

ARAB WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS IN K-12 EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:  
OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND DRIVING EQUITY

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## ABSTRACT

Arab women in K-12 educational leadership face cultural expectations, systemic barriers, and institutional biases. This study explores their leadership journeys through a qualitative multiple case study, featuring semi-structured interviews with eight Arab women leaders in U.S. education. Findings reveal key challenges, including gender norms, professional biases, and the need for self-validation. Despite obstacles, participants exhibit resilience, leveraging self-efficacy, mentorship, and family support. Transformative moments, such as confronting bias and engaging in advocacy, serve as catalysts for leadership. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive leadership models, representation, and targeted mentorship initiatives. Grounded in sociocultural, critical race, and self-efficacy theories, this research advocates for systemic policy changes to enhance equity and diversity in educational leadership. Findings offer insights for policymakers and educators seeking to foster inclusive leadership pathways.

**Keywords:** Arab women, educational leadership, self-efficacy, systemic bias, cultural expectations, mentorship, equity, diversity

## DEDICATION

To my family — your endless love, patience, and encouragement have been the quiet force behind every step of this journey. I am endlessly grateful for your unwavering belief in me.

To my mentors and advisors — thank you for your generous guidance, thoughtful feedback, and steady support. Your wisdom has been instrumental in shaping both this dissertation and my growth as a scholar.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Overview**

In recent decades, women have achieved significant strides in the field of education, demonstrating high levels of academic success. However, despite these notable advancements, a persistent gender gap persists in leadership representation, particularly within the K-12 educational setting (Ballenger, 2010). The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, including the highest rank of superintendent positions, underscores an ongoing challenge that requires careful examination and targeted intervention (D'Avino, 2022; Sampson et al., 2010).

While progress towards gender equality has been evident, disparities in leadership positions remain pronounced, especially for Arab women. The underrepresentation of Arab women in leadership roles within the educational sector prompts critical questions about the factors contributing to this phenomenon. Despite the prevalence of discussions surrounding women's rights and gender equality globally, Arab women continue to face obstacles in attaining leadership positions (Al-Asfour et al., 2017, Fernea, 2000). This disparity raises questions about cultural norms prevalent within the Arab communities, as well as the systemic barriers hindering women's advancement into leadership roles. To address these gaps in representation and understanding, a focused examination of the challenges faced by Arab women in educational leadership is imperative. While studies have explored women's experiences in leadership positions, there remains a notable gap in research concerning Arab women within the K-12 educational context (Arar & Oplatka, 2016).

This research, therefore, endeavors to fill this gap by examining the underrepresentation of Arab women in leadership roles within the K-12 education system in the United States. By shedding light on the challenges, contributing factors, and transformative moments shaping the

leadership journeys of Arab women, this study aims to provide valuable insights into addressing systemic inequities and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational leadership. Guided by comprehensive research questions, this study seeks to explore the various dimensions of Arab women's experiences in educational leadership, including the role of self-efficacy, sociocultural factors, and critical race theory in shaping their leadership trajectories.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Women have made significant progress in education, with high levels of achievement and surpassing men in terms of earning degrees (Ivona & Winny, 2019). However, despite these recent educational accomplishments, women continue to face challenges in reaching leadership positions, resulting in a persistent gender gap in leadership representation (Ballenger, 2010). This disparity is particularly noticeable in the K-12 educational setting, where the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles remains a concern (Ivona & Winny, 2019). For example, for the superintendent which is the highest rank of leadership in a school district, despite the progress of gender equality, there is still a low representation of women in superintendent positions (Sampson et al., 2010). Sampson et al. (2010) further noted that women led 18% of the nation's school districts; however, there is still a significant disparity between female teaching positions and administrative roles (D'Avino, 2022). In New Jersey, while 51.5% of school administrators are women, only 36% of superintendent positions are held by women (D'Avino, 2022).

Closing the identified gaps necessitates a focused approach to examine the challenges above. Smith and Suby-Long's (2019) comprehensive research consistently emphasizes the pivotal contribution of women leaders in K-12 educational settings and found how women leaders play a key role in initiating positive changes, influencing others' aspirations, and challenging entrenched gender stereotypes. The active inclusion of women in leadership

positions, as advocated in current literature, not only facilitates organizational transformation but also acts as a catalyst for reshaping deeply ingrained gender norms within the organizational context. By reflecting on their purpose, women leaders gain a deeper understanding of their motivations, values, and aspirations (Smith & Suby-Long, 2019). The self-awareness allows them to make intentional decisions, align their career paths with their values, and contribute meaningfully to their respective industries. Recognizing the power of their narratives, women leaders use storytelling, a technique that brings the human element into data presentation that is more relatable, understandable and impactful, as a tool to inspire and empower others, breaking barriers and challenging stereotypes along the way.

Multiple systematic reviews have looked at women in educational leadership in the United States and found little research into Arab women and their roles in the education system (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Canas et al., 2019; Murakami et al., 2017; Tchoumi, 2020). Further, studies of educational leadership have focused almost entirely on the roles of principals without looking at others who occupy educational leadership positions (Fosco, 2022). Theories identified in the literature explored Black, Latino, and Asian identities among women in educational leadership (Agost & Roland, 2018; Watson et al., 2016).

Consequently, little examination of Arab women in educational leadership roles was found in the literature, and subsequently, no literature identified on self-efficacy and its role in driving Arab women to educational leadership positions. Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks, which play a significant role in career aspirations and advancement (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Research indicates that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious goals, persist in the face of challenges, and actively seek opportunities for growth (Lent et al., 1994). Studies have shown

that women with strong self-efficacy are more likely to overcome gender-related barriers and pursue leadership positions (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Given the substantial lack of attention to the role of Arab women, it is not even known to what degree self-efficacy affects this population and drives them toward educational leadership is known. What can be said is that women of such background have only occupied less than 1% of school principal positions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Such findings suggest multiple obstacles to attaining positions of leadership, of which self-efficacy beliefs have previously been identified as one potential cause (Hackett et al., 1981; Machida-Kosuga, 2017). More general challenges faced by women in educational leadership included a lack of networks and relationships, and both gender and ethnic-based stereotypes (Allred et al., 2017).

While there have been research studies conducted on gender inequality in higher education settings (Balleger, 2010; Kumalo, 2021), there is a notable gap in research concerning Arab women in the K-12 educational context (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Canas et al., 2019; Murakami et al., 2017; Tchoumi, 2020). The lack of research makes it difficult to understand what challenges this population faces to achieving educational leadership roles, though it is known that women and ethnically diverse women face unique leadership challenges (Allred et al., 2017). Further research may allow for a better understanding of the unique challenges that Arab women face when pursuing educational leadership roles. Additionally, exploring the experiences and successes of Arab women who have broken barriers and assumed leadership positions can serve as inspiration and role models for aspiring leaders. Sharing their stories and perspectives will contribute to the creation of a more inclusive educational environment that celebrates diversity and provides equal opportunities for all. Ultimately, by actively supporting Arab women in leadership positions, educational organizations can pave the way for gender

equality, challenge existing stereotypes, and foster a culture that embraces diverse voices and experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to examine Arab women in leadership within the K-12 education system in the United States. Specifically, this study aims to shed light on the challenges, contributing factors, and transformative moments that have shaped the leadership journeys of Arab women in the K-12 context in the United States. For the purposes of this study, the term "Arab women" refers to individuals who self-identify as Arab, encompassing both first-generation immigrants—those born in Arab countries who later migrated to the United States—and second-generation women who were born in the U.S. to Arab immigrant parents. This inclusive definition acknowledges the diverse cultural, linguistic, and generational experiences that shape Arab women's identities and leadership trajectories within the K-12 educational context. The following research questions will guide this research:

RQ1. What are the challenges that Arab women face to be leaders in the K-12 education sector?

RQ2. What are the pivotal moments that led Arab women to become change agents and take on leadership roles within the K-12 education system?

RQ3. In what ways have self-efficacy and other enabling factors influenced Arab women's attainment of leadership roles in the K-12 educational landscape?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study delves into multifaceted dimensions of social dynamics through the lens of three distinct theoretical frameworks: (1) sociocultural theory, which explores the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their cultural contexts; (2) critical race theory, which



critically examines the intersections of race, power, and society, and (3) self-efficacy theory, which investigates individuals' beliefs in their ability to accomplish tasks and navigate challenges. By intertwining these theoretical perspectives, this research endeavors to shed light on complex phenomena surrounding cultural assimilation, gender dynamics, and social justice, aiming to deepen our understanding of these intricate issues and their implications for contemporary society.

### ***Sociocultural Theory***

Lev S. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, is a key figure in sociocultural theory, emphasizing the primacy of social interactions in shaping individual consciousness (Scott Metcalfe & Padilla Gonzalez, 2013). According to Vygotsky, mental functioning is not solely derived from social interaction but is intricately linked to specific structures and processes emerging from these interactions (Scott Metcalfe & Padilla Gonzalez, 2013). Three major themes in Vygotsky's work highlight the interdependence of individual and social processes. First, individual development, including higher mental functioning, originates from social sources, expressed in Vygotsky's "genetic law of development" (Scott Metcalfe & Padilla Gonzalez, 2013). Second, human action on both social and individual levels is mediated by tools and signs (Semiotics), which are internalized for future problem-solving. Finally, Vygotsky advocated for developmental analysis, studying the historical changes of the phenomenon to understand its essence.

As noted, sociocultural theory was used to examine social impacts on development. Vygotsky emphasized the influence of social and cultural factors on individual development and learning (Scott Metcalfe & Padilla Gonzalez, 2013). When considering the lack of Arab women in leadership roles in the K-12 sector, several sociocultural factors may contribute to this

phenomenon. Sociocultural norms in the Middle East often dictate traditional gender roles. Women may be expected to fulfill domestic responsibilities, which can limit their aspirations, opportunities, and self-development to pursue and advance in leadership roles within the educator sector. Sociocultural factors contribute to the socialization of individuals from a young age. Stereotypes about gender roles and capabilities can influence the aspirations of Arab women, potentially discouraging them from pursuing leadership roles in the education sector (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). The absence of Arab women in leadership roles can create a cycle where the lack of visible role models makes it more difficult for other women to envision themselves in such positions. This lack of representation can further discourage women from pursuing leadership roles. Sociocultural expectations within families and communities may prioritize more traditional roles for women, and there may be pressure for women to conform to these expectations rather than pursue leadership roles in education (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). Sociocultural factors can influence the development of professional networks. If there are limited opportunities for Arab women to connect with mentors and leaders in education, it can hinder their ability to access and advance in leadership positions. Addressing the underrepresentation of Arab women in leadership roles in the K-12 sector requires a comprehensive approach that considers and challenges these sociocultural factors.

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged as a response to concerns among legal scholars that racial mobility had not improved after the Civil Rights movement (Reed et al., 2022).

Originating from feminism and critical legal studies, CRT developed in the 1970s and 80s within the field of law, asserting that societal ordinances and policies were rooted in racism (Reed et al., 2022). CRT posits that the legal system itself is inherently racist, maintaining an unequal status

quo based on race. The framework focuses on analyzing institutional and legislative structures rather than individuals, aiming to expose and transform the systemic inequalities negatively impacting people of color. CRT asserts that racism is normalized and perpetuated through social structures and institutions in the United States (Reed et al., 2022). The researcher plays a crucial role in addressing racial subordination, inequity, and the historical framework of systemic injustice. While aligned with the civil rights movement issues, CRT offers a broader perspective on the racially based historical inequities within the country's systemic structure. It emphasizes the importance of understanding how marginalized identities intersect with issues of race, gender, class, and disabilities. Understanding CRT provides additional context for evaluating the foundation of laws and societal norms, allowing for critical thought on how to navigate a more equitable society.

CRT can be connected to the lack of Arab women in leadership roles in the K-12 sector by examining the ways in which systemic racism and intersectionality may contribute to the underrepresentation. CRT argues that systemic racism is ingrained in institutions, including educational systems. The lack of Arab women in leadership roles may be a result of institutional barriers and discriminatory practices within the K-12 sector that disadvantage individuals based on both gender and ethnicity. Arab women may experience challenges at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, leading to unique barriers in accessing leadership positions. CRT explores how cultural stereotypes and biases can influence policies and practices. Stereotypes about Arab women may contribute to biased hiring decisions, limiting their opportunities for career advancement in the education sector (Audi, 2008). CRT addresses the marginalization of certain racial and ethnic groups; Arab women may be rendered invisible or marginalized within the

educational leadership structures, leading to a lack of representation and perpetuation of systemic inequities.

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Bandura defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in their own ability to take action that produces a desired result (Lightsey, 1999; Montas-Hunter, 2012). The theory of self-efficacy that Bandura developed indicated that high self-efficacy was necessary to help individuals persist with a difficult task (Montas-Hunter, 2012). Such tasks and goals included advancing in leadership roles. Self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in determining the goals people set for themselves, the effort they put into tasks, how long they persist in the face of obstacles, and how they cope with challenges and failures (Lightsey, 1999). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to approach tasks with confidence, resilience, and a belief that they can overcome difficulties (Lightsey, 1999).

Self-efficacy is a psychological motivator (Bandura & Adams, 1977). It provides a foundation for motivation and helps individuals feel a stronger sense of well-being and personal accomplishment. As self-efficacy increases, it helps improve the individual's resilience to a diversity and stress, helps them live healthier, and improves their professional performance (Bandura & Adams, 1977). As such, improving self-efficacy may have a positive impact on Arab women and help drive them into increased roles in educational leadership.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study is significant because it may highlight the difficulties and struggles that Arab women face when attempting to enter positions in educational leadership. Women have previously been noted to have difficulties advancing in positions of leadership and face both gender and ethnic based discrimination. Yet little research has been identified highlighting the

unique challenges of Arab women in comparison to groups such as Black and Latina women. The findings from this study may not only contribute to a better understanding of what challenges these women face but may also highlight potential ways of assisting them. In turn, this may lead to future recommendations and practices that assist Arab women while they pursue positions of leadership in education and help them to occupy a more significant place in education overall.

### **Equity, Fairness, and Social Justice**

Equity, fairness and social justice are foundational principles crucial for promoting gender equality in educational leadership roles. Achieving equity means recognizing and addressing the historical and systemic barriers that have hindered women's access to leadership positions in education. It involves providing equal opportunities for women to enter leadership roles, regardless of gender, and ensuring that they have the support and resources needed to succeed.

Fairness in education leadership entails creating a level playing field where women have the same opportunities for advancement as their male counterparts. This includes implementing transparent and unbiased selection processes, offering professional development and mentorship programs tailored to women's needs and advocating for policies that promote work-life balance and support women's career progression. According to Dowell and Larwin (2013), women comprise more than half of doctoral candidates in educational leadership, however they possess only one fourth of the positions in educational administration. One of the barriers identified in the study was one that is believed to be self-imposed (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). They further described this barrier as the avoidance of administration roles due to family obligations and

motherhood, further stressing the need for policies that ensure a proper work-life balance in women holding administrative positions in education (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

Social justice in this context requires challenging existing power structures and addressing the underlying discrimination and inequality that perpetuate gender disparities in educational leadership. The glass ceiling in higher education leadership hinders women from senior roles due to hidden biases and structural barriers (Ballenger, 2010). By actively promoting equity, fairness, and social justice, we can cultivate a more inclusive and diverse educational leadership landscape where women can thrive and contribute their unique perspectives to shaping the future of education.

## **Summary**

While women have made remarkable strides in education, achieving high levels of academic success and earning degrees at higher rates, the journey toward gender equality in leadership positions remains unfinished. Despite the progress made, women, particularly Arab women, continue to face significant challenges in attaining leadership roles within the K-12 educational setting. The existing literature highlights the persistent underrepresentation of Arab women in leadership positions. Factors contributing to this disparity include societal expectations, cultural norms, biases, and systemic obstacles. Furthermore, limited research focused specifically on Arab women in leadership roles underscores the need for a deeper understanding of their experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

To address these gaps, it is imperative to adopt a multidimensional approach. This approach involves fostering self-efficacy among Arab women, providing mentorship and support networks, challenging societal norms and stereotypes, and advocating for systemic changes within educational institutes. By acknowledging and addressing the intersecting dynamics of

gender, ethnicity, and culture, educational organizations can pave the way for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in leadership positions. Moreover, integrating insights from sociocultural theory and Critical Race Theory can enrich our understanding of the complex factors influencing the underrepresentation of Arab women in educational leadership. Sociocultural norms and institutionalized racism intersect to create barriers that hinder the advancement of Arab women in leadership roles. The Critical Race Theory offers a critical lens through which to analyze and dismantle these systemic inequities.

Furthermore, fostering self-efficacy among Arab women is essential for empowering them to overcome barriers and pursue leadership roles with confidence and resilience. Self-efficacy, as posited by Bandura and Adams (1977) theory, plays a critical role in shaping individuals' beliefs in their ability to succeed and persevere in the face of challenges. By providing support, mentorship, and resources to enhance self-efficacy, educational institutions can empower Arab women to navigate and overcome the barriers they encounter throughout their leadership journey.

Addressing the underrepresentation of Arab women in educational leadership requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. This involves not only challenging societal norms and systemic barriers but also creating inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and provide equal opportunities for all. By bridging the research gap and amplifying the voices and experiences of Arab women, we can work towards a future where educational leadership reflects the rich diversity of our society and fosters greater equity and inclusion for all.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Related Literature**

In societies worldwide, Arab women often find themselves navigating a complex interplay of cultural expectations and gender norms. Rooted in deeply ingrained traditions, Arab culture traditionally assigns women primary roles as caregivers and homemakers. This emphasis on traditional gender roles poses a significant challenge for Arab women aspiring to leadership positions, as it creates a delicate balance between professional ambitions and societal expectations of domestic duties (Romanowski & Saeed Al-Hassan, 2013). Similarly, within North American academia, women, particularly those in higher-ranking positions such as full-time professors and department heads, face a pervasive underrepresentation. The existence of the gender pay gap and systemic disparities further exacerbates these challenges. Implicit biases and gender stereotypes continue to shape hiring and promotion decisions, perpetuating gender inequality within educational settings (Metcalf et al., 2013).

As Arab women navigate the complexities of cultural expectations and gender norms in pursuit of leadership roles, their experiences intersect with broader discussions on self-efficacy. Understanding the influence of self-efficacy on women's leadership aspirations is crucial, as it shapes their confidence, motivation, and ability to overcome internal and external barriers (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Additionally, examining the role of cultural factors, social support systems, and intrinsic motivations provides valuable insights into the various nature of women's experiences in educational leadership (Nakitende, 2019). Furthermore, exploring educational leadership in K-12 settings sheds light on the intersectional challenges faced by women, particularly those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. While existing research



provides valuable insights, the complexities surrounding women in leadership roles suggest the need for ongoing and nuanced investigations. By examining the factors influencing women's access to and experiences within leadership positions, we can foster a more inclusive and equitable approach to educational leadership in diverse cultural contexts.

### **Breaking Boundaries: Navigating Cultural and Gender Diversity for Social Equity**

Examining societal perceptions, Arab women are often regarded as upholders of cultural norms, particularly emphasizing the roles of motherhood and domestic duties within Arab culture (Romanowski & Saeed Al-Hassan, 2013). This cultural emphasis can pose a barrier for Arab women in pursuing leadership roles, creating a delicate balance between professional aspirations and home responsibilities. Tlaiss (2014) contributes to this narrative by characterizing Middle Eastern society as patriarchal, highlighting rigid gender roles and stereotypes dictating specific occupational domains for men and women. These societal norms reinforce the traditional standard, designating women primarily as caregivers and homemakers.

In the context of North American academia, Metcalfe et al. (2013) drew attention to the significant underrepresentation of women, particularly in higher-ranking positions. The study underscores a persistent gender pay gap, indicating systemic disparities. Implicit biases and gender stereotypes play a pivotal role in shaping, hiring, and promotion decisions. Additionally, the literature emphasizes the substantial challenge of work-life balance, impacting women's career trajectories and contributing to higher attrition rates in education.

In response to these challenges, suggested strategies include the implementation of policies fostering gender equity, such as family-friendly initiatives, flexible work arrangements, and mentorship programs. Encouraging diversity and inclusivity in hiring and promotion

practices is identified as crucial, coupled with proactive efforts to raise awareness about implicit biases and stereotypes within academic institutions (Metcalf et al. 2013).

### **Race and Leadership**

Race significantly influences leadership opportunities, career advancement, and representation across various professional sectors. Research by Eagly & Chin (2010) and Rosette et al. (2016) highlights how systemic biases, leadership stereotypes, and exclusionary practices hinder individuals from underrepresented racial groups in their leadership trajectories.

Leadership models have traditionally favored dominant groups, creating barriers for racial minorities whose leadership styles may not align with stereotypical expectations. The perception gap (Rosette et al., 2016) illustrates how leaders of color are often perceived as lacking assertiveness, leading to fewer promotions and heightened scrutiny.

Women of color face compounded biases, as they are expected to balance warmth and authority in ways that white male leaders are not. This double bind (Eagly & Chin, 2010) makes it more difficult for them to assert leadership without being viewed as either too aggressive or too passive. Additionally, leaders from underrepresented racial backgrounds frequently feel pressured to conform to dominant cultural norms, limiting their ability to bring diverse perspectives to leadership roles.

Even when racial minorities attain leadership positions, disparities persist in promotion rates, compensation, and workplace expectations. They are often subject to stricter performance evaluations and are less likely to receive the same rewards and career progression as their white counterparts. Organizations also tend to undervalue the additional cultural and emotional labor leaders of color contribute, such as mentorship and diversity-related initiatives.

Addressing these disparities requires organizations to redefine leadership models to include diverse leadership styles, implement bias-free evaluation criteria, expand mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, and foster inclusive workplace cultures. Without structural reforms and intentional policy changes, leadership opportunities will remain inequitable. Research by Eagly & Chin (2010) and Rosette et al. (2016) underscores the urgent need for systemic change to ensure fair and inclusive leadership representation across all sectors.

### **Integration in America: Embracing Cultural Synthesis**

To emerge as leaders, women face the imperative task of articulating their visions despite inherent fears and societal barriers (Brue & Brue, 2016). The prevalence of suspicions or social constraints can render it arduous for women to express their aspirations or assume leadership roles. Brue and Brue (2016) assert that women find profound meaning in connecting and communicating with other women. Establishing such connections serves as a motivational force, enabling them to surmount the fear barrier and cultivate the courage necessary for leadership roles.

In a study conducted by Johnson (2021), the resilience and leadership prowess of African American female superintendents within the education system are examined. The research highlights the adeptness of African American women in navigating and conquering challenges while leading schools and districts. Johnson emphasizes the pivotal role of representation and diversity in educational leadership, as these women bring unique perspectives and insights that positively impact their communities. It acknowledges the historical underrepresentation of African American women in superintendent positions, highlighting the importance of shattering barriers within the field. Furthermore, it elucidates how these women successfully built robust relationships, advocated for marginalized students, and fostered a positive school culture.

## **Empowerment Through Self-Efficacy**

A comprehensive study explored various dimensions of women's lives, encompassing educational backgrounds, career aspirations, familial responsibilities, and societal expectations (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). The research aimed to understand the factors influencing women's decision-making processes and shaping their career choices, analyzing the consequences of these life choices on their professional advancement. Furthermore, it delved into potential obstacles faced by women prioritizing proximity to home, such as limited opportunities for career growth, restricted access to networking and professional development, and workplace bias and discrimination. The inquiry sought to understand how these barriers impact the success of women aspiring to leadership roles in their communities.

In another study, researchers explored the connection between women's self-efficacy and their identified leadership values (Momsen & Carlson, 2013). The study proposed that believing in one's abilities (Self-efficacy) might be a significant factor in encouraging women to pursue leadership roles. It highlighted the pivotal role of self-efficacy in shaping women's aspirations and leadership behaviors. According to the study, women perceiving themselves as capable are more likely to align with leadership values such as ambition, assertiveness, and self-confidence. This group tends to exhibit a stronger desire to assume leadership roles and engage in corresponding behaviors. The importance of self-efficacy in fostering women's leadership aspirations, even in the face of societal barriers and gender stereotypes, was stressed. The study suggested that by nurturing self-belief and confidence, women can overcome internal and external obstacles to pursue leadership roles.

A study conducted by Erdwins et al., (2001) investigated the correlation between women's role strain and factors such as social support, role satisfaction, and self-efficacy. Role

strain, defined as the stress and tension resulting from conflicting demands in various roles like work, family, and personal life, was the focal point. The study findings suggest that a robust support system encompassing family, friends, and colleagues plays a crucial role in helping women navigate the challenges posed by their different roles. Overall, the research implies an intricate interconnection between social support, role satisfaction, and self-efficacy, collectively influencing women's experiences. Improving social support systems, fostering role satisfaction, and nurturing self-efficacy can effectively alleviate the strain women may face while juggling multiple roles, contributing to enhanced well-being.

### **Relationship between motivation and self-efficacy**

Nakitende's (2019) investigation into the motivations and perseverance of women in educational leadership within the United States highlighted intrinsic factors that propel women towards such roles. The study underscored the importance of passion for education, a desire for positive change, and a commitment to serving students and communities as influential motivators. Additionally, it acknowledged the formidable challenges women encounter, including bias, stereotypes, and the delicate balance between work and personal life. The research emphasized the critical need for supportive environments to cultivate and sustain the motivation and perseverance of women in educational leadership.

In a parallel study, Taylor and Trevino (2022) delved into the experiences, barriers, and strategies contributing to the self-efficacy of faculty members dedicated to social justice. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research gathered insights from faculty members engaged in social justice advocacy, revealing both positive and negative experiences and identifying barriers like resistance from colleagues, lack of institutional support, and emotional toll. Furthermore, it explored strategies to enhance self-efficacy, including professional development opportunities,

the establishment of supportive networks, mentoring, coaching, and valuing their efforts. Taylor and Trevino's study provided a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by faculty members in social justice work, shedding light on experiences, barriers, and methods for self-efficacy enhancement.

One study conducted by McCormick in 2001 explored the application of self-efficacy theory in the context of leadership. This theory suggests that individuals' beliefs in their ability to accomplish tasks influence motivation, behavior, and eventual success. This study extended this theory to leadership, proposing that leaders' self-efficacy beliefs significantly impact their effectiveness. A review of prior studies investigated the connection between self-efficacy and leadership, emphasizing the importance of leadership self-efficacy in various behaviors and outcomes. The study also discussed the role of self-efficacy in leadership development and the potential for interventions to enhance leadership self-efficacy. In a separate study by Montas-Hunter in 2012, the concept of self-efficacy among Latina leaders in higher education was examined. Findings suggested that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the career development and leadership effectiveness of Latina leaders. Those with high self-efficacy were more inclined to take on leadership roles, pursue career advancement, and adeptly navigate professional challenges. The study highlighted various factors contributing to the development of self-efficacy among Latina leaders, including supportive networks, mentorship, access to resources, educational attainment, and personal experiences of overcoming adversity. Cultural factors such as familism, resilience, and collective identity were identified as influences of self-efficacy beliefs. Moreover, the study proposed that addressing unique challenges and barriers faced by Latina leaders could positively impact their self-efficacy and leadership outcomes. Strategies like mentoring programs, networking opportunities, leadership development initiatives, and inclusive

policies were recommended to foster an environment conducive to the growth and advancement of Latina leaders in higher education.

### **Educational Leadership: A Focus on K-12 Settings**

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles has prompted inquiries into the underlying causes. A study conducted by Aldawasari (2016) delved into the experiences of Saudi women in higher education leadership, revealing minimal representation in select leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. Aldawasari's study, grounded in social justice and liberal feminist theories, utilized qualitative methods and purposive sampling to uncover challenges faced by Saudi women in higher education leadership. Notably, participants cited barriers such as limited decision-making authority without consulting male counterparts, challenges balancing work and home duties, and the inhibiting influence of gender stereotypes on professional progression. The study suggests a need for nuanced interventions to address these barriers and promote equitable representation for women in Saudi higher education leadership.

In a separate study, Arar and Abramovitz (2013) investigated the attitudes of teacher colleagues toward women principals in Israel. The research, guided by a questionnaire distributed to schoolteachers and administrators, revealed that educators generally perceived women principals as fostering an enjoyable and friendly school environment. However, a gender effect emerged, with women participants exhibiting more positive attitudes toward women principals' abilities than their male counterparts. This finding underscores the significance of gender dynamics in shaping perceptions of leadership competency, highlighting potential biases that may hinder women's advancement into leadership roles within educational institutions.

Buzzell and Metaxas (1999) explored an educational approach advocating for the inclusion of women's perspectives in the K-12 curriculum from a multicultural lens. This approach recognizes the importance of gender equality and diversity in education, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender with race, ethnicity, and culture. By integrating women's stories and accomplishments from various cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, the approach seeks to challenge gender stereotypes, promote equity, and inspire students to appreciate women's contributions throughout history. Additionally, the multicultural lens encourages educators to incorporate narratives from diverse cultural and ethnic communities, fostering inclusivity and empowering students from different backgrounds.

Amancio's (2019) research focusing on the experiences of Latina women in K-12 educational leadership positions shed light on the intersectional challenges faced by this group. Latina women, significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, navigate additional barriers rooted in both gender and racial discrimination. The study highlighted the importance of understanding the unique challenges and triumphs of Latina school leaders, including biases, stereotypes, and microaggressions. Despite these challenges, Latina leaders demonstrated resilience, drawing strength from cultural backgrounds and familial support. The study emphasized the need to acknowledge and celebrate the cultural relevance brought by Latina school leaders, encouraging a more inclusive and equitable approach to educational leadership. Understanding these narratives is crucial for fostering diverse and culturally responsive educational leadership in K-12 settings.

While existing research provides valuable insights, the complex and multifaceted nature of the issues surrounding women in leadership roles in education suggests that ongoing and nuanced investigations are warranted. Further research is needed to explore the nuanced factors



influencing women's access to and experiences within leadership positions, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in educational leadership.

### **Significance of Arab Women as Leaders**

The inclusion of Arab women in leadership positions within the K-12 education holds profound significance for several reasons. Firstly, representation matters (Hilal et al., 2024). Having Arab women in leadership roles provides students from familiar backgrounds with visible role models, inspiring them to pursue their ambitions and believe in their potential. It helps combat stereotypes and broadens the perception of what leaders can look like and where they can come from. Moreover, Arab women bring unique perspectives and experiences to leadership roles that can enrich the educational environment. Their cultural insights and bilingual abilities enable them to address the diverse needs of students more effectively (Arar, 2018). They can foster an inclusive atmosphere that respects and values different backgrounds, which is essential in today's multicultural classrooms. Additionally, the presence of Arab women in leadership positions can lead to more equitable policymaking and resource allocation. They are more likely to advocate for initiatives that support bilingual education, cultural competency training, and programs that address the specific challenges faced by minoritized students. This advocacy can result in a more supportive and nurturing environment for all students, enhancing overall educational outcomes. Furthermore, promoting Arab women into leadership roles can contribute to breaking down systemic barriers and biases within the education system. It encourages a more diverse and inclusive leadership pipeline, ensuring that a wider range of voices and experiences are represented in the decision-making process.

## **Limitations of the Existing Research**

The research presented in this study offers valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by women in educational leadership roles, particularly focusing on the intersection of gender, culture, and social equity. However, it is important to acknowledge several limitations inherent in the current body of literature. Firstly, the generalizability of findings may be limited due to the specific cultural or regional contexts examined in many studies, such as Arab women or Latina women in educational leadership, which may not be universally applicable. Additionally, reliance on self-report data and qualitative methods introduces the potential for bias and subjectivity in the findings, impacting the accuracy and reliability of the results. Moreover, cultural variability across different communities and regions means that findings may not fully capture the diverse range of cultural contexts and nuances relevant to women in leadership roles.

Furthermore, there may be an underrepresentation of certain voices, such as Arab women, in the research literature, limiting the breadth and depth of understanding. Temporal context is also crucial as societal norms and attitudes evolve, potentially making older studies outdated in reflecting current realities. Language and access barriers may further constrain the inclusivity of the literature reviewed, particularly if studies conducted in languages other than English are not included. Additionally, while the research acknowledges intersectionality, the depth of analysis on how intersecting identities influence women's experiences in educational leadership may be limited. Finally, publication bias could skew the overall understanding of the topic, as studies with statistically significant or positive results may be more likely to be published, leading to an incomplete picture of the challenges and opportunities for women in educational leadership.

## Conclusion

In summary, the journey toward achieving gender equity and cultural diversity within educational leadership is intricate and multifaceted, reflecting the intricate interplay of gender, culture, and societal norms. Arab women, in particular, navigate a delicate balance between cultural expectations and professional ambitions, encountering systemic barriers entrenched in longstanding traditions. Similarly, women in North American academic circles face notable underrepresentation and systemic disparities fueled by implicit biases and gender stereotypes. Despite these formidable challenges, there exists a glimmer of hope and resilience. Initiatives promoting gender equity, such as family-friendly policies and mentorship programs, offer viable avenues for women to advance into leadership roles. Additionally, the significance of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivations cannot be underestimated, as they empower women to surmount internal and external obstacles on their path toward leadership roles.

Within K-12 educational environments, delving into the experiences of women, particularly those from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds, yields invaluable insights into the intersectional hurdles they confront. By embracing and celebrating cultural diversity, educational institutions can foster a more inclusive and equitable approach to leadership.

Looking ahead, it is essential to sustain research endeavors that delve into the nuanced determinants shaping women's access to and encounters within leadership positions. Through a nuanced understanding of these complexities, educational institutions can implement targeted interventions and policies aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership. Ultimately, by dismantling barriers and embracing both cultural and gender diversity, we can cultivate educational settings that empower all individuals to flourish and excel.

## **Chapter III**

### **Method**

#### **Research Design Overview**

The objective of this research was to thoroughly examine the underrepresentation of Arab women in K-12 educational leadership. By exploring this issue, the study shed light on the multifaceted challenges they encounter, identifying both systemic and individual barriers to their advancement. Additionally, it investigated the key factors shaping their career paths, including cultural norms, organizational practices, and personal aspirations. The study also highlights transformative moments that have significantly influenced their leadership journeys. Through detailed narratives and contextual analysis, this research provided a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and resilience of Arab women in educational leadership, contributing to the broader conversation on diversity and inclusion.

Conducting a multiple case study for the research is appropriate for several compelling reasons. Case studies are compatible with conducting in-depth investigations of specific situations (Yin, 2009). In the context of examining the lack of Arab women in leadership roles within K-12 education, a case study permits the researcher to methodically study the experiences of individuals and provide a complete account of their journey. The researcher conducted semi-structured individual online interviews with eight Arab women leaders in the K-12 sector, who were recruited throughout the United States . By focusing on the 8 cases, the researcher provided a rich, contextually grounded analysis that took into account the unique circumstances and nuances of the situation. This contextual understanding was essential for drawing meaningful conclusions and recommendations. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep exploration of the challenges, factors contributing to success, and vital moments that shaped the

leadership journeys of Arab women in K-12 education. The personal narratives and concrete examples made a compelling case for the need to address the underrepresentation of Arab women in leadership roles.

This study used a qualitative research method to capture the rich and nuanced experiences of the eight Arab women in K-12 educational leadership roles. The qualitative research method allowed for a deeper exploration of the personal narratives and context surrounding the experiences of the individuals, providing valued insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions. By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, the participants shared their experiences and challenges in their own words, exploring topics like cultural stereotypes, gender bias, and limited mentorship. Moreover, investigating the factors that attributed to the participant's success as well as allowing participants to share in detail the moments or events in their leadership journey.

In this qualitative research study, the key focus was the experiences and narratives of Arab women in educational leadership positions. Each participant served as a unique unit of analysis, which allowed the researcher to capture the diversity and depth of their experiences, challenges, factors contributing to their success, and transformative moments. Through these individual narratives, a comprehensive understanding of the research questions was achieved.

## **Study Sample**

### ***The Researcher***

The researcher is a teacher at a public school in New Jersey who has been servicing bilingual students for over ten years. As an Arab women working in the K-12 sector, the researcher brings a unique and personal perspective to the work and research. The researcher

role involves not only teaching but also addressing the linguistic and cultural needs of her students, which is crucial in a diverse educational environment.

The researcher's upcoming research will focus on the underrepresentation of Arab women in leader positions within the K-12 education system in the United States. This topic is particularly significant to the researcher as the researcher navigates their own career within this system. The experiences and observations as an Arab women in education directly inform the research, providing valuable insights into the challenges and barriers faced by Arab women aspiring to leadership roles. By shedding light on this issue, the researchers hopes to inspire change and promote diversity and inclusion in educational leadership. The researcher aims to not only understand the current landscape but also advocate for policies and practices that support the advancement of Arab women in leadership roles.

### ***Study Participants***

The study included eight participants, all of whom self-identified as Arab women in K–12 educational leadership roles. For the purposes of this study, *Arab women* are defined as individuals who self-identify as Arab, including both first-generation immigrants and second-generation women born to Arab immigrant parents. The study participants currently hold leadership positions such as vice principals, principals, superintendents in the K-12 education section.

In terms of age, the majority of participants (six) were between 40 and 49 years old, with one participant each in the 30–39 and 50–59 age ranges. All participants were female, consistent with the study's focus on Arab women in leadership. Educationally, the participants demonstrated high levels of academic achievement. Six held master's degrees, and two had earned doctoral degrees; none had only a bachelor's degree.

Geographically, participants represented three U.S. states: New Jersey (five), Michigan (two), and New York (one). Most worked in urban school settings (six participants), while two were employed in suburban areas. No participants were from rural locations. The participants were women of Arab background who are working in K-12 education and live in the United States. Participants resided in the United States because the study concentrated on Arab women leaders and teachers in this area.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic and Background Information*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Demographic Data (State, Gender, Education Level, School Level, Geographic setting, First Generation or US born)</i>
<i>Participant 1</i>	<i>Michigan, female, Doctorate degree, K-12 level, Suburban, US born</i>
<i>Participant 2</i>	<i>Michigan, female, Master's degree, Elementary, Suburban, US born</i>
<i>Participant 3</i>	<i>New York, female, Master's degree, Elementary, Urban, US born</i>
<i>Participant 4</i>	<i>New Jersey, female, Doctorate degree, Middle School, Urban, US born</i>
<i>Participant 5</i>	<i>New Jersey, female, Master's degree, K-12 level, Urban, First Generation</i>
<i>Participant 6</i>	<i>New Jersey, female, Master's degree, Elementary, Urban, First Generation</i>
<i>Participant 7</i>	<i>New Jersey, female, Master's degree, K-12 level, Urban, First Generation</i>
<i>Participant 8</i>	<i>New Jersey, female, Master's degree, Elementary, Urban, US born</i>

***Researcher-Participant Relationship***

No participant of the study will had a direct relationship with the researcher that will represent a conflict of interest or any relationship with the researcher that will convey any bias on the research study.

***Recruitment Process***

The researcher looked for participants using purposive and convenience sampling technique in local districts as well districts across the United States. The criteria was Arab women who currently held positions in leadership roles.

Several strategies were employed to identify potential participants. Professional networks such as the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), National Education Association (NEA), American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE), were utilized to fulfill the number of participants needed for the study. Additionally, the researcher searched different school districts to find potential participants. The participants were contacted through email. The initial email included a brief introduction to the study, its purpose, and an invitation to participate. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, a follow-up email was sent with a link to the informed consent form and details about the purpose of the study, procedures, risks (if any), and benefits of the study. The content of the email included the purpose statement stating, “This research wants to understand why there aren’t many Arab women in charge of schools. The goal of the study was to determine the difficulties they faced, what helped them succeed, and the important moments in their journey. This will help us learn more about how Arab women become leaders in education”. The email highlighted the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of their identity.

### ***Participant selection***

Participants for this study were selected based on particular criteria to guarantee that the research focused on Arab women holding leadership positions in the K-12 education sector. The inclusion criteria were identifying as an Arab women currently holding leadership positions within the K-12 education sector in the United States, as well as their willingness to participate in the study and provide informed consent. The exclusion criteria were individuals who do not identify as having Arab heritage, identifying as a male, individuals who are not employed in the



K-12 education sector, and individuals who do not reside in the United States. Each participant underwent a selection process to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. This encompassed a brief questionnaire to confirm their Arab heritage, their current leadership position, and their willingness to participate.

The exclusion criteria were:

1. Individuals who do not identify as having Arab heritage.
2. Identifying as male.
3. Individuals who are not employed in the K-12 educational leadership sector.
4. Individuals who are in education as teachers but not in higher leadership roles.
5. Individuals who do not reside in the United States.

Each prospective participant will undergo a selection process to ensure they meet the inclusion criteria. This will encompass a brief questionnaire/survey to confirm their Arab heritage, their current leadership position, and their willingness to participate.

### ***Data Collection/Identification Procedures***

After receiving the signed consent forms, the data collection process began. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually via Zoom, ensuring participants feel comfortable and secure in sharing their experiences. Each interview was between 45-60 minutes long, but if further clarifications and elaborations are needed, the researcher will ask the participants for a second interview to gather more information. All interviews conducted were recorded, and all participants were notified of the recording prior to the start of the interview. Each interview began with a brief introduction and overview of the study's objectives. This established an understanding, alleviated any potential anxiety, and clarified the purpose of the research.

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were presented with a determined set of open-ended questions, as shown in Appendix A, that were designed to obtain specific information and permit flexibility. These questions were carefully crafted to address the research questions (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3) and covered a range of topics. For example, participants were asked to recount instances where cultural stereotypes or gender biases affected their leadership journey. They were encouraged to elaborate on strategies or support systems that contributed to their success. Asking open-ended questions allowed participants to explore and share their experiences in their own words, as well as allow for further engagement between the researcher and participants. This qualitative approach enabled a rich and refined understanding of the complexities of their journeys.

In order to maintain the integrity of the study, all interviews were transcribed verbatim using the software, Otter. This safeguarded accuracy in capturing participants' narratives. Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations remained a top priority. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their involvement and the confidentiality of their identity. Any potential conflicts of interest was diligently managed to ensure the research remains unbiased and neutral. In order to eliminate any biases, the researcher met with some of the participants after transcribing all the information gathered to ensure that the researcher captured the participants own point of view. By employing this data collection process, the research aimed to offer a comprehensive, authentic portrayal of the challenges, triumphs, and pivotal moments experienced by Arab women in educational leadership roles within the k-12 education sector.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Multiple case study***

A multiple case study approach was employed to explore The Underrepresentation of Arab Women in Leadership Roles within the K-12 Education System because it allows for a more in-depth understanding of phenomena across different contexts. According to Stake (2006), a multiple case study enables researchers to examine cases both within their unique settings and comparatively across cases. This method is particularly beneficial when the goal is to identify patterns and variations while maintaining the integrity of each individual case. By analyzing multiple cases, the researcher was able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors and relationships, ensuring greater robustness and generalizability of the findings.

### ***Inductive thematic analysis***

The qualitative analysis for this study on Arab women in leadership positions in the K-12 education sector began with the careful organization and transcription of collected data, including interview transcripts and other text-based sources. This initial step was essential in ensuring that the data was accessible and well-structured for analysis. Following data preparation, a thorough familiarization with the content took place through repeated readings of the transcripts. This immersive process helped in obtaining a complete understanding of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Subsequently, the analysis progressed with open coding, where specific segments of text was assigned labels or codes that represented emerging concepts and themes. These initial codes served as the basis for subsequent analysis.

In building open coding, the axial coding stage focused on identifying relationships between codes and grouping related ones into broader categories or themes. This step enabled the

organization and refinement of the coding structure (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Selective coding then come into play, directing attention towards the most significant themes that have emerged during the analysis. This deeper exploration of prioritized codes shed light on their nuanced meanings (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Throughout the coding process, a codebook was developed to serve as a reference guide, detailing the codes and their definitions and providing examples from the data.

Constant comparison was a frequent practice, allowing for the continuous assessment of new data against existing codes and categories to ensure consistency and refinement of the analysis. The overarching themes that emerged from the coded data was identified, which formed the key findings of the analysis. To support and demonstrate these findings, relevant quotes or excerpts from the data was collected. These quotes served as tangible evidence, supporting the analysis of the participants' experiences.

As the analysis progressed, careful reflection on the meaning and implications of each theme was started, considering their relevance to the research questions, theoretical framework, and broader literature. Ethical considerations was paramount throughout the process, with strict adherence to guidelines safeguarding participant confidentiality and privacy. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript, validate, clarify, and provide feedback. The transcripts was emailed to the participants, in which they had one week to review and provide feedback.

The analysis also integrated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) considerations by exploring how these elements interconnected with the experiences of Arab women in leadership positions. The significance of the study's findings was summarized, offering insights into their implications for equity, fairness, and social justice within the context of Arab women in

educational leadership roles. Throughout the analysis, transparency, context, and ethical considerations was carefully maintained to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the research. Lastly, the study effectively referenced previous research studies to demonstrate the gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding Arab women in leadership positions.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

The underrepresentation of Arab women in K-12 leadership was a significant yet understudied issue, influenced by cultural norms, organizational barriers, and personal challenges. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Arab women in leadership roles within the K-12 education system, highlighting the factors that shaped their career trajectories and the obstacles they encountered.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of this issue, the study employed a multiple case study methodology, allowing for an in-depth examination of individual experiences while identifying common themes across participants' narratives. Case studies provided valuable insight into complex social phenomena within specific contexts, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities Arab women faced in educational leadership (Yin, 2009).

Guided by the theories of sociocultural theory, critical race theory, and self-efficacy theory this research incorporated interview questions designed to explore the intersections of culture, gender, race, and self-efficacy in shaping leadership experiences. Through this exploration, the study contributed to the broader discourse on diversity and inclusion in educational leadership while amplifying the voices and resilience of Arab women in the field.

## **Data Preparation**

Data preparation was a foundational step in ensuring the integrity and quality of the study's findings. The process began with the transcription of interview recordings. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using Otter transcription software. To ensure accuracy, the transcriptions were meticulously reviewed and compared against the audio recordings. Any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations were corrected during this review process. Non-verbal cues, such as tone, pauses, and emotional expressions, were annotated where relevant, as they added context and depth to participants' narratives.

Maintaining confidentiality was a central aspect of data preparation. All personal identifiers, such as names, school affiliations, and geographic locations, were anonymized. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and specific references to their schools, districts, or organizations were replaced with generalized terms to protect their identities. Sensitive incidents or details that could reveal participants' identities were further generalized without compromising the meaning of the data.

Once transcriptions were completed and anonymized, the data was systematically organized. Each transcript was labeled with a unique identifier, including metadata such as the participant's role (e.g., principal or superintendent), the interview date, and its duration. These files were stored securely in a password-protected repository, with encrypted backups created to safeguard against data loss. Reflective notes and observations from the interviews were also documented to support the analytical process.

## **Data Cleaning**

Data cleaning was an essential and multifaceted step to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and consistency of the qualitative data prior to analysis. This process involved a series of

deliberate actions to refine and organize the interview transcripts, enabling a structured and coherent dataset for thematic analysis. The first phase of cleaning involved a meticulous review of automated transcriptions produced by Otter transcription software. These transcriptions were cross-checked against the original audio recordings to ensure they accurately captured participants' spoken words and contextual nuances. Errors such as misheard words, incomplete sentences, and missed expressions were identified and corrected during this process.

In addition to correcting errors, irrelevant content such as filler words, off-topic remarks, or notes related to background noise was removed. The goal was to streamline the data while preserving the integrity and richness of participants' narratives. Non-verbal cues, such as pauses, hesitations, tone, and emotional expressions, were annotated where relevant to provide context and depth to the transcripts. These annotations enriched the data by capturing aspects of the participants' experiences that went beyond their spoken words.

Standardization of formatting was another critical component of data cleaning. This involved ensuring consistent use of speaker labels, punctuation, paragraphing, and timestamping across all transcripts. Standardization facilitated a seamless process for segmentation and analysis, making it easier to trace key insights back to their original contexts. For example, paragraph breaks were aligned with thematic shifts in participants' narratives, allowing each segment to stand as an independent unit for analysis without losing its contextual relevance.

Discrepancies in the data, such as ambiguous or unclear statements, were addressed systematically. When certain parts of a transcript were difficult to interpret, the researcher revisited the original audio recordings to clarify meaning. In instances where further clarification was necessary, follow-up discussions were conducted with participants to resolve ambiguities

and verify the accuracy of the data. This iterative engagement with the participants ensured that the data faithfully reflected their intended meanings and perspectives.

To prepare the data for thematic analysis, transcripts were segmented into smaller, meaningful units. These units, typically sentences or thematic paragraphs, were delineated based on shifts in topics or focus within the narratives. Each unit was labeled and categorized systematically, creating an organized dataset. The segmentation process was executed with care to preserve the continuity and coherence of participants' stories while making the data more manageable for detailed examination.

The final step in data cleaning involved implementing quality control measures to validate the refined dataset. A secondary review of the finalized transcripts was conducted to confirm that no errors, inconsistencies, or omissions had been overlooked. Reflective notes and observations recorded during the cleaning process were integrated into the research journal, creating a comprehensive record of the decisions and justifications for adjustments made to the data. This transparent documentation enhanced the credibility of the study and laid a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The cleaned and refined qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic coding process designed to uncover patterns, themes, and deeper meanings within participants' narratives. This robust analytical framework began with an intensive familiarization phase, during which the researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. The goal of this phase was to gain a holistic understanding of participants' lived experiences and to identify initial insights that could guide the coding process. Analytical memos



were maintained throughout, capturing observations, reflections, and emerging ideas that would inform subsequent stages of analysis.

An inductive approach was employed to allow themes to emerge organically from the data. This method ensured that the findings were grounded in participants' authentic experiences rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. The initial coding process involved assigning descriptive labels, or "codes," to specific segments of the data that represented key ideas or patterns. For instance, codes such as "cultural expectations," "lack of mentorship," or "resilience strategies" were applied to capture recurring elements in participants' narratives.

The coding process was iterative and reflexive. As new insights emerged during subsequent readings, the researcher revisited and refined existing codes to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Multiple cycles of review and re-evaluation were conducted to group related codes into broader themes and sub-themes. For example, codes related to cultural barriers and systemic inequities were organized under overarching themes such as "systemic challenges" and "cultural influences." Analytical notes documented the rationale for these groupings, providing transparency and consistency in theme development.

Cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify shared and unique experiences among participants. This comparative process illuminated areas of convergence, such as common systemic barriers faced by Arab women in leadership, as well as areas of divergence, such as individual strategies for overcoming challenges. This nuanced approach allowed the analysis to capture both the collective and individual dimensions of participants' experiences. Direct quotes from participants were extracted to validate and illustrate each theme, ensuring that the findings remained deeply rooted in the data. These quotes not only added authenticity to the

analysis but also provided vivid, firsthand accounts that enriched the study's narrative. For example, quotes were used to exemplify participants' reflections on cultural stereotypes, their resilience in overcoming biases, or their perspectives on the importance of mentorship.

The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the identified themes into a cohesive narrative. This synthesis integrated the nuanced insights gained through thematic coding, presenting a comprehensive understanding of the complexities, challenges, and motivations that shaped Arab women's pathways to leadership. Themes such as "navigating cultural stereotypes," "overcoming systemic barriers," and "developing resilience" were interconnected to provide a holistic view of participants' journeys.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, continually questioning and refining their interpretations to ensure they remained faithful to participants' voices and experiences. This rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis ensured that the study's findings were robust, credible, and deeply rooted in the qualitative data, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of Arab women in K-12 educational leadership.

### **Validity**

An expert in qualitative research audited the study, with particular attention to the data analysis process. After thoroughly reviewing the coding procedures, thematic development, and interpretation of findings, the expert expressed agreement with the overall approach and conclusions drawn from the data. She provided constructive feedback to further refine the clarity and presentation of the analysis. In response, revisions were made to enhance transparency and ensure alignment with qualitative research best practices, ultimately strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

## **Presentation of Findings**

### **RQ1 .What are the challenges that Arab women face in becoming leaders in the K-12 education sector?**

Arab women in K-12 educational leadership face significant cultural and societal challenges that shape their professional journeys. Traditional gender norms and systemic biases create barriers that require them to constantly prove their capabilities while balancing professional aspirations with societal expectations. Their qualifications, language proficiency, and cultural identity are often scrutinized, particularly in male-dominated environments where leadership traits are judged differently based on gender. Additionally, visible markers of cultural and religious identity, such as the hijab, add another layer of complexity, further challenging their authority and legitimacy as leaders. Despite these obstacles, many Arab women demonstrate resilience, using these challenges as motivation to excel and redefine societal perceptions of leadership. Their experiences highlight the need for greater inclusivity and recognition of diverse leadership contributions within the educational sector.

Arab American women striving for leadership positions in K–12 education encounter a range of barriers shaped by both cultural and societal factors. These barriers often intersect, yet they manifest in distinct ways that influence how Arab women experience, navigate, and contribute to educational leadership. The following analysis is structured around three overarching themes—Cultural, Societal, and Individual Factors, which encompass the subthemes of Navigating Male-Dominated Environments and Confronting Stereotypes and Perceptions. Individual Factors reflect the experience of the participants which did not fit the Cultural or Societal factors. These themes reflect the complex dynamics that Arab women must negotiate in

order to thrive in leadership roles; while also highlighting the depth of resilience and transformation they bring to educational institutions.

**Table 2**

*Major challenges faced by Arab American women looking to become leaders in K-12 education.*

Overarching Themes	Subthemes	Categories / Codes	Supporting quotes
<b>Cultural Factors</b>	Navigating Male-Dominated Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cultural expectations to prioritize familial responsibilities</li> <li>- Breaking traditional caregiving roles</li> <li>- Gendered expectations around behavior (e.g., modesty, humility)</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Now people who interact with Arab women in leadership positions often question who they are, where they came from, and why they are doing this job.”</i></p> <p><i>“There’s always a question about whether these women are good enough or capable, and that’s something we constantly have to push against.”</i></p>
	Confronting stereotype and perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Visible cultural and religious markers (e.g., hijab, modest clothing)</li> <li>- Cultural assumptions tied to identity and belonging</li> </ul>	<p><i>“I wear the hijab and very loose clothing. For some people, it seems like I’m not as American as others, and that in itself is another element of proving myself—proving that I share the same values.”</i></p> <p><i>“I value those experiences</i></p>

			<i>because they made me stronger... but the reality is, it's exhausting to always have to prove yourself in ways that others don't have to."</i>
<b>Societal Factors</b>	Navigating Male-Dominated Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Isolation in professional settings</li> <li>- Male dominance in leadership spaces</li> <li>- Need to over-credential and over-perform</li> </ul>	<p><i>"I'd walk into a room, and the majority of administrators were men in suits. I was the only woman, and I always had to prove myself among them."</i></p> <p><i>"Some individuals may not even have a third of the credentials that I have, but I feel I always need to get more certifications and qualifications to validate my position."</i></p>
	Confronting stereotype and perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societal doubts about Arab women's qualifications</li> <li>- Language proficiency scrutiny</li> <li>- Higher performance expectations</li> </ul>	<p><i>"They question everything—your qualifications, your education, your language, even if English is your first language. It's exhausting to have to prove yourself over and over again."</i></p> <p><i>"It doesn't matter who it is—we're always proving ourselves. It's like we have to hold ourselves to a</i></p>

			<i>higher standard than anyone else in the field of education.”</i>
<b>Individual Factors</b>	Individual barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of mentorship</li> <li>- Individual experiences with lack of family to support leadership attainment</li> </ul>	<p><i>“I never truly felt like I had a mentor of my background to guide me through the struggles of attaining a position of leadership”</i></p> <p><i>“My family lived out of state, so I didn’t always have the help and physical support of my family while pursuing a higher degree.”</i></p>

## Cultural Factors

### *Navigating Male-Dominated Environments*

Cultural expectations within Arab communities regarding gender roles and leadership responsibilities remain a significant challenge for women pursuing administrative positions. Traditional norms often dictate that women should prioritize familial duties and caregiving over career advancement, creating internal and external pressures that shape leadership aspirations. These pressures are compounded when Arab women enter professional spaces traditionally dominated by men. Participants frequently described feelings of isolation, noting that they were often the only woman in the room during leadership meetings or decision-making sessions. One woman shared, “I’d walk into a room, and the majority of administrators were men in suits. I was the only woman, and I always had to prove myself among them.”

Even more, participants emphasized how cultural expectations around modesty and female behavior created double standards in leadership. Assertive behavior, confidence, and

decisiveness—traits commonly expected of leaders—were often misinterpreted when exhibited by women. These traits, instead of being seen as leadership strengths, were viewed as arrogance or insubordination. “There’s always a question about whether these women are good enough or capable,” one participant noted, “and that’s something we constantly have to push against.” Such responses highlight how deeply ingrained cultural norms, both within and outside Arab communities, shape how Arab women leaders are perceived and received in educational settings.

### ***Confronting Stereotypes and Perceptions***

Cultural identity markers—such as the hijab or traditional clothing—intensify the visibility of Arab women and subject them to heightened scrutiny. These visible expressions of cultural and religious identity often lead others to question their belonging, commitment, or even loyalty to dominant cultural norms. One participant poignantly remarked, “I wear the hijab and very loose clothing. For some people, it seems like I’m not as American as others, and that in itself is another element of proving myself—proving that I share the same values.” For many, these markers became a site of bias, causing them to feel that they had to work even harder to gain legitimacy and acceptance.

The internalization of this pressure was evident in participants’ reflections. Many felt that their cultural identity, rather than being embraced as an asset, was treated as something that needed to be mitigated or explained. Despite this, participants expressed a strong sense of cultural pride and a commitment to using their visibility as a form of resistance. They reframed the very qualities for which they were criticized into sources of strength and leadership. As one woman said, “I value those experiences because they made me stronger and more capable. They helped me recognize my own abilities much more. But the reality is, it’s exhausting to always have to prove yourself in ways that others don’t have to.”

## **Societal Factors**

### ***Navigating Male-Dominated Environments***

Beyond cultural expectations, Arab women leaders must also contend with systemic and institutional norms within society that are rooted in gender hierarchy and racialized perceptions of leadership. While male-dominated leadership spaces pose challenges for many women, Arab American women face a compounded experience due to the intersection of gender, race, and perceived foreignness. They must constantly validate their right to be at the table. One participant described the emotional toll of this process: “Some individuals may not even have a third of the credentials that I have, but I feel I always need to get more certifications and qualifications to validate my position.”

These statements reflect how societal systems often privilege certain identities in leadership—namely, white and male—and render others invisible unless they dramatically overperform. Even when Arab women meet or exceed formal qualifications, their legitimacy is still questioned. The societal expectation to “prove oneself” is not only emotionally draining but also institutionally unjust, reinforcing exclusionary norms within educational leadership.

### ***Confronting Stereotypes and Perceptions***

Societal stereotypes about Arab women’s roles, abilities, and identities deeply influence how they are perceived in professional spaces. Participants shared how their leadership was regularly doubted, even when they possessed strong qualifications. “They question everything—your qualifications, your education, your language, even if English is your first language,” one participant said. “It’s exhausting to have to prove yourself over and over again.” These doubts often extended to their broader identity, with assumptions made about their cultural background, values, and compatibility with dominant leadership norms.



This constant scrutiny contributed to a feeling of always needing to be exceptional. Arab women leaders often described the pressure to hold themselves to a higher standard than their peers. As one participant explained, “It doesn’t matter who it is—we’re always proving ourselves. It’s like we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard than anyone else in the field of education.” These perceptions create a double bind where Arab women must both embody ideal leadership traits and simultaneously navigate widespread doubts about their place in those roles.

Despite these societal challenges, participants often used their leadership journeys to disrupt stereotypes and inspire change. Rather than being discouraged by the skepticism, they viewed their efforts as part of a larger struggle for representation, equity, and justice in education. By succeeding in leadership positions, they became visible counter-narratives to the dominant assumptions about Arab and Muslim women—offering proof that leadership excellence can take many forms, including those grounded in cultural pride and community advocacy.

### **Individual Factors**

Arab women leaders often faced internal challenges shaped by a persistent need to prove their worth in professional settings. Many described feeling pressure to exceed expectations, driven by both external doubt and internalized self-criticism. As one participant put it, “We’re always proving ourselves. It’s like we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard than anyone else in the field of education.”

A lack of mentorship was another recurring barrier. Few participants had access to mentors who understood their cultural and religious identities, leaving them without guidance tailored to their unique leadership paths. In some cases, family support was also inconsistent—

some women had to overcome familial expectations that prioritized caregiving or traditional roles over professional advancement.

This integrated analysis demonstrates that while Arab American women in K–12 leadership face substantial cultural and societal challenges, they persist with resilience, determination, and a vision for more inclusive and representative educational environments. Their experiences not only expose systemic inequities but also model the transformative potential of culturally conscious and socially responsive leadership.

**RQ2. What pivotal moments that led Arab women to become change agents and take on leadership roles within the K-12 education system?**

Arab American women in K–12 educational leadership navigate a complex terrain shaped by deep-rooted cultural and societal factors. These three overarching themes—Cultural, Societal and Individual Challenges—reveal how their leadership journeys are shaped by traditions, expectations, institutional norms, and systemic biases. The following sections explore these challenges through the lens of family support, intrinsic motivation, cultural identity, ethical leadership, representation, and bias. Table 2 summarizes the themes in this section, with supporting quotes from the participants. It delves into the impact of cultural and ethical foundations, highlighting how these leaders balance traditional values with the demands of their roles. Additionally, the analysis examines the challenges they face, such as systemic bias and societal expectations, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles.

**Table 3**

*Change agents for Arab women in pursuing K-12 leadership roles.*

Overarching Themes	Themes	Codes	Supporting quotes
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<b>Cultural Factors</b>	Support Systems and Networks: Family Support as the Cornerstone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spouses, parents, and siblings play a key role in supporting leadership aspirations.</li> <li>- Some women struggle with balancing cultural expectations and career ambitions.</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Without family support, Arab women cannot even think of leadership.”</i></p> <p><i>“Balancing cultural expectations with career ambitions is one of the hardest parts.”</i></p>
	Cultural Identity, Ethics, and Strategic Leadership: Navigating Leadership Complexities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong ethical foundations guide decision-making.</li> <li>- Emotional intelligence is required to navigate professional settings while maintaining cultural identity.</li> </ul>	<p><i>“You have to hold on to your values while adapting to your professional environment.”</i></p> <p><i>“I learned when to explain myself and when to stand firm.”</i></p>
<b>Societal Factors</b>	The Drive to Succeed: Intrinsic Motivation, Resilience, and Transformative Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arab women must exceed expectations to gain recognition.</li> <li>- Lifelong learning and continuous education are essential for career progression.</li> </ul>	<p><i>“An Arab woman in leadership must go above and beyond just to be seen as equal.”</i></p> <p><i>“I pursued three master’s degrees because I wanted to keep growing.”</i></p>
	Overcoming Bias: Arab Women Redefining Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women in leadership often experience skepticism and exclusion.</li> <li>- Visible identifiers (e.g., hijab) can lead to greater scrutiny but also serve as a source of pride.</li> </ul>	<p><i>“People judge me before I even open my mouth, but I remind myself that my hijab is my crown.”</i></p> <p><i>“Those moments of exclusion pushed me to prove that Arab women can excel in leadership.”</i></p>
	The Power of Representation and Inspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women leaders serve as role models for younger generations.</li> <li>- Leadership is not just about personal success but about</li> </ul>	<p><i>“I wanted students to see leaders who reflect them.”</i></p> <p><i>“At first, I impacted a single classroom. Now, I influence an entire</i></p>

		opening doors for others.	<i>district of 24,000 students."</i>
<b>Individual Factors</b>	Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some attained leadership positions quicker than others.</li> <li>- Differences in Degree levels</li> <li>- Some women did not have visible religious markers such as the hijab</li> </ul>	<p><i>"It took me longer because I had to prioritize my children first. I don't regret it, but it meant I entered leadership later than others."</i></p> <p><i>"I knew I needed a doctorate to be taken seriously at the table where decisions are made."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't wear the hijab, but I still faced assumptions—being Arab and a woman was enough to be doubted."</i></p>

## Cultural Factors

### *Support Systems and Networks: Family Support as the Cornerstone*

Family support emerged as a central cultural pillar in the leadership journeys of Arab women. Many participants emphasized that without the backing of spouses, parents, or siblings, pursuing leadership would have been nearly impossible. "I keep repeating this because, to be honest, without this, Arab women cannot even think of leadership, let alone pursue a career. Family support is everything. Without it, the journey is impossible," stated one participant. This support was not limited to emotional encouragement; it extended to tangible assistance like childcare, domestic responsibilities, and buffering cultural resistance.

Spousal support was often a defining element. One leader shared, "When I wanted to go back to school to get not one but multiple advanced degrees, my husband took over many household responsibilities. He supported me fully, knowing how much it meant to me." Still, this support was not universal. Several women discussed the internal conflict and guilt they felt in

balancing traditional caregiving roles with professional ambitions. “There was constant guilt—leaving my children to attend classes or feeling like I wasn’t doing enough at home. Balancing cultural expectations with career ambitions is one of the hardest parts of this journey,” one participant explained. Despite these pressures, their determination to lead and grow professionally enabled them to confront and overcome deeply held cultural norms.

***Cultural Identity, Ethics, and Strategic Leadership: Navigating Leadership Complexities***

Participants consistently emphasized the tension between maintaining cultural and religious values and adapting to the demands of leadership. As one participant explained, “You have to hold on to your values while adapting to your professional environment. It’s a delicate balance, but it’s what keeps you grounded.” This dual responsibility required high emotional intelligence, strategic communication, and confidence. Another leader shared, “Sometimes, I educate others about my ethical foundations, but I’ve learned when to explain myself and when to stand firm.”

Cultural and religious values were often cited as moral compasses guiding leadership decisions. One participant stated, “A strong ethical foundation keeps me grounded. It ensures that I remain true to my values, no matter the situation.” For some, key moments in their careers were defined by misalignments between institutional expectations and personal values. “When I realized their advice didn’t align with my reality, I thought, ‘I can do this better.’ That was the moment I decided to pursue leadership,” recalled one leader.

Overcoming internalized self-doubt was also crucial. For women visibly identified as Arab and Muslim, resistance to their presence in leadership was common. Yet, many embraced their identities unapologetically. “This is my crown, and I’m not taking it off for anyone. If they’re not ready for someone like me in leadership, that’s their loss, not mine,” asserted one

participant. Their ability to maintain strategic vision, innovate, and lead with cultural integrity was a form of resistance and empowerment.

## **Societal Factors**

### ***The Drive to Succeed: Intrinsic Motivation, Resilience, and Transformative Leadership***

Arab women leaders described a powerful internal drive to succeed, rooted in a need to consistently prove themselves in the face of societal skepticism. “An Arab woman in leadership must go above and beyond—far more than any regular leader. We constantly need to prove ourselves, again and again, just to be seen as equal,” said one participant. This need to exceed expectations was both exhausting and motivating. Lifelong learning became a recurring theme, with many participants pursuing multiple degrees and certifications to remain competitive. “I started with a bachelor’s degree, but I wasn’t satisfied. I went back for a master’s, then a second, then a third. Each step brought me closer to my goals,” one shared.

Adversity and exclusion often acted as catalysts for transformation. A participant recounted a moment of racial profiling during her student teaching after 9/11: “One of my students blurted out ‘terrorist’ to me... it sparked a fire inside me to ensure that students, teachers, parents, and community members understood who we truly are.” These difficult experiences became defining moments, reinforcing participants’ desire to lead with purpose and challenge harmful narratives about Arab women.

### ***Overcoming Bias: Arab Women Redefining Leadership***

Participants reported feeling like pioneers—often the only Arab or Muslim woman in leadership. “The hardest part is being the first—there are no role models who look like you. But someone has to pave the way,” said one leader. For those who wore the hijab or dressed modestly, scrutiny intensified. “I know people judge me before I even open my mouth. But I

remind myself that my hijab is my crown, and I wear it proudly,” a participant declared. Rather than internalize the discrimination, these women used it to fuel their ambition.

Resilience was a shared trait. “Every challenge I faced made me stronger. I learned to reframe obstacles as opportunities to grow and prove myself,” one said. Despite systemic barriers, leaders found hope in mentorship, peer networks, and policy shifts aimed at increasing diversity. “We need an alliance that helps women transition into leadership roles. It’s about building a pipeline,” emphasized one participant. They were not only navigating leadership for themselves but also actively opening doors for others.

Many of these women were driven by a desire to counter stereotypes about Arab women. “We are strong, compassionate, and capable. I hope my journey inspires others to dream bigger,” one noted. These leaders redefined leadership not as a title, but as impact. One participant described being thanked by a former student—now a police officer—who credited her for changing his life. “That moment reminded me that leadership isn’t about titles or salaries—it’s about lives touched and futures shaped.”

Their leadership often started in the classroom but expanded to influence entire schools and districts. “At first, I supported one classroom, then multiple. That desire grew until I was leading a school, then an entire district of 24,000 students,” one participant reflected. These journeys demonstrate how purpose, resilience, and a commitment to justice empower Arab women to rise, lead, and transform educational landscapes.

### ***The Power of Representation and Inspiration***

Representation was another vital societal factor that shaped participants’ leadership trajectories. Seeing women who looked like them in leadership roles served as a profound source of inspiration. “The drive comes from wanting to make a difference... Now, on the district level,

I want to impact 24,000 students and staff members. That desire to make a bigger impact has kept me going,” shared one participant.

Becoming a role model was not just aspirational—it was essential. “I wanted students to see leaders who reflect them... That’s what drove me to step into leadership—not just for myself, but for the students who needed to see someone who looked like them in positions of authority.” This visibility was transformative, reinforcing the idea that leadership must reflect the diversity of the communities it serves.

### **Individual Factors**

The leadership paths of Arab women in K–12 education were shaped by strong intrinsic motivation, strategic decision-making, and personal resilience. Many participants expressed a persistent need to outperform their peers to gain equal recognition, with one stating, “We constantly need to prove ourselves, again and again, just to be seen as equal.” Their responses to this pressure varied—while some women progressed quickly into leadership roles through early career ambition and family support, others took more gradual paths due to competing responsibilities or cultural expectations.

Education was a central pillar of their leadership journeys. While two participants chose to pursue doctoral degrees to deepen their expertise and open more doors, others were satisfied with one or more master’s degrees, viewing them as sufficient for their leadership goals. Regardless of degree level, continued learning was seen as essential to credibility and effectiveness.

Identity expression also varied. While some leaders wore the hijab and navigated the added visibility and scrutiny that came with it, others did not, reflecting the diversity within the group’s religious and cultural practices. Despite different approaches, all participants emphasized



the importance of leading authentically, with many crediting personal resilience and mentorship—when available—as key to their growth and confidence.

Arab American women in K–12 leadership are navigating complex cultural and societal landscapes. Through the unwavering support of family, intrinsic motivation, and strategic leadership, they are transforming adversity into impact. Their experiences reflect both the burden and the power of representation, illustrating how cultural values, ethical clarity, and social advocacy intersect to redefine leadership. These women are not only leading schools—they are building pathways for future generations to follow.

**RQ3. In what ways have self-efficacy and other enabling factors influenced Arab women’s attainment of leadership roles in the K–12 educational landscape?**

Arab women’s attainment of leadership roles in the K–12 educational sector is shaped by a constellation of internal and external factors, with self-efficacy emerging as a foundational enabler. Drawing from Bandura and Adams (1977) concept of self-efficacy—the belief in one’s capacity to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations—many Arab women leaders report a deeply rooted conviction in their ability to succeed, even in the face of systemic and cultural adversity. This belief often stems from a combination of mastery experiences, social modeling, and verbal encouragement, all of which reinforce their sense of personal agency.

Self-efficacy influences how these women set goals, maintain motivation, and respond to challenges. Leaders with high self-efficacy are more likely to interpret obstacles as surmountable rather than as deterrents, enabling them to persist through structural inequities such as gender bias, religious stereotyping, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. This internal assurance

frequently serves as the psychological engine driving them to pursue advanced academic qualifications, participate in leadership training, and seek out challenging professional roles.

Moreover, self-efficacy empowers Arab women to assert their leadership identity in traditionally male-dominated or culturally conservative environments, where their authority may be routinely questioned or undermined. By believing in their ability to effect change and influence outcomes, they are more likely to embrace transformative leadership roles, mentor emerging leaders, and challenge institutional norms. In this way, self-efficacy not only fuels personal ambition but also becomes a vehicle for collective empowerment, allowing Arab women to navigate and reshape the educational leadership landscape.

The attainment of leadership roles by Arab women in education is generally shaped by four factors: (a) cultural, (b) educational, (c) policy, and (d) support-related factors. Cultural influences, mainly gender roles and community influence, impact leadership aspirations. For education, mainly leadership training and development resources enhances preparedness. Policies on equal opportunity and gender equity play a crucial role in either enabling or hindering progress. Lastly, support systems like mentorship and peer networks provide essential guidance. Figure 1 shows the categories and corresponding factors that affect the attainment of leadership positions in the K-12 sector for Arab women.

These findings provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of Arab women in leadership roles, specifically within the K-12 education sector. They illuminate the multifaceted challenges these women face, the factors that contribute to their success, and the transformative moments that define their leadership journeys. Through the voices of participants, the study uncovers stories of perseverance, resilience, and a commitment to effecting meaningful change despite systemic and societal barriers.

Cultural and societal expectations emerged as significant obstacles, with participants often navigating traditional gender roles that placed familial responsibilities above professional ambitions. These pressures were compounded by professional biases, particularly in male-dominated environments where women were frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny and the need to prove their worth repeatedly. The participants' experiences reveal the intersectionality of cultural, gender, and religious biases that shaped their pathways, highlighting the emotional and physical toll of constantly challenging stereotypes and societal norms.

Despite these barriers, the study also identifies the factors that enabled these women to excel and thrive in leadership. Family support was a foundational pillar, offering emotional and practical assistance that empowered many participants to pursue their ambitions. Mentorship and professional networks played an equally pivotal role, providing guidance and opening doors to opportunities that might otherwise have remained inaccessible. Participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning, with many pursuing advanced degrees and certifications to bolster their expertise and credibility. Ethical leadership, rooted in cultural and religious values, served as a guiding principle for decision-making and resilience.

Transformative experiences acted as turning points in participants' journeys, often arising from encounters with bias, exclusion, or societal challenges. These moments, though difficult, became powerful catalysts for growth and leadership. Many participants found inspiration in the power of representation, recognizing their leadership roles as opportunities to challenge stereotypes and inspire others. They embraced the responsibility of paving the way for future generations, striving to create inclusive spaces where Arab women could thrive and succeed.

The findings of this study reveal the complex interplay of factors that Arab women navigate in their leadership roles, marked by systemic inequities yet also defined by their

resilience and determination. These factors, as illustrated in Figure 2, encompass culture, education, policies, and support systems. Together, these interconnected elements shape the experiences of Arab women leaders and highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms to create equitable leadership opportunities. More detail on each of these factors is explored further in the study, providing a deeper understanding of their impact on the leadership experiences of Arab women. By addressing these factors holistically, this study celebrates their achievements while advocating for structural changes to support and sustain their success.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Interpretation of Results**

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Arab women in K-12 educational leadership, shedding light on how intersecting identities such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture shape their career trajectories, leadership styles, and workplace interactions. Expanding on prior research addressing structural barriers for women in leadership (Carroll, 2021), the findings illustrate the compounded challenges faced by Arab women, particularly when their religious and cultural identities become visible in professional settings. Participants who wore the hijab described encountering intensified scrutiny, implicit biases, and persistent questioning of their competence and authority (Koura, 2018). Many recounted instances where their leadership decisions were second-guessed or where they had to work harder than their peers to establish credibility. These findings align with research demonstrating that visible religious markers can amplify discrimination and bias (Collins et al., 2021). However, the study also highlights the complexity of these experiences, revealing how some participants leveraged their identities as a source of strength, resilience, and community-building within their schools. The

results emphasize the need for more inclusive leadership frameworks that acknowledge and address the unique challenges and contributions of Arab women in educational leadership.

Figure 1 illustrates the key factors influencing the attainment of leadership roles by Arab women in K–12 education, organized into four categories: **Culture, Education, Policies, and Support**. Cultural factors, such as gender roles and community expectations, shape leadership aspirations and perceptions of legitimacy. Educational access—including leadership training and development resources—provides essential tools for advancement. Policy-related elements like equal opportunity and gender equity influence structural access to leadership pipelines. Finally, support systems—especially mentorship and peer networks—offer critical guidance, validation, and collaboration. Together, these interconnected factors highlight the complex, layered pathways that shape Arab women’s leadership journeys.

**Figure 1**

*Factors and Categories affecting attainment of roles of Arab women in the educational setting.*

Culture (C)	Education (E)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender roles</li> <li>Community influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership training</li> <li>Development resources</li> </ul>
Policies (P)	Support (S)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equal opportunity</li> <li>Gender equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentorship</li> <li>Peer networks</li> </ul>

### ***The impact of Support Networks in Overcoming Challenges***

While structural inequities and cultural stereotypes remain significant forces, participants’ accounts reveal important counter-narratives that challenge deficit-based assumptions. Several participants noted that supportive kinship networks encompassing

immediate family members, extended relatives, and community leaders provided critical emotional and financial resources that sustained them through professional setbacks. This family and community support not only mitigated the isolation often experienced in predominantly non-Arab or non-Muslim school environments but also fostered a sense of purpose and resilience. In some cases, participants spoke of drawing on cultural traditions of communal care, which influenced their approach to leadership by emphasizing relationship-building, collective decision-making, and moral responsibility to the broader school community.

Moreover, mentorship from trusted colleagues emerged as a pivotal factor in participants' leadership journeys. Rather than facing systemic obstacles alone, many Arab women leaders benefited from formal and informal mentoring relationships that offered guidance on navigating school politics, advocating for equitable policies, and improving leadership skills tailored to diverse student populations. These mentorship experiences frequently intersected with the participants' own commitment to mentoring others, particularly younger women educators of similar backgrounds. In doing so, they not only gained crucial support but also actively contributed to expanding leadership pipelines for future generations of Arab and Muslim women.

### ***The Role of Self-Efficacy in Leadership Development***

Self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their capacity to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Bandura & Adams, 1977), emerged as a critical factor in the leadership journeys of Arab women in K-12 education. Participants who exhibited strong self-efficacy were more likely to persist in leadership roles despite systemic barriers, leveraging their confidence to challenge stereotypes and advocate for institutional change. Many of these women attributed their resilience to the support of mentors, faith, and personal determination, reinforcing recent

research that highlights the role of self-efficacy in overcoming adversity (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Several participants recounted experiences in which they had to reaffirm their leadership abilities in the face of skepticism from colleagues or administrators. By demonstrating competence through strategic decision-making, relationship-building, and policy advocacy, these women cultivated professional credibility. Furthermore, self-efficacy played a significant role in shaping participants' mentoring practices. Many Arab women leaders viewed mentorship as a means of instilling confidence in younger educators, helping them develop the self-efficacy needed to pursue leadership roles. This reciprocal relationship not only strengthened leadership pipelines but also reinforced a culture of resilience within their communities.

Institutions seeking to support Arab women in educational leadership should consider implementing targeted programs that enhance self-efficacy, such as leadership training, mentorship initiatives, and professional development opportunities that emphasize confidence-building and skill mastery. By fostering self-efficacy, schools and districts can help Arab women leaders overcome systemic challenges and contribute meaningfully to educational equity.

### ***The Role of Arab Women Leaders in Advancing Equity and Inclusion Through Identity***

These findings underscore the importance of intersectional frameworks (Sim & Bierema, 2024) by illustrating how overlapping systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and religious discrimination create unique experiences of marginalization. However, the results also demonstrate the dynamic ways in which Arab women leaders leverage their intersectional identities as sources of cultural capital. For instance, participants often utilized their bilingual or multilingual skills to communicate more effectively with diverse families, thereby strengthening trust and inclusivity within the school community. Others adapted culturally responsive

leadership strategies, which proved particularly effective in schools serving high populations of immigrants or linguistically diverse students. By aligning their leadership practices with community values such as mutual well-being, respect for elders, and collective problem-solving these women were able to promote policies that addressed the specific needs of marginalized student populations.

Community-centered leadership is an approach that prioritizes the needs, voices, and cultural values of the community in educational decision-making, school governance, and leadership practice (Shah & Grimaldos, 2023). It emphasizes collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and shared accountability between school leaders and the communities they serve. For Arab women in K–12 educational leadership, this model resonates with deeply held cultural values around collective responsibility, familial obligation, and social cohesion.

By adopting a community-centered leadership approach, Arab women are able to foster trust, build inclusive school environments, and navigate the expectations of both professional and cultural spheres. This leadership style allows them to ground their decision-making in the lived experiences of their communities, reinforcing their legitimacy and strengthening school-community relationships. It also serves as a culturally congruent way to assert leadership while honoring community norms, helping to mitigate resistance and promote more equitable and inclusive educational practices.

### ***The Impact of Intersectional Identities on Leadership Experiences***

The study thus complicates traditional leadership theories by showing that intersectional identities can be mobilized as assets rather than solely as barriers (Jimenez, 2024). Participants reported that their cultural and religious backgrounds often endowed them with heightened awareness of social justice issues, prompting them to advocate for policies that benefit all



students, especially those from historically underrepresented communities. This advocacy ranged from implementing inclusive curricula to challenging discriminatory discipline practices. By centering the well-being of diverse stakeholders, Arab women leaders in this study demonstrated a capacity to transform adversity into innovative leadership approaches that foster equity and inclusion in educational settings.

### ***Overcoming Structural and Cultural Barriers***

While the structural barriers identified in earlier research, especially those related to gender and religion, remain significant, this study highlights the multifaceted resilience of Arab women in K-12 leadership roles. By applying an intersectional framework, the research reaffirms the persistence of overlapping forms of oppression while also emphasizing the intentional, culturally grounded strategies these leaders adopt. As a result, the findings challenge homogeneous portrayals of Arab and Muslim women, showcasing how cultural identity can serve as a powerful catalyst for community-building, policy advocacy, and transformative leadership. This enriched understanding encourages policymakers, educational institutions, and leadership development programs to create more inclusive pathways that recognize and harness the diverse cultural strengths Arab women contribute to educational leadership.

### **Implications**

This study carries substantial implications for both scholarly discourse and practical implementation. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on intersectionality in educational leadership by emphasizing the interplay of gender, ethnicity, and religion in shaping the career paths of Arab women. Traditional models of leadership have often concentrated on single axes of identity such as gender alone (Carroll, 2021) thereby overlooking the compounding effects of cultural and religious factors. By demonstrating how stereotypes about Arab women's "fit" or

“competence” intersect with systemic inequities, the study calls for a more nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of leadership experiences (Aoudeh,2023).

### ***Enhancing Leadership Development and Mentorship for Arab Women in Education***

The necessity of culturally responsive leadership development and targeted mentorship programs for Arab women, particularly Arab female educators and administrators, cannot be overstated. Many Arab women aspiring to leadership roles face compounded challenges, including cultural expectations, gender norms, and systemic barriers within educational institutions. To address these challenges, institutions should design mentorship and professional development programs that specifically cater to the needs of Arab female educators at different career stages.

For example, creating structured peer-support networks can help Arab women navigate administrative complexities, balancing professional responsibilities with cultural and familial expectations. These networks could pair emerging leaders with experienced Arab women in similar roles, ensuring culturally aligned guidance and fostering confidence in leadership.

Additionally, regular equity audits of hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes are critical. Institutions should systematically examine whether Arab women, particularly those who wear hijabs or come from underrepresented backgrounds, are equitably considered for leadership roles. Such audits can expose implicit biases that may hinder their career progression and help establish clear, measurable diversity goals.

Furthermore, professional development programs should integrate social justice and cultural competency training with a focus on Arab women’s experiences. These programs could include leadership workshops that address challenges such as unconscious bias, work-life balance, and navigating predominantly male-dominated leadership spaces. Embedded

coaching—where Arab female leaders receive ongoing, situation-specific support—can be particularly effective in helping them break barriers.

By implementing these measures, institutions not only empower Arab women in leadership but also foster inclusive organizational climates that benefit all marginalized groups. Recognizing and addressing the specific struggles Arab female educators face is essential to ensuring their representation in leadership and creating a more equitable educational landscape.

### *From the Social Justice Perspective*

Social justice is central to this research, revealing how overlapping systems, such as patriarchy and racism, collectively marginalize Arab women in K-12 leadership (Doan & Jaber, 2021). The findings indicate that these discriminatory practices are woven into everyday institutional routines, from biased hiring processes to culturally insensitive performance evaluations. This dynamic echoes broader calls for equitable pathways to leadership, transparent assessment frameworks, and policy interventions designed to dismantle systemic discrimination (Jimenez, 2024). By detailing participants' experiences, such as encountering microaggressions or having their professional expertise questioned, the study highlights the deeper structural inequities that shape individual encounters.

At the same time, the research illuminates the agency and resilience of Arab women leaders who actively transform these challenging circumstances. Many participants described establishing culturally responsive mentorship programs that connect emerging Arab women educators with seasoned leaders who understand their religious and cultural contexts. Others emphasized the importance of community partnerships, collaborating with local faith-based and cultural organizations to advocate for policy reforms at the district level. These efforts embody

the social justice principle that those most affected by inequities can become powerful agents of change. By serving as advocates and role models, Arab women in leadership challenge longstanding assumptions about who is “qualified” or “entitled” to hold positions of authority in educational institutions.

Additionally, the inclusive leadership practices shared by participants, such as organizing professional development on cultural competence, revising curricula to reflect diverse histories, and involving parents from various backgrounds in decision-making, demonstrate tangible ways to foster equity within school communities. By embracing and leveraging their intersectional identities, these leaders bridge gaps between schools and the communities they serve, creating environments that benefit not only Arab and Muslim students but also the broader student body.

By highlighting both systemic barriers and the proactive strategies employed by Arab women, this study underscores the transformative potential of intersectional, community-rooted leadership. Rather than depicting Arab women solely as recipients of discrimination, the findings reveal how they actively reshape their professional landscapes, forging new opportunities for themselves and future generations. This leadership style, deeply rooted in social justice principles, moves beyond merely identifying institutional inequities by harnessing cultural and communal resources to challenge the status quo. Educational stakeholders, such as policymakers, school administrators, and leadership development programs, are encouraged to implement policies and practices that recognize and nurture the diverse cultural strengths Arab women bring to educational leadership, ultimately paving the way for more equitable opportunities for all.

### **Limitations**

Despite these potential interventions, the study’s limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and geographic focus (New York, New Jersey, and Michigan) mean

that broad generalizations should be made cautiously. Additionally, Arab women themselves are not a monolithic group; variations in nationality, religious observance, socioeconomic status, and generational differences likely shape experiences in ways that were not fully captured here. Future research could disaggregate these subgroups to provide more targeted insights and avoid overgeneralization. In addition, this research included Arab women who attained leadership positions. Further studies may be able to delve deeper into the barriers of leadership attainment of Arab women who failed in achieving leadership positions in K-12 education. Nevertheless, the depth and richness of the participants' narratives reveal systemic issues that are highly relevant to wider educational contexts, making a compelling case for both scholarly and policy-level engagement.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

### ***Expanding Scope and Comparative Studies of Marginalized Groups***

Building on the insights generated by this study, future research should address several critical gaps to further deepen our understanding of the intersectional challenges in educational leadership. First, expanding the sample size and including participants from a broader range of geographical and cultural contexts would allow researchers to capture a more nuanced spectrum of experiences among Arab women leaders. The diversity within the Arab world itself, encompassing variations in language, socioeconomic conditions, and degrees of political stability can significantly shape leadership trajectories. By broadening the geographical scope, researchers can uncover cross-regional differences and commonalities that may not be apparent in smaller or more localized studies. This expansion would help establish a richer comparative framework, ultimately improving the transferability and applicability of the findings to different educational systems.

Second, comparative studies that examine the experiences of Arab women alongside other minoritized or underrepresented groups in educational leadership roles can yield broader insights into both common and unique barriers. Understanding the similarities and differences in how various marginalized groups experience leadership challenges would enrich the intersectional analysis and help researchers propose more targeted and inclusive policy recommendations. This comparative approach might also illuminate universal strategies for dismantling structural barriers, such as bias training or flexible work policies, while highlighting the need for culturally specific interventions tailored to particular contexts.

Furthermore, employing mixed-method approaches that blend qualitative interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observations with quantitative measures of leadership effectiveness could offer a more holistic understanding of how cultural, social, and institutional factors interact to shape leadership outcomes (Moss-Racusin et al., 2015). Qualitative data can provide rich, context-specific insights into the nuanced experiences of Arab women leaders, such as the role of family expectations or community support, while quantitative metrics (e.g., student achievement, staff retention, budget management) can help objectively assess leadership performance. Such a methodological design would facilitate triangulation, thereby increasing the credibility of the findings and ensuring that conclusions are grounded in both lived experiences and measurable outcomes.

### ***Reflexivity and Methodological Transparency***

In addition to expanding the scope and methods of research, future scholars should maintain rigorous reflexivity regarding their own positionality and potential biases. In this study, strategies such as member checking and iterative coding were employed to mitigate bias; however, reflexivity should be an ongoing practice that involves continual self-examination of

researchers' assumptions, power dynamics, and cultural perspectives. Researchers could also consider participatory approaches that actively involve participants in the research design, data interpretation, and dissemination of findings. Such collaborative methods can help ensure that the voices of Arab women leaders are not merely represented but also actively shape the research process.

### ***Practical and Socially Just Outcomes***

Finally, methodological transparency including clear documentation of sampling decisions, analytical frameworks, and limitations will strengthen the validity of future studies and support the development of practical, socially just strategies for fostering inclusive leadership environments. By clearly articulating how data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, researchers enable policymakers, educational administrators, and community stakeholders to translate empirical findings into actionable reforms. Such transparency also fosters greater trust and collaboration between the academic community and practitioners, paving the way for evidence-based interventions that address the systemic inequities faced by Arab women leaders in educational contexts.

### ***Perspectives from Unattained Leadership***

Future research should intentionally include the voices of Arab women who pursued but did not attain leadership positions to better understand the barriers that halted their progress. Exploring their experiences could reveal hidden or less visible forms of exclusion, such as discriminatory hiring practices, lack of institutional support, or internalized cultural constraints. These insights would enhance the development of more inclusive leadership pipelines and inform targeted interventions to support aspiring Arab women leaders.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides critical insights into the complex and multifaceted experiences of Arab women in K-12 educational leadership. By applying an intersectional lens, it highlights how gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture converge to shape professional trajectories, leadership styles, and institutional interactions. The findings reveal the persistent structural barriers Arab women face, including implicit biases, heightened scrutiny, and systemic discrimination, particularly when their religious and cultural identities are visibly expressed. However, rather than viewing these challenges solely as obstacles, this research underscores the resilience, agency, and adaptability of Arab women leaders in navigating and transforming their professional environments.

The narratives of the participants illustrate how cultural identity can be leveraged as an asset in leadership, allowing these women to foster inclusive school communities, advocate for marginalized students, and implement culturally responsive leadership practices. Family and community support, mentorship networks, and a strong commitment to social justice emerged as key factors enabling these leaders to persist and thrive despite institutional constraints. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of leadership in diverse educational settings, challenging deficit-based perspectives and reaffirming the importance of intersectional frameworks in educational research.

Ultimately, this study calls for more inclusive leadership models that recognize and harness the unique strengths of Arab women. Educational institutions, policymakers, and leadership development programs should implement equity-driven policies that address systemic biases, provide culturally responsive mentorship, and create professional pathways that foster diversity in leadership. By doing so, the field of educational leadership can move toward a more



equitable and representative framework, one that values the diverse cultural contributions of all leaders and promotes transformative change within schools and communities.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### Interview Questions

##### RQ1:

1. Can you describe any specific challenges you believe Arab women face in pursuing leadership roles within the K-12 education sector?
2. Have you observed or experienced any cultural or societal barriers that hinder Arab women from advancing into leadership positions in education?
3. How do you think the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity impacts the opportunities available for Arab women in educational leadership roles?
4. What institutional or structural barriers exist that may impede Arab women from ascending to leadership positions in K-12 education?
5. Can you share any anecdotes or personal experiences that shed light on the unique challenges Arab women encounter in their journey toward educational leadership?

##### RQ2:

1. What factors have contributed to the successes of Arab women who have attained leadership positions in K-12 education?
2. Have you observed any specific support networks or mentorship programs that have been particularly beneficial for Arab women aspiring to be leaders in education?
3. How do you think cultural values and traditions influence the leadership styles and approaches of Arab women in educational settings?

4. Can you provide examples of initiatives or strategies that have been effective in promoting the advancement of Arab women into leadership positions within K-12 education?
5. What role does organizational culture play in fostering the professional growth and advancement of Arab women into leadership positions in K-12 education?

RQ3:

1. How do you define self-efficacy, and what role do you believe it plays in the leadership journey of Arab women in K-12 education?
2. Can you share any instances where high levels of self-efficacy have empowered Arab women to overcome obstacles and succeed as leaders in education?
3. How do perceptions of self-efficacy influence the leadership decisions and actions of Arab women in the K-12 education sector?
4. What strategies and interventions do you think can help enhance the self-efficacy of Arab women aspiring to be leaders in education?

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