013; Pillow, 2003) question is, am I welcome to do this in either space?

Further, in recognizing the power dynamics (Crenshaw, 1989), I, as an employee, have more power/authority than as a queer person or parent. However, this power/authority is conditional. Especially now, as increasingly conservative policies are being established and enforced, I am worried that by saying or acting out against these decisions, I will be encouraged to resign, my contract will not be renewed, or I might be targeted by prominent conservative groups that have a strong presence in the district. I am also worried about the financial implications and what it will mean to lose my position or walk away. I am a provider for my family, and as a parent, I walk the line between satisfying my personal needs and taking care of my children and family. Financial aspects aside, as a father of children of color, other conflicting concerns are arising. These concerns center around how my queer identity impacts them in the various social groups in which they are a part. The conflict also relates to the implications of having my kids watch how their parents advocate for themselves as well as for them. Such worries intertwine with the hope that they learn to advocate for themselves, each other, and others. Then, in pairing intersectional theory with conscious leadership, there needs to be a purpose and intention – a call to action – to question what has emerged from these experiences and what can collectively the group do to address them. This call to action needs to be within the realm of compassionate practices with the intention of emancipation (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Jones & Brazdau, 2015; Marinčič & Marič, 2018; Ward & Haase, 2016). Seeking to first understand how my experiences are impacting me and my interactions with others. Considering whether I am being a contributor or reinforcing the systems of oppression, which are a hindrance to the cause of reforming the system, I am only considering my personal involvement with these system changes. The next step is to gain the perspective of others who agree and disagree with my perspective and to accept them as valid (Nagendra, 2022). Then, it is working communally to

determine the underlying connection between groups and to strategize around how both groups can be honored while establishing practices that are desirable, inclusive, and restorative (Ward & Haase, 2016). Reflecting again on whether I can be an effective leader the way my district wants me to be while simultaneously being the leader I need to be for myself and the communities I care about.

Leading Through Loss

Friends and colleagues of mine often speak about the things they do not teach you in post-graduate education about working in the school system. They do not prepare one, for example, for working with students, parents, and leaders or how to work with and build relationships with staff. It has been an honor to lead people over the past several years of my career. In that time, we encountered the loss of students and family members, and unfortunately, during the time of this study (July 1st- August 31st, 2023), the loss of one of our own. One of the first teachers I interviewed, hired, and trained after becoming a leader in the district passed away after a brief but aggressive battle with illness. Their pain towards the end of their life is not the primary focus of this discussion; indeed, it is more than about the circumstances of their death. I will simply say that they were fortunate enough to go on their dream vacation with their family before any health concerns began to manifest. Shortly after their travels, they experienced a persistent stomachache, which subsequently led to a diagnosis of cancer. Only a few short weeks later, they passed away. Two sub-realizations emerged while working through the data collected in this section. One focused on the experiences of leading through loss and how that is related to other personal experiences, and the second centered around the experiences of moving on.

Supporting Self and Others in the Mourning Process

Reflecting on my interactions with death, some of the samskaras that arose related to the loss of my sister, a grandmother, and some of my students. Some of these losses were very sudden and unexpected, resulting from events such as medical issues, accidents, and suicides. Others progressed slowly over time. A process: diagnosis, treatment, remission, recurrence, surgery, treatment, recurrence, comfort, and finally goodbye. I also can still hear bits and pieces of the conversations I had with others. Calls coming in saying:

> "Aaron, you need to come home. Something happened with your sister."
> "Aaron, your grandmother passed away last night."
> "Aaron, there's an ambulance outside of his house when I got to work this morning;
> Aaron, he's dead!"
> "Aaron, there's been an accident. She's gone".

Receiving these messages at that point in my life felt like I was in the passenger seat of a car. I was given this information and then expected only to process it in my own time. I was not tasked with making any arrangements or sharing this information, nor was I expected to follow up with others whom the situation had impacted. I was to follow as directed. Honestly, this led to me not fully understanding the gravity of the situation nor truly experiencing my grief. As I was familiar with the loss of family, as my father and sister both left at various stages of life, the true end of someone's life happened around me and did impact me. However, there were others around who would handle it, provide support, make the hard choices, and follow up with any lasting situations.

> This summer, it was when calls came in saying:
> > "Aaron, I have been diagnosed with cancer. I am going for more testing, surgery, and chemo."
> > "Please tell the other teachers we work with."
> > "Aaron, they can't operate, but they will do chemo."
> > "Aaron, my body can't currently handle the chemo, so we will have to wait and see."
> > "Aaron. Hey. They have moved hospice in."

111

"Aaron, come visit and tell the others I would like to see them."
"Aaron, we will need to reduce how many people can come see me."
"Aaron, we are going to try to go see her one last time."
"Aaron, she's not eating."
"Aaron, she can't speak anymore but will listen."
"Aaron, she's in a coma."
"Aaron, she's gone."
"Aaron, what can we do?"

I realized that I was the one in the driver's seat. I went from the one who was getting the calls to the one who was making them. Realizing that it is not just one action that one must take; It is several individual calls. A call from others attempting to gain information or seek comfort. A call from colleagues to check on me because they know how deeply I care for those with whom I work. A call for each staff member to provide updates, find resources to support, worry about the work, and what one less teacher meant for the others. I was then asked to reach out and support the family, speaking at the celebration of life ceremony and then coming over to the house afterward; I came to the realization that what we do in relation to each other is not always the same as who we are to each other.

Taking and Making the Call

Experiencing the transition from being the receiver of calls to the one charged with making them is an example of how one can operate within a conscious leadership approach. In recognizing the ways in which such events trigger my experiences. I needed to create a space that honored what was occurring, what had occurred, and what will occur (Ward, 2016). As a leader, I implemented practices of transparency regarding my actions and communications. Letting staff know what was going on, what the implications were for their work, and how we could support each other in the process. During the time of the study, I was made aware of this staff member's diagnosis; I had to call many staff members to inform them of the situation, the updates, and, ultimately, the loss of their colleague. I also had to work with our human resources

112

department, the mental health team, and my department to facilitate support meetings for staff, students, and parents.

Such circumstances cause ripple effects of processing grief. There is the parent who hears of the situation and fears for her own family: they fear leaving their spouse and children like their colleague and friend did. Who will help take care of the children? How will they be comforted? Wondering if you will be remembered and afraid of what wonderful things you will miss by not being there. I speak from firsthand experience, of course, and I understand what it is like to lose a father, a sister, and a grandmother. Knowing what it means not to have someone around that you grew up with, that you need, and that you love. Also, I was her friend. I had to find space to grieve privately, find the strength to support those around me, find support for myself, and continue to work within the other departments I oversee as if it were business as usual. Simpson French and Harvew (2002) discuss that a negative capability of leaders, working from a conscious approach, needs to develop spaces such as the one described above. Space set to not only allow oneself and others to grieve but also to process, plan, and connect in ways that lead to productive and responsive approaches that honor what is being felt with the work that still needs to occur. I have discovered that one of the most challenging aspects of the mourning process is feeling frozen in time while everyone else around you return to reality. Other members of the staff from other departments did not know the teacher involved, so they were not grieving. They had other more pressing concerns related to the details of their everyday jobs. Feeling stuck, grieving, and just wanting your friend back. That is the priority of the friend; meanwhile, the priority of the leader is to continue to support and move forward. An impossible task is then made possible because there is a lack of other productive options.

In working within a formal role as a leader while processing one's grief, providing space for self-awareness, as described by Hayden (2017), is essential. This key element within a conscious leadership approach allows one to pause, reflect, and process what is occurring around them. While I was doing this, a connection to the samskara related to the death of my sister arose within me. As someone who has had a lot of sudden losses in their lives, the grieving process was very reactionary. While experiencing this situation, I was able to speak with this person, grieve with them, support their family, say goodbye, and let them know how they impacted me. Throughout this process, Nagendra's (2022) concept of humanization was exemplified as I, in a formal leadership position, took advantage of some of the privileges I had (Crenshaw, 1989). I called the human resources department, asked for clarification, and finding resources who to support the family, I granted leave, and allowed other staff to go during their workday and not be charged any personal time. Whatever I had to give, I could, and whatever we needed, I tried to attain or leaned on others to attain. Within this context of this situation, the formality of positions became arbitrary; we were there for each other, and we were able to recognize our own needs and the needs of others and commune together to connect and build deeper, more meaningful relationships while providing a space that was sacred and shared so that not only could we continue to do our work but also to say goodbye to a friend (Cohen, 2018; Crosswell, 2010; Hayden, 2017; Nagendra, 2022).

Recognizing the Rainbows in the Clouds

As I began to write this study and simultaneously experienced one of the most challenging positions I have found myself in as an administrator, there were also some rainbows in the clouds (Maya Angelou). As previously discussed, within the dynamic world of K-12 education, educators and leaders are not fully prepared to enjoy all that awaits them. Instead,

they are dependent upon others and their previous experiences to muddle through and get to an amicable resolution. Especially in the current atmosphere of the K-12 education system. At times, there can be very little cause to celebrate or evidence that one has benefited others. However, that is simply not true. There are circumstances and results that occur throughout one's career that are life-affirming, humbling, and a recognition of the impact one has had on others' lives. Fortunately, throughout the course of this study, several rainbows appeared in my clouds.

Full Circle Moments

Getting an email from a staff member stating, "Can we set up a meeting to discuss something important," is usually associated with an anxiety attack. This is true, especially during the summer when I am simultaneously having a difficult time at work. This was the case with this person's email. They took the time to see when I was able to meet with them. I set a meeting as soon as possible, speculating what this person had to tell me. Thinking and assuming the worst, I started to plan. My plans involved running a new job position over the summer and who I should contact to inform them of this change in staff. However, to my surprise and delight, one of the first things this therapist told me was, "Don't worry. I'm not quitting; I just have something to tell you." They then shared with me that in working with me over the previous years, I had inspired them and their spouse to become foster parents again, working specifically with children with disabilities. They stated, "At first, we were very nervous, as this child has very little communication and may have a traumatic background." However, upon entry into their home, they knew they had a good thing going. "That is not the best news," they stated. "I wanted you to be one of the first people to know. We are going to move forward in adopting this child!" They said, "Hearing your story, seeing how wonderful you are, and how big your heart is inspired us to do the same." "My family cannot thank you enough for all you have done for us

and the newest addition to our family." This person then got out of the chair and presented me with a beautiful card and a warm embrace. As they were leaving, they mentioned that we would be in touch as now we have kids of similar ages and needs.

Another situation occurred when a sign language interpreter wanted to set up a meeting with me to discuss some updates on their circumstances. When they arrived in my office, they were pleased to see me and had a document prepared for me to review: their recently earned master's degree in Deaf Education. They stated that they were finally able and ready to become a Teacher for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing in our district. That was if, of course, there was still an open position. I informed this teacher that, indeed, there was. We discussed the next steps, getting ready for the interview, caseloads, and additional training they would need, as well as how thankful they were to me for supporting them and not allowing them to become a teacher too soon. "You got me to think about this process and to focus on the learning instead of doing." This person also thanked me for helping them the entire time we worked together. "You helped me become a nationally certified interpreter; you showed me how great it is working with students." "I feel like I am following in your footsteps." This indeed was a cathartic moment for me, as the path was similar to the one that I took, going from an interpreter to a teacher. That is, only I did not have anyone supporting me. They, however, had me. Now, together, we can move forward working together in a different capacity.

The next occurrence transpired through the Facebook messenger app. I received a new message from a parent of a former student of mine. The student was in my 5th-grade class several years ago when I taught at an inner-city school. This parent wanted to let me know that her son had graduated with honors from a university with their bachelor's degree and was getting ready to enter medical school the following semester. She stated, "You were the first

116

person to believe in my son. You saw him for more than his disability." "You sparked the first

real joy of education within him; we are forever grateful for that!" She also mentioned that she

would reach out to me once he graduates from medical school to invite me to the graduation. I

told her I would not miss it for the world. Reflecting on this, I remember having a parent-teacher

conference with this parent. With a bias developed during several meetings, she came in ready

for a fight to defend her son because of his struggles. We had a good conversation that centered

around the progress he had made. In fact, with some trial accommodations I had implemented,

he seemed to be doing better every day. We then transitioned our conversation to middle school.

I asked if she would be applying for any special programs or if she would wait until high school

to have the conversation. She looked dumbstruck. She honestly did not know what I was referring

to. I told her there are a lot of good programs in this district, and since he is such a science

lover, he may like a few that we have. Again, she sat there, speechless. I asked her if something

was wrong. She stated, "I just don't want to get his hopes up. He has been struggling for so long

we want to provide him with what he needs to finish school, and then we will worry about what

he will do." I stopped her and looked her squarely in the eye. "He can do anything he wants to

do, including college. He is brilliant and needs to work on learning his accommodations." I

stated that, in my opinion, he is college-bound and could quite possibly be a professor in a

college devoted to science. I could see him as a professor. She immediately began to cry. She had

never even considered the possibility of college for her son since he has an IEP. "Absolutely

not," I stated. Together, we started to look for magnet schools. I wrote a letter of

recommendation, and his mother kept in touch with me over the years, updating me on his

progress.

Further expanding my understanding of self (Hayden, 2017), I recognized that while growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was very little in terms of queer representation or explanation of what it meant to be gay, let alone what it meant to be in a gay relationship. No television program showed what such a family would even look like. The question raised by critics of such families includes, "How can you have a kid without a mom?" Indeed, this question not only diminishes the dreams and aspirations of the queer community, figuring out how one would go about getting a baby, much less raise them in a family dynamic. As a child, I would never have imagined it possible for me to be living in my truth, have a family, be an educator, be in public spaces, or be able to openly discuss and advocate for my needs or the needs of others. This internal sense of responsibility (Hayden, 2017; Ward & Haase, 2016) has led me to embody this so that I can do for others what was not done for me. Recognizing that I tend to work from a very personal and passionate place and utilizing uncomfortable reflexivity (Alexander, 2013; Pillow, 2003), I am reflecting on whether I am speaking for others or with others, as well as assessing what my intentions are in my interactions (Ward & Haase, 2016). As I have grown in my position within my district, I need to be aware that my actions have an impact on others that sets precedence on how individuals within the organization interact with others (Crenshaw, 2000; Hill Collins, 2004; Weber & Fore, 2007)

Leading Through Change

Twice within the window of the data collection process, I was asked to attend a "Roles and Responsibilities Meeting," which resulted in the loss of several groups of people I had supported and worked with for years, and the second resulted in me gaining additional district-based staff and several new areas of responsibility. Within each meeting, I was tasked with supporting other district administrators, who would be gaining my groups, and onboarding

restructured staff in new areas. This was incredibly challenging for one of my newfound

coordinators with whom I did not have the best relationship. We previously had been peers;

however, at the end of their meeting, it was determined that they take a step back into a new

position so that they could find more success within the district. We were still processing and

adjusting to these staff changes and the potential loss of a staff member. Meanwhile, I had to not

only onboard new district coordinators but also rebuild and redefine our previous relationships

with the intention of working productively together.

Welcoming the Unwelcomed

Working within the field of education, I remember early on learning the adage, "Never

say never," and "Be careful which bridges you burn, as you will never know what is possible,"

and, "You never know who you might work with in the future." This certainly was correct when I

learned that a certain ex-supervisor was being transferred to my team. Upon hearing the news, I

immediately requested support for this person from my supervisors, clear guidelines and

expectations for them and their role, and support when they did not meet the district's

expectations. I wanted it to be clear that while I supervised this person, their actions, their

inability to do their job, and their relationships with others had nothing to do with me. While I

was more than willing to support anyone, I also wanted to be ready to go to the mattresses. The

vision of the person I had of this person was someone who was toxic, inept, and would be willing

to run off good people to benefit their own needs. This sentiment was not my own but represented

those of other members of my team. Initially, I wondered how long this person would last before

they either were given another opportunity within the district or strongly considered resigning.

That was until one of the roles and responsibilities meetings, at which it was revealed to me that,

to this person, I was the type of leader who was authoritarian and aggressive instead of inclusive and compassionate.

This thought made me undertake further uncomfortable reflexivity (Alexander, 2013; Pillow, 2003) and pair that with the Union of Mergence protocol (Appendix A). I confronted myself about my hypocrisy, asking why I had such animosity towards this person with whom I had had minimal interactions and who recognized that they were unsuccessful in their previous role. After several rounds of questioning, I realized I had associated this person with my mother. They was a person of about the same age who was supposed to know and be of aid to those who needed them; someone who should be welcoming and understanding instead of distant and analytical. Further, they should be apologetic and remorseful, especially after realizing they were unsuccessful in their previous role, especially to those that they were connected to and those who needed support and guidance. After the realization of what I thought the other person should think, I thought to myself, "Oh no… I am punishing my mother through this person."

Unpacking this thought further, I began asking myself what I knew about this person, how they came to this place in their career, and what they think and feel about how others perceive them. I then realized I had to do some level setting and rebuilding relations. My intention as a leader is to include, understand, and motivate others to grow while we support each other so that we ultimately support the kids. After several interactions, I came to know and understand this person. They were put in a position for which they were unprepared, not supported throughout, and vilified when others needed a scapegoat. They also identify as a queer person, one that did not have the best upbringing and has learned that people are there to use, abuse, and forget about them when they are done. As it turns out, this person was not my mother.

120

They were me, or at least a possible version, who needed support, understanding, and

recognition of what they could bring to the table.

The recognition of this unhealed wound manifested itself and impacted my interactions and intentions as a leader. In utilizing intersectionality theory, I worked to recognize what identity markers were influencing my perceptions of what was occurring (McCall, 2005; Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Recognizing from an intersectional lens that I had the ability to either inhibit or support this person based on my roles within the organization is an example of how power, intentionally or not, can be used to enhance someone's experiences (Ward & Haase, 2016) or to limit them (Crenshaw, 2000). It is also an aim of autoethnography work, as described by Kerby (1991), as the intention of this analysis is to connect how past interactions are connected to present-day practices. Here, the child is forced to grow up and become a caretaker for other conflicts with the district administrator, who has a position of power over the individual described above, in understanding that one aim of this childhood perspective within me is to make the adults in my life culpable for their actions. This leads to a punitive mentality that tasks the person to know better and to suffer. This mentality also ignites the suffering of others as well as places blame and expectations on others that are unfairly warranted. The leader within me then needed to provide a space (Simpson et al., 2002) to examine these thoughts and accusations and then move to a place that considers the perspective of others and validates them (Ward & Haase, 2016). Then, the task is to expand my perceptions and identify my intentions for those I work with and interact with. It is also then, in working and interacting with others, that I need to recognize when I am acting outside of who I intend to be as a leader and person.

Connecting Literature and Practice

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) describe that when utilizing concepts from intersectionality within a researcher's analysis, it highlights the relational aspects of human connections and society. I am subject to subscribing to the organization's expectations and values. For example, the notion that I, as an employee, should maintain a level of neutrality and impartiality so that I can work with and support all who are members of my organization. Further recognizing that as a queer person, a father, and an advocate, my personal life comes into conflict with my professional life. This then impacts my membership within the organization and impacts how I lead and interact with other group members. As I further embarked on this journey of discovery (Dyson, 2007), I also recognized that to survive and be successful in the various environments and spaces I am in, I must silence some parts of my identity and allow them to go underserved. Then, within this silence, I needed to seek out how that impacts my current perceptions and interactions with others.

Utilizing intersectionality within my analysis, I incorporated the premise that people live multiple layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). Then, within the multiple aspects of my identity, I identified which identity markers actively informed my perceptions of my experiences and explored how they influenced my understanding of them (McCall, 2005). For example, in processing my grief, I needed to recognize that I, in the leadership role, was also a son reminded of the mortality of their parents, a parent who does not want to leave their children, and a bother and a friend who also knows what it is like to lose someone so suddenly. Both losses are sudden and unforeseen, and one has a slow winding down. Those perspectives influence my decisions and practices. I stopped and provided time for staff to grieve; I worked to provide mental health

resources to not only the staff that was impacted but also to the family. In this instance, taking care of each other trumped the "business as usual" mentality heavily ingrained within my organization. The analysis of stories captured within the samskaras described above while also considering how they altered my perceptions and interactions with others. Another example of this would be recognizing that when I am acting within a leadership role and perceiving that I am not being supported or acknowledged within an environment, I become cold and distant – acting from a place of self-preservation instead of productively and support. This misaligned with my conceptualization of leadership. Recognizing this misalignment was due to a fear-based response, I utilized a mindful practice, Union of Mergence (Appendix A), which allowed me to reconnect to my intentions and choose how I wanted to respond within the circumstances I was currently experiencing (Ward & Haase, 2016).

In utilizing Intersectionality theory within my analysis, I aimed to reveal my multiple identities and personas as social actors, exposing the connections between various perspectives around the experiences I was having and the decisions I was making about those experiences. How I conceptualized what it means to be a father, teacher, advocate, and queer person is not unique to me. My conceptualization and understanding have been modeled and taught to me directly and indirectly. They reflect me, my perceptions, and the social groups around me. The usage of intersectionality theory also suggests that analysis of complex social situations should not reduce understanding to a singular category; instead, it should facilitate the understanding of substantively distinct experiences from the effects of inextricably connected roles and situations (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). This interconnectedness, a concept embedded within conscious leadership (Ward & Haase, 2016), is a reiteration that our communal and individual experiences do not occur within a vacuum (Change, 2008). Further, a mindful leader understands that

everyone, including themselves, views life through perceptual filters that will influence how they act or react to any given experience with the intention of creating more desirable experiences (Ward & Haase, 2016).

In ascribing the concepts embedded within a conscious leadership approach, I sought out how I personified the four key elements described by Cohen (2018), Crosswell (2010), Hayden (2017), and Nagendra (2022). While living through the experiences recorded in the samskaras, there were several moments when I found myself utilizing self-awareness and self-sufficiency (Hayden, 2017) concepts embedded with conscious leadership. I paused, reassessed, and established the connection between my concept of leadership and my intentions when interacting with the various individuals I work with. The internal sense of responsibility described by Hayden (2017) occurred when approaching my supervisors, especially about the policies being set forth, emphasizing maintaining neutrality in the face of division; I allowed the queer advocate to remain in that discussion while cycling the concerned staff member and parent who needs job security. I also recognized how the concept of humaneness or humanization of others described by Nagendra (2022) occurred when I came to the realization that I was acting more in an authoritarian way with certain new staff members. I had to pause again and assess past relationships and interactions. This concept also aligns with another key element in conscious leadership relationship building (Crosswell, 2010). As a leader and a person, I have experienced many burnt bridges, leaving individuals separated and unheard. As it is my intention to build and maintain positive working relationships. I needed to foster these relationships and create opportunities for collaboration and growth both for the individual and the organization (Cohen, 2018). For myself, an area of growth is to identify earlier when I am experiencing change or rather a fear or the sense of not being in control, feeling wronged, or undervalued by others.

124

Continuing my way of work and understanding that change is part of the human experience, I recognize that how I respond to change is directly associated with the extent of perceived control I have of the situation. This desire for control is also inexplicitly linked to how I react to fear. There is the fear of giving up control, not overseeing one's circumstances, and needing to develop interdependence with others. This leads to imposter syndrome, which is fawning over others and seeking to attain some level of control one believes one requires to function. Chapter 5 is designed to explore further how fear was an unbilled main character within my autoethnographic episodes. Recognizing this fear will lead to further discussion on how intersectionality and working from a conscious leadership approach will dispel the assumption that kindness is a weakness, and that leadership necessitates a hierarchical form. Chapter 5 discusses findings, considers implications for the future, and current educational leaders and other practitioners desiring to work from a place of understanding and compassion rather than from a place of authority and control.

Chapter 5:

Moving Forward Productively Together

> I see myself in a different way because "autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally (Spry, 2001, p. 708).

The first aim of this study was to explore the implications for an individual after they have attained a certain level of self-knowledge and how that has influenced their conceptualization of leadership. This self-awareness also led to the acknowledgment and understanding of how they impacted others, specifically within the act of leadership. Throughout the process of performing this study, the following questions were addressed.

RQ 1: What connection exists between understanding the various aspects of a person's identity and how they conceptualize leadership?

RQ2: In recognition of my multiple identities, leadership actions, and interactions with others, in what ways did I engage in conscious leadership practices?

To answer these questions, I first unpacked and explored my identity, as seen in Chapter 1. I established the context of this study and provided insight into how I conceptualized and perceived the world around me. Chapter 1 also introduced autoethnography as a method, intersectionality, and a conscious approach to leadership. Chapter 2 analyzes the works of others for the purpose of conceptualizing the act of leadership and how others have conceptualized it and implemented it in practice. Intersectionality was explored and connected within the context of educational leadership. As well as how others have utilized autoethnography as a method in various disciplines and within K-12 educational leadership. Throughout these studies, authors

126

found that they gained a more profound sense of self by performing autoethnographic work. They also realized the impact this work had on others. Chapter 3 was designed to define how I utilized Autoethnography as both a method and a product and what that implementation looked like within the context of this study. The first phase developed an autoethnographic timeline (Chang, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994), in which I looked for critical incidents (Chang, 2008) or samskaras that, in part, shaped how I perceived my current experiences and influenced my reactions and thoughts. This was further explored within the second phase when I used self-interviewing, event listing (Chang, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and hindsight (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004) to not only gain a deeper insight of my own identity but also to assess how my perceptions manifested in the world. Chapter 4 identified what autoethnographic episodes (Richardson, 2000) or samskaras emerged while performing this study again in the context of educational leadership, seeking the connection between one who has become more aware of their identity and the impact they had on others. The themes centered around change, the need to seek and maintain control, recognizing fear, honoring the good work that had been done, and realizing and respecting how relationship, reflective, and intentional my approach to leadership was and is.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings embedded within this study as well as an acknowledgement on what I have become conscious to within this study. Chapter 5 then further explores this underlying notion of fear that seemed to permeate the samskaras composed within Chapter 4. In the recognition of fear and the utilization of the concepts discussed within conscious leadership (Ward & Haase, 2016), I then discussed how I responded to opening the gift that is autoethnography (Ellis, 2000) and speaking to what I learned from the undertaking of autoethnography as a method to guide further researchers interested in utilizing this method. I

then discuss the implications of this research, specifically the call to more collaborative and compassionate practices. I then discuss how this research can be further developed and explored. Finally, it is my hope to end this piece on a note of hope, peace, and creation.

Discussion of Autoethnographic Episodes

Throughout this study, one finding is connected to the usage of the space a leader facilitates within their organization. That space is used for transparency (Ciulla, 2014; Starr, 2016) aimed at resolving issues and establishing desirable and inclusive practices (Nagendra, 2022; Weick, 1996). Leaders within that space can build relationships (Jo, 2014) and intention set (Nagendra, 2022). Space can also be established to become places that facilitate activism (Cosgrove, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Pryor, 2021). Space can also be used to examine thoughts that are oppressive and divisive to develop empathy (Eisenberg, 2003), to perspectives take with the intention of validation (Ward & Haase, 2016) and humanize themselves and others (Nagendra, 2022). This is especially pertinent, and the aim of an organization is to promote healing, connectedness, and develop hope (Kerby, 1991; Le Guin, 1980). This also parallels how space is created and utilized within autoethnography. Calafell (2021) stated that this is to create a resonance between the autoethnographer, the story, and the reader. This witnessing (Goodall, 2000) also allows for pleasure, reflection, and learning to occur (Frank, 1995).

Another finding that has emerged from this study is the need for unconditional acceptance of self and others. Within the conscious leadership approach, one key aspect to developing one's self-awareness (Hayden, 2017; Ward & Haase, 2016) is the intention of understanding one's perception, as well as the impact one has on those they interact with and then following a similar process with others. Within this study, I found that not only did my personal and professional identities intersect, but they also influenced my perceptions and

decisions. I then found myself having to dime or strength the various identities I was absent

from. Context and intention were a few of the determining factors. Within the process of gaining

deeper self-awareness, a humanization Nagendra (2022) of self and of others occurs. Within this

process, there is the concept of unconditional acceptance. Within this practice, there is the

acknowledgment of oneself as well as others. Villainization, othering, and division are

minimized as the aim is to accept all of who a person, including oneself, presents to be. After this

course of action, meaningful relationships (Crosswell, 2010) and inclusive practices (Cohen,

2018) can be developed.

What I have become Conscious of

In performing both the Union of Mergence (Appendix A) and uncomfortable reflexivity,

as described by Alexander (2013) and Pillow (2003), I have been asking myself how this study

has changed and impacted me as well as what I have become conscious of. During this study, I

have grown in my self-awareness and concept of self. I have not only become aware of who I am

but I have also worked on my acceptance of self (Nagendra, 2022; Philips, 2009). I have realized

the impact of my upbringing and how samskaras have come to the surface when I am interacting

with others. It is then, within unpacking the established namaskars I am able to recognize the

roles and interactions I have had with others and how that has impacted me.

I have also become conscious in my practice as a leader. My leadership approach is to be

intentional, inclusive, open, responsive, and to facilitate hope and healing. However, I have

found that one of the biggest barriers that inhibits my practice is when I am not transparent with

myself. Transparency is directly connected to my intentions. I have found that not only do I need

to consider what my aim is when interacting with others, but I also have to realize when I am and

am not recognizing my intentions, especially when they are linked to negative experiences that

cause false or warped assumptions of others. This is exemplified in my interactions with the newest team member. I had to critically reflect on what my intentions were. However, I also have to uncomfortably reflect on past experiences and interactions to assess why this person was bringing up so much discus and negativity. It was then in the recognition that I was able to ask, accept, and then move on so that I could work more productively in my environment. Lastly, I have also become conscious of what the concept of peace looks like within a concourse leadership approach (Cohen, 2018; Crosswell, 2010; Hayden, 2017; Nagendra, 2022). Historically, I have conceptualized peace and extrinsic outside of my state of being. Something that I had to attain within my environment by seeking control, perfection, and agreement. As I have moved within this process, I have realized that as an extension of self-awareness and self-sufficiency (Hayden, 2017), a sense of inner peace is attained. In growing in my self-knowledge, in accepting myself unconditionally, and in doing the same for others, I have been able to focus on facilitating spaces that are desirable, produce and involve, and build and maintain relationships. Within this space, change is accepted, as well as the fear that accompanies it.

Acknowledging and Working with Fear

After the analysis of the collected experiences was completed and the autoethnographic episodes were drafted, a common thread emerged throughout this study. This thread interconnected all the samskaras presented in Chapter 4 as well as the autoethnographic timeline presented in Figure 2. In utilizing uncomfortable reflexivity described in Alexander's (2013) and Pillow's (2003) work. Questions arose from the data: How are the feelings and responses of the mourning administrator connected to that of the proud teacher? How is the queer little boy seeking connection tied to the advocate who is ready for war on behalf of others? The answers seemed to come after several critical readings of the data and asking the following question:

"What am I trying to do in these situations?" The answer was to attempt to be better, perfect, and ready. In filling my mind with these thoughts and experiences, I was prepared with answers - the sole problem solver with something everyone needed. Then, I would be worthy of doing the work. There, I realized I was seeking control because I did not trust my current environment.

That realization brought with it the understanding that I have been working within the paradigm of fear. That is, a fear of the unknown, of loss, and of not being accepted. I delved further into my analysis, asking myself how I responded to fear. Understanding then how I respond to triggering events, I realized which experiences and identities I needed to further explore and acknowledge. For example, during the time of this study, I received from the senior leadership team entitled "Roles and Responsibilities Meeting." The last time we received a similar email, the content of its meetings had significant implications for my plans for the following year. The invite requested that I meet with senior leadership, not discuss anything prior to their meeting, and be receptive to potential changes. There is a power dynamic at play here that is triggering. However, I was able to reference my autoethnographic timeline or my samskaras. I sought previous experiences that evoked a similar feeling within me.

Utilizing the practice of negative capability, as defined by Simpson, French, and Harvey (2002), I created a space that aimed to understand that fear, lack of control, and desire to take back control over my circumstances. I was able to recognize that the feelings that I was experiencing were linked to several of my samskaras. One example was when I was the queer kid in college, being told being gay is a choice. That statement implied that if a binary choice is to be made, then I was making the wrong one. That fear of making the wrong choice connected back to when I was a kid whose mother neither believed in them nor wanted to forgive them for any misdeeds. This connected to who I am, the parent who had spoken to a child protection

131

officer about why their kids were covered in bruises. These bruises, which were, in fact, Mongolian spots, were a genetic condition that appeared in the first few years of life of children of color. I realized that I had to defend who I was constantly, the choices I made, and that I was not a harm to myself and others. This repeated defense of my character led to the awareness that I was operating out of fear. Zingela, Stroud, Cronje, Fink, and van Wyk (2022) discussed that people typically assume that fear-based responses are fight or avoidance, fight or aggression, and freeze or reluctance. There is a fourth response, fawn, which is to become submissive and avoid conflict altogether. As a result, one dims one's light for others, allows others to usurp one's role, or become a support for others instead of a barrier. This with the intention of protecting oneself. I was fawning over those who triggered me. It is the work of fawning that dishonors who I am as a person, as well as the work that I need to be doing based on the various roles I inhabit.

I am aware that such changes to practices of self-assessment are much easier proclaimed than followed through. Our realities often are not conducive to radical or immediate change. We tend to be our own worst critics when it comes to implementing and redefining our perspectives. Working for so long with students with disabilities, I have developed a personal mantra: "One day's progress for one day's intervention." Even though we have developed goals, we cannot expect monumental change all at once. This journey is analogous to a marathon: one step, one fall, one day at a time. The rush to attain or the desire for control is often a fear-based response: the fear that we are not good enough to change, that those around us will not accept us or the changes we want to make, or that even if we decide to change, we will revert back to how things used to be. In Eckman's (2020) work, they identify fear as one of the seven universal emotions experienced by everyone in the world. Further, they state that fear is triggered by a perceived threat, either physical, emotional, psychological, actual, or imagined (Eckman, 2020). This

triggering can stem from personal and professional stressors linked to past experiences or our perceptions of the future. While fear can lead to a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response (Zingela et al., 2022), one can also recognize that fear is not inherently a negative emotion or experience. Rather, it serves an important role that keeps us safe, notifies us that something is wrong, and can be a catalyst for change, comradery, empathy, and compassion (Eckman, 2020). Fear is a part of our experience, and denying it is akin to denying another part of one's perceptions of who they are and where they come from. In working from a conscious leadership approach, a leader must be willing to face their fears, both individually and collectively, as they address the fears of those with whom they work (Jones & Brazdau, 2015; Marinčič & Marič, 2018; Ward & Haase, 2016). Working through fear can also facilitate connection, add perspective, and initiate compassionate work.

Finding the Courage to Open the Gift of Autoethnography

Throughout this process, I have recognized the samskaras that impact my present reality and the ways in which they both help and hinder my personal and professional growth, and I recognize that I would not be where I am today without these experiences. At times, however, I have felt isolated, misunderstood, and unsafe. In working through the process of drafting this autoethnographic work, I found that I needed to do the one thing I tried to avoid – talking and reflecting on myself. I needed to be vulnerable, not only in the larger sense to those willing to read this work but also to myself and those closest to me. I need to feel both past and present experiences: accepting, forgiving, and becoming compassionate to myself and others. Certainly, this was not modeled for me. Truthfully, this was another aim of the study: I intended to write my story and work through my anger, pain, and confusion, and I also wanted to offer others a way of working through their feelings and relationships in a productive and safe manner.

Autoethnography is a means to elicit the writer's reflection on their own life and for the reader to reflect on their own (Ellis, 2004). Once this reflecting and storytelling process is complete and stories are told, one can then rest and experience a sense of inner peace (Primo Levi (1958/1987). This peace allows us to move forward and connect in deeper and more meaningful ways.

Ellis (2000) also described autoethnography as a gift to self. Listening to and engaging in others' stories is a gift and sometimes the best thing we can do for those in distress (Greenspan, 1998). Telling our stories is a gift, as our stories potentially offer readers companionship when they desperately need it (Mairs, 1993). Writing difficult stories is also a gift to self, as it's a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain. Ellis (2000) further explains that autoethnography is a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in the lives of the writer and the reader to heal and grow from pain. Jones (2002) contends that I am setting a scene in telling my story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation, and explanation. Frank (1995) supports this concept within Ellis' and Jones' usage of autoethnography by recommending that we viscerally feel the stories being shared rather than just think about them. Feeling our feelings not only enables us to understand ourselves and how we rationalize our experiences, but it also allows us to empathize with others, creating agencies. This allows one to understand that when I can help me, I can also help you. This allows us to break patterns of oppression, abuse, and self-neglect and creates the potential for those who come after us to avoid experiencing such hurt and to accept, love, and understand themselves and how their interactions impact others.

When Engaging in Autoethnographic Work

Autoethnographers often state that going through the process of drafting can also have therapeutic benefits for both the writer and the reader (Hodgins & Boydell, 2014; Malhotra, 2013; Raab, 2013). Ellis (2000) supports this by describing autoethnography as a self-reflective and therapeutic process. The very nature of writing about oneself is both a testament to a person's strength as an individual and also their willingness to be vulnerable. Ellis (2000) states that autoethnography is the embodiment of the human intertextuality of existence because someone has to have the courage to be vulnerable, first within themselves and then with others. This courage could then be the catalyst for others to want to do this type of inquiry. The yearning to gain a deeper understanding as well as to go through the healing embedded within autoethnography (Sell-Smith & Lax, 2013) forced me to interact with who I was in the past and then investigate that person and his experiences. With this knowledge, I then analyzed how I linked my past self with how I presently perceived myself and interacted with others during the time of this study. I recognize these experiences as my foundation: one that can be built upon, torn down, or kept hidden underground.

Using this narrative approach also allowed me to become the subject of the research, and the text repositions the reader as a co-participant in dialogue, thereby rejecting the orthodox view of the reader as a passive receiver of knowledge (Ellis, 2000). I invited you into my life and experiences to create a shared space promoting healing, connection, and hope (Kerby, 1991; Le Guin, 1980). Richardson (1994) further contends that a narrative structure such as this provides a way of finding out about oneself and the topic under investigation to know and discover new aspects of the topic and one's relationship to it. In this autoethnographic study, I must be as explicit as possible regarding past experiences but also attempt to evoke emotional experiences

135

from the reader with the aim of impacting their lives (Ellis, 2004). This research is an extension

of my life, and I chose to share it in the hopes that a deeper level of meaning and connection can

be made.

Responding to My Hesitations

While there are definite benefits associated with undertaking autoethnographic works,

Chapter 3 also described some potential hesitations and consequences. Personally, the three main

pillars of hesitation centered around my relationships with others. The first pillar is represented

by how this process went against my conditioned silence, as well as my hesitancy to share

personal insights and experiences with a wide audience. Ellis (2000) further expands on this

notion by explaining that this method requires autoethnography to be vulnerable, naked, and

willing to discuss and unpack one's perceptions, especially one's shame. Recognizing this, I

needed to undo my learning from previous experiences so that I could tell my story and present it

in a meaningful and impactful way. To overcome this hesitation, I came to the realization that

there is power in doing this work: the power of choice, of boundary setting, and of choosing how

much – or how little – I shared with others (Petronio, 2002). Then, through the intentional stroke

of keys on my keyboard, I was able to focus on how I was going to illuminate the samskaras

occurring during the time of this study but also on the insights gained from this experience (Van

Manen, 1990) with the intention of healing some of my emotional wounds (Ellis, 2000).

The following two pillars of hesitation stemmed from the concern about the impact this

study would have on my personal and professional relationships, especially since I was not

gaining consent from those with whom I interacted during the study (Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2009;

Etherington, 2007; Medford, 2006; Poulos, 2008). In understanding that, as the author of this

text, I do not simply write about myself (Berry, 2006). I sought to create a space that was not

only safe for me to share what I deemed necessary but also one that allowed others to digest, reflect, and understand my intention for sharing (Ward, 2016). Le Guin (1980) further elucidates the connection between a conscious leadership approach and autoethnography when they state that in telling a story, the author tells it from a place in the middle. Indeed, I also aim to converse with those who read this text from this middle ground (Ellis, 2004). Still, I shifted the focus to my perceptions of self, my understanding of the experiences shared, and how I viewed and understood the interactions that took place (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Leading Consciously from an Intersectional Perspective

As the work of autoethnography moves forward, Change (2008) tasks autoethnographers with writing critically and performing a significantly deeper analysis. Change (2008) describes this as viewing one's story through a window of interpretation. Meaning that, one needs to look at the aesthetics, the plot, and what lessons can be learned from a story but also to connect the story within the field. One needs to anchor it to something others can also implement in their analysis of stories. This not only adds to the growing body of research but also solidifies autoethnography as a method that can permeate any field and provide a deeper meaning and connection to the researcher and research participants. For this study, I blended the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and conscious leadership (Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Red-Danahay, 1999).

The implementation of these concepts, paired with autoethnography, necessitates that the individual, or observer-self (Ward & Haase 2016), first gain an understanding of who they are as an individual by unpacking one's various identity markers and analyzing how they intersect, diverge, and impact one's perceptions of self and others. One must consider their past experiences, as well as the roles with which they currently identify (a parent, a spouse, a teacher,

137

etc.). Context also plays a critical role in which these identities are situated. Notions of power within personal and professional relationships need to be considered as well as brought to the surface and examined so that fuller, thicker descriptions can be drafted Geertz, 1973). This utilizes concepts from Crenshaw's (1989) conception of intersectionality as well as King's (1988) multiple-conscious theory. That is, those utilizing intersectionality within the contexts of conscious leadership can both be aware of the various identities (King, 1988) and understand how they are intertwined and intersected (Crenshaw, 1989). The analysis would then be applicable to those who identify, at least in part, with one of the researcher's identified identity markers, as well as those who may have more than one identity maker, both internally and externally known. Context – where, when, and who – is another integral facet of this study (Cho et al., 2013). As one gains a deeper understanding of one's role and identity, one then becomes more aware of one's decisions and how one chooses to act as a leader, and one gains a deeper understanding of one's impact on others.

Implications

Performing this autoethnographic work from the conscious leadership approach paired with intersectionality, I felt I was grounded within the context of this study. Working as a current educational leader working within the K-12 education system in the state of Florida, post COVID-19 pandemic, with a governor that is openly against developing critical thinkers, public education, and supporting the LGBTQ+ community, I challenged myself to experience my feelings and responses at a deeper level than I had previously. Focusing on one identity marker at a time, I recorded and analyzed how a parent would respond, an educator, a queer person, and an advocate. I then assessed how the combination of these identity makers aligned and diverged in

138

my responses to various situations and stimuli. After several critical readings, the following implications emerged.

First, it is About You

In deciding to do this work, I had to first step back from my practice and ask the critical questions; "How is this about me? My leadership? What are my intentions?". This engagement in the "observer self" (Ward & Haase, 2016) also connects with one of the key elements of conscious leadership, being self-aware (Hayden, 2017). Within my self-awareness, I have recognized that not only am I a leader, but I am a queer person, a father, a spouse, an advocate, a son, a survivor, an educator, and a friend. It is important for me to recognize these individually and how they interact and manifest in my perceptions and experiences. Then, I form a leadership perspective, especially when intentionally planning my interactions and intentions; I needed to be cognizant of these characteristics and those of others. This is especially true when I am a developer and implementing policies and practices that may limit or hurt a community that I am directly linked to or intend to support. There is tension and silencing that sometimes occurs. As a leader advocate, parent, queer person, etc. I must then uncomfortably reflect (Dowling, 2008; Pillow, 2003) and determine if this can be tolerated, changed, or pursued. I am finding that line of questioning highly different in my professional life when I know we are as inclusive as we can of all students with disabilities or our students, parents, and educators who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Considering when is enough, as well as asking if someone can be a member of an organization when part of its aim is to undermine and eliminate crucial aspects of one's identity. As I move forward in my practice, I intend to plan methodically, consider, and implement policies and strives that are inclusive and restorative.

In order to fully engage in this approach, a leader needs to seek out what it means to lead and why they elected to take on a leadership role. They must consider their intentions, dreams, and hopes for the people they work with and the communities they impact. Then, in self-interviewing and journaling, such as the Union of Mergence (Appendix A), one is tasked with assessing how one's current thoughts are associated with previous experiences/samskaras. How was the individual's reaction modeled for them? What lessons from the past are they reteaching? Vigilant for remnants of past experiences continuing to manifest in their current day realities. Then, through critical reflection and the use of hindsight (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004), one needs to consider how their intentions are aligned with their current actions and the lessons they are modeling and teaching. In utilizing the concepts of conscious leadership and intersectionality, embedded within them is expanded consciousness, in which there exists a need for empathy and the need to be a whole person (Ward & Haase, 2016). Then, with the acknowledgment of them as a person (Nagendra, 2022), leaders can build and maintain relationships (Crosswell, 2010) and establish cooperative practices (Choen, 2018). As an educational leader, I must recognize the leader, the father, the queer person, the advocate, and the many other identities I ascribe to. Then, in conversation with others, the leader operating from a conscious leadership approach and intersectionality must seek to understand the various perspectives of those they are interacting with while setting aside any judgments about them (Jones & Brazdau, 2015). Then, within that created space, perspective-taking and mutual understanding are possible.

Within the context of this study, I did this through daily journaling and meditation, as well as identifying several samskaras that heavily influenced my perceptions. This involved documenting what transpired in words, recording my emotional response, and then reading both

to find connections to my previous experiences and concepts about myself and the samskaras. Samskaras are described as the mental formations that occur after interactions with others (Fowler, 2002; Kalupahana, 1992; Philips, 2009). In working from a conscious leadership approach, the focus in the development of these samskaras is preferred over other critical incidents or reflective practices as samskaras directly connect with the experience of not only what happened but also situate the circumstances within the context of others. We do not live, lead, or experience anything in a vacuum. It is our intentions, as well as the intentions of others, that create our experiences. It is then the responsibility of a conscious leader to be intentional in their actuation. Part of this intentionality is recognizing not only why you have these intentions but also considering how they will impact others (Cohen, 2018; Crosswell, 2010; Hayden, 2017; Nagendra, 2022; Ward, Haase, 2016). For example, when interacting with those who held positions of authority over me – especially during more critical conversations – my reactions were, at times, connected to the problem being solved by a caretaker who was being undermined and undervalued. A perspective of a child who learned that they needed to accept blame, apologize, and then console those who have done them harm. The aim then became to make things right between myself and the individual so that I could secure my own safety. I was trying to seek forgiveness from a parent rather than acceptance and a support plan from a supervisor.

This work also requires one to ask: "Who am I, and who do I want to be?" One must also consider the various roles and identities they possess and consider how these roles interact, both independently and intertwined. Departmentalizing one aspect of yourself from another is not only impossible but also dishonors who an individual is (Harnois, 2015). The principal present during the IEP meeting not only represents the school during the meeting, but they also sit there as a parent, spouse, artist, advocate, and friend that comprises all of who they are. They also

141

carry the background experiences and knowledge that impact their decisions. The symbolic narrative of the wounded child within an adult is present even when the individual is acting as the aggressor. What was modeled for us is what we model (McMillen & Rideout, 1996). It is up to us, as individuals, to rethink what we are trying to teach and who we want to be as leaders, educators, parents, advocates, spouses, and children in our interactions with other individuals. Intention setting involves conscious practices that lead us to a place where we are in control of our actions. Intention setting establishes expectations for others in our interactions, our treatment of one another, and what to do in times of conflict. First, coming to a knowledge of self clarifies how we perceive ourselves and allows us to clarify how others perceive us (Hayden, 2017). Intention setting also allows us to be cognizant of what we can and cannot control, as it focuses on what we individually want to accomplish (Cohen, 2018).

It's Not Just About You

Continuation of this work leads to the awareness of self for the individual undertaking this work and for other individuals with whom they are in relation. Working with others from a conscious leadership approach, the practice of empathy emerges (Jones & Brazdau, 2015; Ward, 2006). Litz (2011) stated that empathy can be broken down into four base components. The first is that a person who is self-aware recognizes the other and bases their reactions upon who they perceive the other to be. Then, based upon that recognition, they can recognize the other person's experiences as different from their own. Next, with the realization of the differing experiences, the person can partake in imaginative roleplaying and perspective gathering to see into another person's experiences (Nagendra, 2022). Finally, utilizing one's negative capability (Simpson et al., 2002), they are then able to understand the person's feelings without becoming overwhelmed by the intensity of their experience. Of course, this does not happen in a vacuum; rather, such

progress occurs through interactions and conversations with others, learning from and about each other to gain a deeper understanding of who we are and the realization that we are in constant relation with one another.

While the practice of empathy is an essential part of working and leading with intention, it is also not an ending. One needs to take this practice further: with this more profound understanding of the other - their triumphs and tribulations, concerns, and recommendations - to take their empathy and act with compassion. Empathy drives compassion, which is the willingness to act on others' behalf to propel them and their needs forward. In response to conflict and times of uncertainty, there is still the intention of being compassionate and accepting of who the other is in their entirety. As complex as we find ourselves, we need to remember the same applies to everyone else around us. Compassion also allows us to consider who we are in relation to each other and assess what power dynamics are at play (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). Often, there is a perception of power between leaders and followers, adults and children, nondisabled and disabled. The former groups speak out and, while trying to act in support of the latter groups, speak for or about individuals in the marginalized groups. However, the practice of compassion dictates whether we need to speak with the groups with whom we are working or not speak at all. The sharing of power, platforms, or attention leads to true equity of voice and more inclusive practices.

Regarding compassion, the Buddha taught a concept called "the middle way" (Lopez, 2023). The middle way is a place that exists between individuals that allows for the acknowledgment of pain, healing, and moving forward productively together, much like the aims of autoethnographic work (Le Guin, 1980) as well as conscious leadership (Ward & Haase, 2016). It is about setting expectations, honing each other's perspectives, and the willingness to

be wrong and change one's decisions based on the needs of the other. For leaders, I describe the practice as coming to the table versus having a meeting. When we come to the table, we are equal members with knowledge to gain from each other and are here to accomplish a goal. While conflict may occasionally arise, such interactions are led by mutual respect. Similarly, while there is a difference of opinions, there are still boundaries. The group holds and accepts accountability for maintaining their boundaries and holds space for the creation of something new. This is not about the individuals imagining and creating the new idea; it is about how this will benefit those it is being designed for.

Establishing Conscious Practices

Thomas' (2008) research stated that some common perceptions of staff resulted in anger, division, and isolation within an organization. Those common perceptions were feeling overloaded/overwhelmed, disrespected, blacked/scapegoated, powerless, unheard, morally distressed, and unsupported by leadership (Thomas, 2008). I know I have experienced some, if not all, of these feelings. Thomas recognized that even though these are all personal perceptions, leaders need to consider them as they directly impact the organization's performance and climate (2008). Incorporating a conscious leadership approach within the organization is a solution-based approach that aims to set the level and create a community. Working from a conscious leadership approach, the leader validates the individual feelings of those within the organization (Ward & Haase, 2016). They do this by listening to others' perspectives nonjudgmentally. It also allows the leader to absorb their employees' feelings to solve problems and expand their conscious practices (Ward & Haase, 2016). These interactions also aim to humanize and create an inclusive environment (Nagendra, 2022). These intentional practices also allow for equitable participation within the organization (Nagendra, 2002), allowing members to see the impact they are having

on an organization (Hayden, 2017) but also lead to transparency (Starr, 2016). This transparency stems from an inclusive, reflective, asset-based, clear, and systematic place. Leaders who work from a conscious leadership approach need to grow in self-awareness (Hayden, 2017) so that they not only know where they want to go but learn from how they got there and who they bring with them.

Setting the Foundation for Collaboration

As a district supervisor in the ESE department, I intended to work from a more conscious leadership approach. I recognize that it has been a gift to be able to begin to do some of the personal identity work and analysis through the process of the drafting of this dissertation. I intend to implement what was learned in this study in my work and the work of those that I support. The next section of this chapter offers another autoethnographic episode in which I exemplify what this work could look like in implementation. As mentioned previously, the faculty in one of the departments I work with recently suffered the significant loss of one of its teachers. While I am still processing my grief, I am also assisting others to do the same. This loss has impacted us not only because of the loss of a human being, a friend, a mentor, and a supporter but also because it means that the department is down another person in an area historically defined as an area of critical shortage. Critical shortage meaning that the demand for such trained staff is far greater than the supply of those capable of doing this work. Thus, we were tasked with developing caseloads that seemed insurmountable for the rest of the team. Subsequently, other team members resigned or transferred from their positions, causing even more of a shortage within my district. This led to upset schools, parents, and students because, at this moment in time, we are unable to support them in the way they need to be supported. The

following autoethnographic episode reflects upon an interaction I had with a team of educators at a school site that has been significantly impacted by the recent developments described above.

Sitting around a table of 16 people, made up of district and site-based staff, a principal stood up with tears in her eyes and stated, "I am frustrated. I am frustrated with the district. No one seems to care. We have kids here with no teachers and no instructional assistants trained to communicate with them. Teachers are burning out. They don't know how to deal with these behaviors, and I have newer staff that don't have the experience to deal with these kids. We are busing them here, some over an hour, to come to a place that can't support them. What are you all going to do to fix this?" I noticed school-based personnel nodding in agreement. They were looking at us – the district team – for a seemingly magical solution. I spoke up. "I am just as mad and frustrated as you are. I am saddened to see the current situation here. I am angry that my staff resigned or left the job because times have gotten tough. I agree with you, and I support you. But, in the same regard, I want you to know that of the remaining teachers that I do have, two of them are on medical leave for various reasons, and another one has recently just passed away. I am grieving with them, and I am also letting you know that, for right now, there is no one coming. Those of us in this room are all we have. We need to assess what we do have and what we need. I will continue to provide training, resources, and space for use to do this work, but we need to recognize that we will all have to do more than we have traditionally done. We are what we have right now. It sucks, but this is where we are. Now, I want everyone to think and give me one to two top needs or priorities moving forward that the people in this room can solve.

After a break and some time to allow others to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, another discussion began. This time, the conversation focused on the academic needs of students, intentional planning, differentiation, and looking at staff schedules to see who can support or be responsible for planning and instructing students. Next, the discussion focused on communication needs; working with the school's speech-language pathologist, district supports, and everyone with various expertise, we came up with a new support plan to help implement visuals, communication expectations, lessons, and what the expectation is for the carryover of such skills is so that when there is not a specific provider in the room, other staff know what effective strategies they can utilize. This conversation is not about what was wrong but what we can do and what the students need. Permission was given to work collaboratively, ask critical questions, try, fail, and create something new: something individualized based on need, something worthy of the students with whom we get to work.

The solutions here did not stem from one person taking full ownership of their situation. It came from the collective abilities and thoughts of the group. The group now has a clearer understanding of the district's situation, resources, and thoughts. The group co-owned the situation and had a shared vision of where they needed to go with benchmarks and goals of how we could get there. It has been several weeks since this interaction, progress has been made and frustrations have been aired, but the effort and the collective responsibility has been maintained. Others have been brought in to train the team on how to plan and teach better. Alternative strategies have been developed, and the kids are okay. They are learning, safe, and developing stronger relationships with those who work with them. Are we still looking to fill staff positions? Of course, we need people to share this responsibility and support kids to their fullest ability. However, when these people come into our system, there will be a greater sense of responsibility

147

and comradery. They will enter a team that does not scapegoat or transfer responsibility but one that builds new individuals up. This is because there is recognition that when one is better equipped, we are all better equipped.

Leadership Development

Reflecting on not only my own personal and professional leadership training and also on the identified gaps in the current literature on leadership approaches, there is a critique of how the act of leadership has been neutralized or conceptualized without considering an individual's past conceptions of leadership, and identity (Harrison et al., 1998; Jackson et al., 2003; Parker, 2005). Connecting back to how I was trained to become a leader, seldom there was discussion around why I wanted to be, a leader what in my life has brought me to a place where I thought it would be a good idea to become more of a formalized support to other nor how my perceptions of self would impact my interactions and relationships with other. Burns (2004) posits that part of the work of leaders is to exploit tension within people's value systems. I argue that to truly assess an individual's values system, we must first understand our own and what intentions there are between our own values, identity makers, and the organization we work within. This inclusion of conscious leadership approaches, mindfulness practices, as well as expanded conscious approaches, not only leads to a greater understanding of self but also deeper and more profound connections to others (Ward & Haase, 2016).

It is also in the teaching of how to set intentions (Nagendra, 2002) for oneself as well as for an organization. There can be a true discussion of one's values and how inclusive they are with the members that make up that organization. It is also within this acknowledgment of others (Sander-Staudt, 2011) that leaders can understand their biases, how they developed these, as well as how they are impacting their current perceptions and interactions with others. Then, leaders

can begin to understand how to establish spaces in which others, especially in a professional setting, can come to the table as equal members who can work productively together (Sim, 2019; Weick, 1996). Concepts aimed at empowering others, such as trust, respect, loyalty, patience, fairness, and forgiveness (Abdollahi et al., 2002) are then not simply placed within an environment like a work of art. Rather, they are now intentionally defined, first by a leader and then amended with a group but are also incorporated into the practices of those involved within the organization.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recognizing a critique of autoethnography, I have written this story based solely on my experiences, understandings, and biases (Tamas, 2008). One recommendation that stems from the study is to invite other researchers to perform this study and use their personal narratives and experiences as data. A comparative study could then potentially be conducted to examine the parallels or commonalities present, as well as what differs and needs further exploration. Autoethnography is also about the explicit relationship between the author and the reader of such texts (Ellis, 2004). So, a natural extension would be to continue the conversation between my work and others.

While the field of educational leadership has a large body of work describing many different leadership approaches, conscious leadership is an approach that still needs to be explored. More work needs to be centered around its implications and utilization by others. As a non-disabled cisgender queer white male, having a broader pool of researchers performing this study would only broaden the scope and impact of similar studies. Such studies could seek to analyze a conscious leader's impact during times of school openings, changes, policy implementation, integration of various communities, or other turbulent times that may be before

us. What does it mean to lead during times of war, government unrest, or when the community does not welcome a leader they are tasked to serve? How does one get that opportunity to lead, what does it mean to stay and lead, and what if one chooses to walk about from a situation?

Another area that can be explored is what it means to lead from the middle or to work from a leadership perspective that is not based on the traditional hierarchical structure. When a leader decides to come to the table, especially during times when teams disagree, tensions are high, and it seems that common ground cannot be found; how might a leader lead, and if they are not the traditional authoritative leader, who are they? What within their life led them to respond this way, and how has their leadership impacted those around them? The possibilities are endless, and it is ultimately up to the readers of this study to decide how the conscious leadership approach can be implemented in their practice, as well as what questions they have about themselves that move this forward.

Go With Peace

The work presented here is a culmination of stories and experiences showing an individual's thoughts, ideas, and perceptions about themselves that are directly connected with who they decide to be as a leader. Throughout the study and as I became more conscious of my identity, gaining clarity and insight into my past experiences, I discovered how interconnected they were with my private and my conceptualization of who I was as a leader and how I reacted to various stimuli. This work also demonstrated how interconnected we are all to each other. My reactions became more responsive to my perceptions, the context, and the needs of others. I then shaped and defined the work of leadership for myself: leadership does not have to be just one thing, just as we are not one thing. We live and work in shades of gray, creating dynamic, context-specific spaces that are interconnected to the individuals that make up the space. I intend

to continue this work, and I hope you elect to start on this path. Having the knowledge and acceptance of self is critical when deciding how you want to lead, work, and interact with others.

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Appendix A: Union of Mergence Protocol

Working through a conscious leadership approach, I utilized a self-interview protocol based on the Hindu meditative practice called the Union of Mergence. This process is intended to connect mind and body through crucial questions based on previous experiences. Each section is based upon a specific location (Chakra point) in one's body. Each of these questions attempts to connect with the source of a feeling, known as samskaras, based on one's life experiences, then acknowledge it, let it go, and move to the following location in the body. The ultimate intention of this process is to gain access to the higher self or the *kuṇḍalinī* or the culmination of all of one's lived experiences.

During this process, one must take as much time as necessary to experience, feel, connect with, and let off the ideas that come up. Working from a conscious leadership approach and within the parameters of autoethnography, one must ask oneself what is coming up to the sources, what samskaras led one to the relation, and what other perceptions/identities resonate with this experience.

The answers to these questions will be recorded in written form.

Earth Chakra
Location: Base of the spine
The Earth Chakra is based on one's survival. Trigging the point entails contemplating what triggers one's fear-based response.
- Question 1: What are you most afraid of?
- Question 2: How do you respond when experiencing fear? Fight, flight, freeze, flop, or fawn?
- Question 3: Why, what samskaras have led you to this place?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one must realize that this operates out of fear. To move on, one needs to practice/reflect on these experiences. Accept, recognize, and realize that what you fear the most has not happened yet.
- Question 4: What do I need to surrender to/understand that cannot be changed?

Water Chakra
Location: Below the navel
      The Water Shakra is focused on pleasure, which can be linked to the suffering of others, the feeling of selfishness, or something that one feels undeserving of.
- Question 1: What do you feel guilty for/blame yourself for?
- Question 2: What samskaras have led you to believe this is true?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one must accept that what has occurred has occurred, and no one can change it.

- Question 3: What do you need to forgive yourself for?

Fire Chakra
Location: Base of the stomach
The Fire Chakra is focused on one's willpower, desires, and ambitions. Often, what one is willing to do to gain something over someone else.

- Question 1: What is something that brings you shame?
- Question 2: What is your greatest disappointment in yourself?
- Question 2: How do you respond when you experience shame?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one must accept all parts of themselves. Realizing that without that part, they would not be in their current situations.

- Question 4: Which identity do you struggle with accepting?

Heart Chakra
Location: Heart
The Heart Chakra is focused on the loved ones in their life: self-love, the love of a partner, a friend, a sibling, a parent, and a child. A disconnect occurs here when one is focused on loss or fears that a loss may occur.

- Question 1: Who do you grieve?
- Question 2: How do you deal with grief?
- Question 3: What does it mean to lose someone?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one must understand that love is an energy. It is not created or destroyed but is ever-present. People may be in and out of our lives, but that love will come back in other ways. One needs to honor those who were and let them rest/live peacefully.

- Question 4: Who do you still grieve?
- Question 5: What has come from this past relationship?

Sound Chakra
Location: Throat
The sound chakra on the truths that we tell ourselves. Our conceptualizations of who we are and what we perceive others to be. A disconnect occurs when we try to hide things about ourselves either from others or from the things that go unacknowledged.

- Question 1: What do you do not like about yourself that you do not share?
- Question 2: Do you talk about yourself to yourself?
- Question 3: What lies do you tell yourself to others?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one needs to understand that to be fully present in one's life, one cannot lie or hide what one thinks, feels, and believes. Acceptance and unconditional love for oneself.

- Question 4: If you were to love yourself unconditionally and accept everything you have ever done, how would that change your perception of yourself? How would it change your perception of others?
- Question 5: How would this mentality change your life moving forward impact your life?

Light Chakra
Location: Center of Head
The Light Charka focuses on insight and understanding ourselves and others. The disconnect occurs here when one conceptualizes themselves as separate from the other.
- Question 1: Who do you conceptualize as separate from yourself?

In reconnecting to this chakra point and moving to the following location, one must realize the interconnectedness of all people. Compassion, empathy, and understanding are the things that link us all.
- Question 2: Through compassion, empathy, and understanding, what connection can you draw between yourself and others?
- Question 3: Within the relation in that we are all connected, how does this impact your practice/your perspectives on the other?

Thought Chakra
Location: Crown of the head
This thought chakra is connected to all energies around us. In the realization of our interconnectedness to each tell ourselves how we love, our desires, and our survival, it is that point that we need to realize that we do not own or control anything or anyone.
- Question 1: What do you need to let go of in your life?

In reconnecting with this charka point, one must realize that letting go is not forgetting or abandoning. It provides freedom. To be, to experience, to try, to fail, to succeed.
- Question 2: What do you need to emancipate yourself from?
- Question 3: What freedoms will follow if you have done so?

After the Union of Mergence is performed, write in the space below the initial thoughts, feelings, and stories that come to the surface. Consider how you can carry this feeling and how it would impact your environment.