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## **Navigating Workplace Challenges: The Role of Emotional Intelligence in the Career Advancement of Black Leaders**

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### **Abstract**

Educational justice scholarship has increasingly emphasized leadership practices that address inequities embedded within organizational cultures and power structures. This qualitative study examined how professionals navigated workplace challenges through emotional intelligence within racially and gendered organizational contexts. Guided by an educational justice lens, participant narratives were analyzed to examine how emotional awareness, regulation, and relational engagement functioned as mechanisms for negotiating power, sustaining professional agency, and resisting marginalization.

Findings indicated that emotional intelligence operated not merely as an individual competency, but as a situated leadership literacy shaped by institutional norms, relational dynamics, and systemic inequities. Drawing on the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM), emotional intelligence was interpreted as a form of justice-oriented praxis through which participants enacted critical self-awareness, relational navigation, and future-oriented decision-making. By foregrounding emotional intelligence as a literacy enacted within inequitable systems rather than a neutral skill, this study contributes to educational justice scholarship by illuminating how everyday leadership practices may reproduce or disrupt structural inequities in workplace and educational settings.

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence, Black Leadership, Workplace Bias and Discrimination, Career Advancement, Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

## **Introduction**

The role of Emotional Intelligence in leadership and performance has gained popularity in recent years, with many scholars noting its impact on workplace success (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Caruso and Salovey, 1999; Goleman, 1998b; McClelland, 1998; McCleskey, 2014). McCleskey (2014) posits that emotional intelligence is crucial for effective leadership and can be a strong indication of success. Despite the growing recognition and popularity of emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical leadership skill, there is limited understanding of how minority leaders experience, develop, and utilize EI in navigating workplace challenges. There is also little research on the role EI plays in minority career advancement, this limits the ability to create and administer targeted leadership development programs that address the unique needs of minority leaders. Finding ways to address these gaps is essential for creating more inclusive workplaces and advancing minority leadership. This study sought to explore and understand how Black leaders perceive the role of emotional intelligence in navigating and overcoming workplace challenges.

In equity-centered leadership contexts, emotional intelligence is not simply a neutral “soft skill,” but is often enacted as a form of emotional labor—work required to manage feelings and displays of emotion to meet organizational expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Steinberg & Figart, 1999). For Black leaders, this labor is routinely intensified by racialized organizational norms, heightened visibility, and the expectation to absorb or translate inequity while remaining “professional.” Such dynamics overlap with cultural taxation and the ongoing demand to carry disproportionate diversity work and relational repair (Robinson & Henriquez-Aldana, 2020), as well as chronic stress responses described in racial battle fatigue scholarship (Smith, 2004).

Situating emotional intelligence within these structural conditions helps avoid framing participants' strategies as individual remedies for organizational inequities.

Further, Black leadership in higher education is frequently navigated through diasporic identity work: an ongoing negotiation of belonging, recognition, and safety across institutional and cultural boundaries (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993). Read through this lens, emotional intelligence can be understood as a practice of "double attunement": calibrating one's internal emotional life while simultaneously reading racialized environments and their shifting expectations. This interpretive stance aligns with justice-oriented scholarship that foregrounds defining professional moments, identity negotiation, and ethical commitments in the work of social justice leadership (Marbley et al., 2015).

This gap in research is critical as research suggests that Black leaders can use emotional intelligence to not only influence workplace dynamics, but it can also be a critical skill to aid in career advancement (Hughes, 2016). I find this research intriguing because insights into emotional intelligence in Black leaders can aid in the development of tailored leadership development programs that can specifically address the needs and unique circumstances they face. It has the potential to improve workplace diversity and inclusion by equipping Black leaders with strategies to overcome bias and underrepresentation. Additionally, understanding how emotional intelligence influences career advancement can provide actionable strategies that empower Black leaders to thrive in their careers. This research can advocate for equality in leadership by highlighting the practical value of emotional intelligence training in enhancing team dynamics, leadership effectiveness, and organizational success. Finally, it aims to contribute to future research by inspiring more studies on the role of emotional intelligence in the experiences of all minority groups.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the growing recognition of emotional intelligence as a critical leadership capacity, limited research has examined how Black leaders experience, develop, and enact emotional intelligence while navigating workplace challenges such as bias, discrimination, and underrepresentation. Even less is known about the role emotional intelligence plays in the career advancement of Black leaders, constraining the development of leadership programs that meaningfully address their lived realities. Addressing these gaps is essential for fostering more inclusive workplaces and advancing equity in leadership.

Black leadership development does not occur in neutral organizational environments. Rather, it unfolds within institutions shaped by racialized norms, expectations of professionalism, and uneven distributions of power. Diasporic identity scholarship reminds us that belonging is not assumed but negotiated, often requiring individuals to interpret and recalibrate their positioning within institutional contexts (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993). Within such environments, emotional intelligence may function not simply as interpersonal competence, but as a survival-oriented and justice-relevant leadership literacy.

This qualitative phenomenological pilot study examined how Black leaders perceived and described the role of emotional intelligence in navigating workplace challenges and sustaining leadership practice. Through in-depth interviews with Black leaders in higher education in the United States, the study explored how emotional intelligence influenced participants' relationships with supervisors, colleagues, and teams, as well as its perceived impact on career progression. The study also examined how participants understood emotional intelligence in relation to identity, lived experience, and organizational expectations. By centering Black leaders' perspectives, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of emotional intelligence

as a contextually situated leadership practice and offer insights to inform more responsive and equity-oriented leadership development initiatives.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant for advancing understanding of how emotional intelligence functioned as a leadership resource for Black leaders navigating workplace bias, discrimination, and underrepresentation. By centering the voices and lived experiences of Black leaders, the study contributed perspectives that remain underrepresented in leadership and emotional intelligence scholarship. Attending to these experiences created space for more critical and honest dialogue about how emotional intelligence was shaped by, and enacted within, inequitable organizational contexts rather than operating as a neutral or universal competency.

The study also held practical significance by examining whether and how emotional intelligence influenced participants' career trajectories and leadership effectiveness. Understanding how Black leaders perceived the role of emotional intelligence in navigating professional advancement offered insight into how leadership development, mentoring, and professional training initiatives might be more intentionally designed to support Black leaders. Such insights challenged one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership development and underscored the importance of aligning training with the lived realities of leaders operating within racially stratified institutions.

In addition, this research contributed to equity-oriented leadership discourse by highlighting both the challenges faced by Black leaders and the strategic strengths they mobilized through emotional intelligence. By examining the intersection of race, leadership, and emotional intelligence, the study underscored the need for institutional support systems and professional development structures that prepare Black leaders for advancement while

addressing systemic barriers to inclusion. These findings offered insight into how emotional intelligence was leveraged to sustain leadership practice, build relationships, and navigate organizational power.

Finally, the study extended emotional intelligence scholarship by examining its enactment within an underrepresented population, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and contextually grounded understanding of the construct. Rather than treating emotional intelligence as an abstract or universally experienced skill, this research demonstrated its significance as a situated leadership literacy shaped by race, power, and organizational context. In doing so, the study advanced educational justice scholarship by illuminating how everyday leadership practices may either reproduce or disrupt inequities within workplace and educational environments.

## **Literature Review**

Scholars have long suggested that emotional intelligence (EI) contributes to workplace performance and leadership effectiveness. Early conceptualizations by Salovey and Mayer framed emotional intelligence as the capacity to recognize, interpret, and regulate one's own emotions and those of others in ways that guide thinking and action. Goleman later extended this conceptualization by emphasizing emotional awareness, motivation, and the management of emotions within interpersonal relationships. Viewed through a critical literacies lens, these foundational definitions position emotional intelligence not simply as an internal trait, but as a situated leadership literacy through which individuals make sense of relational dynamics and navigate complex social environments.

Goleman's framework further articulated emotional intelligence through four interrelated competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship

management) which parallel core dimensions of the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) (Robinson, 2020, 2021). Within CLAM, emotional intelligence is understood as a form of enacted praxis shaped by identity, institutional context, and power relations. While these competencies have been widely associated with effective leadership, less attention has been given to how emotional intelligence is developed and mobilized by leaders operating within racialized and inequitable organizational contexts. Aligning emotional intelligence with CLAM therefore foregrounds its role as a justice-oriented literacy, emphasizing how emotional awareness and regulation function as tools for navigating power, sustaining agency, and engaging ethically in leadership practice.

However, emotional intelligence does not operate independently of institutional context. Organizational scholarship has demonstrated that emotion regulation and emotional labor are often shaped by structural expectations and implicit norms regarding credibility, professionalism, and authority (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000). For Black leaders navigating racially stratified institutions, these expectations may be intensified, requiring calibrated self-presentation and strategic emotional restraint (Smith, 2004). In such contexts, emotional intelligence becomes both relational capacity and institutional navigation.

### ***Emotional Intelligence and Leadership***

Emotional intelligence has been widely examined as a critical component of effective leadership and workplace performance. Goleman's (1998a) framework conceptualized emotional intelligence as a set of interrelated competencies that shape how individuals understand themselves, engage others, and manage complex interpersonal dynamics in organizational settings. Central to this framework are four core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Together, these competencies describe leaders'

capacities to recognize and regulate their own emotions, attend to the emotions and perspectives of others, and cultivate productive relationships.

Building on this framework, Goleman (1998b) introduced the concept of emotional competence, defined as a learned capability grounded in emotional intelligence that results in effective and sustained workplace performance. Emotional competence reflects the extent to which emotional intelligence is enacted in practice rather than merely possessed as potential. Goleman distinguished between personal competence, which emphasizes self-directed emotional capacities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation, and social competence, which encompasses empathy and relational skills necessary for managing interpersonal and organizational relationships. This distinction underscores the importance of emotional intelligence not only as an internal resource but as a leadership capacity realized through action, interaction, and context.

### ***Emotional Intelligence as a Justice-Relevant Leadership Practice***

Despite decades of scholarship on emotional intelligence, relatively limited attention has been given to its role in shaping the lived experiences of Black leaders. Hughes (2016) began to address this gap by examining emotional intelligence among Black leaders and introducing the concept of diversity intelligence (DQ), defined as the capacity to recognize, understand, and respond effectively to multiple forms of difference. Hughes argued that while emotional intelligence provides a foundation for interpersonal engagement, the integration of EI and DQ enables leaders to more effectively navigate cultural dynamics, manage conflict, and foster collaboration within diverse environments. This integrated framework is particularly salient for Black leaders, whose leadership practice often unfolds within contexts marked by bias, underrepresentation, and heightened emotional labor. Viewed through a critical literacies

perspective, emotional intelligence in these contexts functions not simply as a personal attribute, but as a situated leadership literacy enacted in response to institutional norms, relational expectations, and power dynamics.

Related scholarship has further underscored the relevance of emotional intelligence for leaders from marginalized groups. Ashley (2023), for example, highlighted how women of color leveraged emotional intelligence to manage bias and microaggressions, build resilience, and sustain career advancement. In this framing, emotional intelligence operated as a relational and strategic resource that supported leaders' capacity to navigate inequitable organizational environments. Such work suggests that emotional intelligence is not merely an internal skill set, but a contextually responsive practice shaped by identity and organizational conditions.

Despite these contributions, important gaps remain. Rudel et al. (2021) noted the limited empirical attention to how emotional intelligence specifically shapes the career trajectories and workplace experiences of Black leaders. While emotional intelligence has been extensively examined in general leadership contexts, its enactment within racialized organizational environments remains underexplored. Scholars such as Hughes (2016) and Rudel et al. (2021) have called for research that more intentionally examines how emotional intelligence supports Black leaders in navigating discrimination, bias, and underrepresentation while sustaining leadership effectiveness and professional agency.

### **Emotional Labor, Cultural Taxation, and Racialized Organizational Life**

Across organizational and leadership studies, emotional labor and emotion regulation have been positioned as core mechanisms through which institutions reproduce norms and discipline workers' affective expression (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). For Black professionals in predominantly White or historically exclusionary spaces, emotion regulation

frequently includes anticipating microaggressions, buffering colleagues' discomfort, and engaging in strategic restraint to avoid stereotype-based penalties—work that can be both protective and exhausting (Smith, 2004). Related higher education scholarship has also documented how Black faculty and leaders are often positioned to shoulder disproportionate service, mentoring, and diversity labor, creating cumulative burdens that are structurally produced rather than individually chosen (Banda et al., 2017; Bonner et al., 2015).

Within this terrain, emotional intelligence may function as a leadership literacy that helps individuals navigate institutional constraints while sustaining professional agency. This framing is consistent with justice-oriented literacy perspectives that treat “reading” and “responding” to inequitable systems as learned practices shaped by power, identity, and lived experience (Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2020; Robinson et al., 2025).

### **Diasporic Identity, Belonging, and Leadership Praxis**

Diaspora theorists describe identity as relational, historically situated, and continually “becoming” in response to mobility, displacement, and the politics of recognition (Hall, 1990). Gilroy's (1993) account of the Black Atlantic further emphasizes the co-constitution of modernity and Black diasporic cultural life, highlighting how double consciousness and transnational imaginaries shape how Black subjects interpret institutions and craft agency. In higher education and workplace contexts, these dynamics can surface as intensified negotiations of belonging, credibility, and safety—conditions that influence how leaders interpret social cues, assess risk, and decide when to speak, stay silent, or exit.

Addressing this gap, the present study examined how Black leaders enacted emotional intelligence within higher education contexts shaped by structural inequities. By centering participants' narratives, the study illuminated emotional intelligence as a justice-relevant

leadership literacy through which leaders negotiated power, preserved agency, and responded to inequitable conditions. In doing so, the study contributed to educational justice scholarship by highlighting how everyday leadership practices—often rendered invisible—function as sites where inequities are either reproduced or actively contested, with implications for leadership development, institutional accountability, and more equitable organizational futures.

## **Methods**

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to examine how Black leaders utilized emotional intelligence to navigate workplace challenges in higher education. A phenomenological approach was selected to foreground participants' meaning-making and lived experience, consistent with qualitative inquiry that prioritizes depth, context, and interpretation over generalization (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design aligned with the study's educational justice orientation by centering the voices of leaders whose experiences are often marginalized within organizational and leadership research.

## ***Sampling***

The target population consisted of Black leaders working primarily within the higher education sector. Eligibility criteria required participants to self-identify as Black or African American and to have held a supervisory or managerial role for a minimum of three years. Leadership was defined relationally and organizationally, emphasizing responsibility for supervising personnel rather than positional title alone. Participants were also required to have foundational familiarity with the concept of emotional intelligence to support meaningful reflection on its role in workplace interactions and decision-making.

Purposeful sampling guided participant selection, consistent with Creswell's (2013) recommendation that qualitative researchers intentionally select individuals who can best illuminate the phenomenon under study. Participants were recruited from a public university in the southern United States, a regional context where historical and contemporary inequities in higher education leadership remain pronounced. While the minimum inclusion criteria focused on supervisory experience, recruitment prioritized individuals with more extensive professional backgrounds. Specifically, participants with over five years of supervisory experience and at least ten years of overall professional experience were sought to ensure sufficient exposure to organizational dynamics, leadership responsibilities, and emotionally complex workplace situations. This sampling strategy strengthened the study's credibility by ensuring that participants drew upon sustained leadership practice rather than isolated experiences.

### ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews provided both consistency and flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on experiences most salient to them while ensuring alignment with the study's guiding questions. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and included open-ended questions. Each interview began with a brief scripted introduction outlining the purpose of the study, reaffirming confidentiality, and reconfirming informed consent. While a predetermined protocol guided the interviews, follow-up and clarification questions were used selectively, as participants frequently offered rich, detailed narratives without prompting.

Three Black leaders working in higher education institutions in the southern United States participated in the study. All participants had a minimum of 12 years of professional experience, with most having spent their entire careers in higher education. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded to support analytic accuracy. Automated transcripts were

generated using Zoom's transcription feature and reviewed alongside audio recordings to enhance dependability.

### ***Data Analysis and Trustworthiness***

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection and followed an inductive analytic approach. Analytic memoing followed each interview to document emerging insights, analytic decisions, and reflections on the interview process, supporting reflexivity throughout the study. Transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring language, shared meanings, and patterns across participants' accounts. Initial codes were derived directly from participants' words, privileging their perspectives in the analytic process and enhancing credibility.

Codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected shared experiences across participants. Themes were refined through repeated comparison with interview transcripts to ensure coherence and alignment with participants' narratives. For example, responses related to underrepresentation and exclusion were organized under the theme *Workplace Diversity and Inclusion*. Ongoing review of codes, memos, and thematic structures supported analytic consistency and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings, consistent with qualitative research.

### ***Nature and Limitations of the Study***

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to examine the lived experiences of Black leaders and their use of emotional intelligence in navigating workplace bias, discrimination, and underrepresentation within higher education contexts. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the study emphasized depth, meaning-making, and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalizability, in keeping with established qualitative research traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The small number of participants ( $n = 3$ ) reflected

an intentional design choice aligned with phenomenological inquiry, which privileges rich, in-depth engagement with participants' experiences over breadth.

Accordingly, the findings are not intended to be generalized, but to offer analytic insights that may be transferable to similar institutional and leadership contexts (Creswell, 2013). Participants were recruited through professional networks, which may have shaped the perspectives represented in the study. To address this, reflexive engagement was maintained throughout the research process, including analytic memoing to enhance credibility, transparency, and interpretive integrity. These methodological considerations support the trustworthiness of the study while acknowledging the contextual and relational nature of qualitative knowledge production.

## **Findings**

This study explored how Black leaders described and made meaning of emotional intelligence as they navigated workplace challenges shaped by bias, discrimination, and underrepresentation. Analysis of the interview data yielded four interrelated themes that illustrated how emotional intelligence functioned as both a protective and enabling leadership resource within racially stratified organizational contexts. Collectively, these findings highlighted emotional intelligence as a contextually situated practice rather than a neutral or universally experienced skill.

### ***Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Challenges***

Participants consistently described a perceived decline in organizational commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly at senior leadership levels. This shift was experienced not only structurally, but affectively, intensifying feelings of isolation and

increasing the need for emotional regulation. Several participants noted that diminished racial representation signaled a devaluation of diversity within their institutions. One participant observed, “Unfortunately, we’ve had to shift things where the leadership was once very diverse, very dynamic in thought...and now the leadership looks a lot like the same.” Another reflected, “We’ve seen the diversity is not there as it was before.”

Representation was described as consequential rather than symbolic. Being the only Black leader in a unit often resulted in exclusion from informal networks where information and influence circulated. One participant shared, “I was the only Black in the office... it was only my face. However, having my other two coworkers there... it makes me feel a little bit better. It makes me feel more comfortable, more open.” These reflections illustrated how emotional intelligence was enacted in response to relational marginalization and structural absence.

#### Emotional Intelligence as a Survival Tool in Navigating Bias and Stereotypes

Participants described emotional intelligence as essential for navigating workplace dynamics shaped by bias and racialized perceptions. Skills such as self-regulation, empathy, and situational awareness were framed not as optional leadership attributes, but as necessary for maintaining credibility and stability within politicized environments. One participant reflected, “I’ve got to try to navigate their thoughts and views around that... while also trying to help the team understand that even though the work is not valued at that level, there’s still value in it.”

Several participants emphasized the importance of “reading the room,” particularly during periods of institutional instability. As one participant explained, “Emotional intelligence was really important... trying to pick up the feeling of the room, especially when the political climate within the university was unstable or volatile.” Another participant recounted modifying her behavior after recognizing that assertive communication had been interpreted through the

stereotype of the ‘aggressive Black woman.’ Although she viewed her response as appropriate, she adapted her approach to manage others’ perceptions. These accounts underscored the additional emotional labor required of Black leaders in racialized organizational contexts.

### ***Lack of Tailored Support***

Despite relying heavily on emotional intelligence, participants reported limited access to leadership development or training that addressed their specific realities as Black leaders. Emotional intelligence programming, when available, was described as generic and insufficiently attentive to race or identity. One participant noted, “Nothing specifically as a Black woman... they’ve spoken generally about minorities.”

Mentorship was similarly described as constrained when mentors lacked shared lived experience. As one participant explained, “The mentor did not share the same thing as me... it wasn’t a Black woman or a Black male, and so I didn’t really get a lot from that relationship.” These reflections highlighted a disconnect between institutional support structures and the contextual demands placed on Black leaders.

### ***Resilience, Adaptability, and Career Navigation***

Participants also emphasized that their racialized life experiences contributed to their emotional intelligence, particularly in the areas of resilience, empathy, and adaptability. One participant reflected, “Because of my background... knowing that you have to set yourself apart from everybody.” Another stated, “I have more empathy for others,” while a third shared, “It has allowed me to be more strong, to feel more strong.”

Emotional intelligence was linked to leadership effectiveness and career navigation. Participants described how these capacities supported their ability to move across organizational spaces and to be perceived as steady and competent leaders. One participant explained, “It’s

helped me navigate different rooms and spaces... helped me to be seen as a more level-headed manager, someone who can really manage teams well.”

## **Discussion**

Taken together, the findings revealed emotional intelligence as a situated leadership practice shaped by race, power, and organizational context. Participants’ narratives demonstrated that emotional intelligence functioned as a mechanism for navigating inequitable workplace conditions rather than as a neutral interpersonal skill. This transition from findings to discussion underscores how emotional intelligence operated at the intersection of individual agency and structural constraint. These dynamics resonate with scholarship on the politics of belonging in institutional contexts, which highlights how marginalized individuals learn to interpret, negotiate, and position themselves within systems that simultaneously invite participation and constrain full inclusion (Robinson & Scott, 2021).

Organizational turbulence and institutional instability further intensify these dynamics. Research examining human resource development during unplanned organizational disruption demonstrates that leaders must simultaneously regulate their own emotional responses while sustaining relational trust and adaptability under shifting conditions (Robinson, et al., 2022). Such findings reinforce the interpretation of emotional intelligence in this study as a contextually responsive leadership practice shaped by structural pressures rather than solely individual disposition.

Interpreting these findings through diaspora theory further clarifies why participants described emotional intelligence as both strategy and survival. Several narratives reflected a form of double consciousness—maintaining self-definition and professional purpose while continuously appraising how one is being read through racialized scripts (Gilroy, 1993; Hall,

1990). In this sense, emotional intelligence is not merely intrapersonal awareness; it becomes a relational practice for navigating the politics of belonging and respectability in spaces that may simultaneously need Black leadership and resist Black authority.

This interpretation is consistent with justice-centered accounts of professional “defining moments,” in which leadership commitments are forged through confronting inequity, sustaining community obligations, and making principled choices within constrained systems (Marbley et al., 2015). Participants’ experiences aligned with established emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. However, the findings extended these frameworks by illustrating the additional emotional labor required of Black leaders operating within racialized institutions. Emotional intelligence often involved monitoring self-presentation, anticipating others’ reactions, and adapting communication strategies to mitigate bias. Viewed through the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM), emotional intelligence functioned as a justice-relevant leadership literacy enacted through critical self-awareness, relational navigation, and future-oriented decision-making. CLAM provided a useful interpretive lens for understanding how participants translated emotional regulation into leadership praxis while responding to inequitable institutional conditions.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributed to educational justice scholarship by centering the lived experiences of Black leaders and examining how emotional intelligence was enacted within inequitable organizational contexts. The findings demonstrated that emotional intelligence operated as a situated leadership literacy shaped by race, power, and institutional culture. For

participants, emotional intelligence supported both survival and advancement, enabling navigation of bias while sustaining leadership credibility and professional agency.

By illuminating the emotional labor required of Black leaders, this study underscores the need for leadership development initiatives and organizational practices that recognize and address inequitable expectations and supports. Within racially stratified organizational systems, emotional intelligence operates not only as a professional competency but as a justice-relevant leadership practice—mediating between individual agency and institutional constraint. For Black leaders, this practice is frequently enacted at the intersection of belonging, credibility, and structural inequity. Grounded in participants’ narratives, the findings highlight how everyday leadership practices serve as sites where inequities may be reproduced or actively contested. Recognizing this complexity invites institutions to reconsider how leadership is cultivated, evaluated, and supported within equity-focused environments. In doing so, the study reaffirms that educational justice is enacted not only through formal policy or representation, but through the daily leadership practices that shape institutional culture and opportunity.

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