

Analyzing the Leadership Theories and Practices Employed by Black Female Principals and Other Women of Color: A Study of Transformational, Transactional, and Culturally Responsive Leadership

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Abstract: In the context of a leadership preparation program in K-12 education, this article explores aligned theories and practices of leadership that reflect the professional experiences and aspirations of black females who serve as school principals, with a focus on organizational results and equity-oriented improvement in schools. Analyzing a qualitative synthesis of practitioner stories and theory, the study integrates transformational, transactional, culturally responsive leadership analysis, and intersectionality of role expectations. The results suggest that the transformational model of leadership, combined with culturally responsive and evidence-based decision-making routines and distributed approaches, promote instructional coherence, staff capacity-building, and sustained trust among stakeholders. The discussion explores persistent challenges such as stereotype threat, inequitable emotional labor, and policy limitations, and traces repeatable practices that these leaders employ to mitigate stressors through transparent communications, data-informed coaching, and focus on time-bound collaboration. Implications include the need for leadership preparation programs to incorporate race- and gender-conscious practices into the development of aligned theories; the need to evolve district policy to underwrite initiatives that address specific school contexts; and the need to design professional development that enacts embedded networks of mentorship and cycles of reflection, with recommendations that include staged implementation templates and rubrics for evaluation and adjustment.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Leadership; Distributed Leadership; Inclusive Education; Intersectionality; Transactional Leadership; Transformational Leadership.

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I. INTRODUCTION

➤ Purpose of the Study

This study will define and analyze leadership theories and practices that are identified as most appropriate to help black female principals facilitate instructional improvement, organize day-to-day routines, and connect with the school community. The approaches under review will focus on the alignment of routines with day-to-day equity-driven targets and the specific impact of intersecting race/gender on decisions and expectations in these areas. There will be two specific analytic goals: 1) to examine how existing leadership theories are congruent with the leadership contexts and experiences of black female principals that have been

outlined in the literature; 2) to determine what theorized processes/practices can be situated and operationalized to promote the coherence of instructional targets, staff capacity, and stakeholder trust. There will also be a need for identifying the conditions under which certain theorized practices (e.g., collective responsibility, culturally responsive communication, and data-based coaching) produce sustainable results in schools with respect to instructional coherence and staff transformation. These components will support the essay's efforts to envision specific theoretical goals, which support the articulation of daily needs and the emergence of the practices at the school, district, and national levels.

II. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

A qualitative integrative review was conducted for this research study, combining a thematic synthesis of the peer-reviewed studies with analytic memoing of documented cases on the practice of black female principals. Our first step was to perform a systematic search in discipline-specific and interdisciplinary databases. We established inclusion criteria that allowed for a ranking of the empirical studies according to their focus on leadership practice and analyses of conditions for role success tempered by race and gender; we coded the study findings hierarchically according to the transformational, transactional, distributed, instructional and culturally responsive leadership constructs. We then analyzed the similarities and differences among the practices reported by the studies and their consequences for school success, noting how organizational context operated as a moderator on practice influence (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024). To protect against overreach in our conclusions, we performed triangulation within document types—peer review articles, professional practitioner reports, and district review evaluations—and peer debriefed thematic aggregates within reporting rounds for clarity of exposition and evidence for disconfirming hypotheses. Mapping evidence clusters through a matrix, we located agreements on the themes of instructional coherence, collaborative learning and capacity building, referencing the external expert reviews that have identified them as common priorities in contemporary school leadership research (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024).

In source selection, logistical considerations included preference for peer-reviewed, empirical studies of black women principals or comparable cases of intersectionality characterized by geographic, linguistic, etc.; and operationalization of constructs for leadership as related to school outcomes. For this last consideration, inclusion required evidence from the studies that addressed instructional coherence, staff development, climate or trusting relationships with the community. Designs with clear methods and triangulation or cross-context replication were favored for assessing transferability. For assessing the usefulness of the models, we used criteria related to specificity of practice, cultural relevance, supported routines, and the outcomes' fit with equity aims; the transformational, distributed and instructional models were compared in terms of contextualization under resource and policy constraints (Daniëls et al., 2019). Downgrading occurred for studies that presented theory and no routines for practice, mistook leadership for unspecified organizational supports, and did not name presumptions for race- and gendered work conditions. Aligning with reviews linking leadership development models to situated practice, a model was seen as more useful if it presented structures for professional learning—coaching, collaborative inquiry, context-sensitive feedback routinized as learnings able to be reproduced in black women led schools (Daniëls et al., 2019).

➤ *Analysis of Current Leadership Theories*

Within this methodological framework, the main theories of leadership affecting present-day school leadership practice are presented, which will be valued against their

potential to fit black female principals' contexts. Transformational leadership aims to build a shared vision, motivation, and capacity, while transactional leadership organizes performance according contingent rewards and compliance routines; instructional leadership suits teaching effectiveness, curriculum coherence and data-utilization. Distributed leadership innovates a result-collective and role-sharing model supporting problem solving through engagement of formal and informal actors, while culturally responsive leadership concentrates on equitable-relationships, community knowledge and context-oriented decision-making. The attributes which cross the boundaries of the previous models about effective leadership and are highlighted by comparative syntheses are: clear vision building, integrity, empathy, communication and the ability to inspire collective effort (Zen et al., 2023). They could be used as indicators to measure theory versus practice fit on schools led to develop equitability. We will investigate how their mechanisms interact with the demands of intersectional role, the boundaries of time and resources, and the accountability framework, and whether they can materialize in operating routines that enhance instructional coherence, professional development and lasting trust within community.

➤ *Transformational Leadership in Practice*

Transformational leadership, as a framework, is defined by the ability to articulate a compelling vision that inspires followers, model ethical behavior, and influence followers to change through motivation, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation, all aimed at learning and improvement within the organization. In schools, these elements are embedded in routines that connect vision and instructional coherence, build commitment to the vision through open and trusting communications with staff, and allow for reflection and risk-taking around teaching practice. Beyond black female principals, transformational leadership is most effective when the principal is able to set the vision for the school while also building culturally responsive relationships that honor the knowledge of students and the surrounding community for pedagogy and climate. The behaviors of the leader, such as active-listening practices, transparent feedback loops, and directed and purposeful communications, are the expressions of individual consideration that stabilize collaboration, a theme captured in research around female principals that are transformational leaders (Alli, 2020). In this sense, transformational leadership, in practice, focuses on communicative transparency and capacity-building feedback that support collaborative problem solving, all reinforcing both instructional coherence and the disruption of a disjointed authority and decision-making style that often responds to stereotypes as they play out in culturally-diverse schools (Alli, 2020).

Additionally, they further consolidate that culture through relationship-centered practices—such as caring check-ins and recognition in a timely manner—that connect similarity-based motivational framing with specific supports, making it clear how care ties to accountability and reinforcing teachers' professional identity. When combined with focused

professional learning communities and coaching time that communicate the principal's investment in teacher growth, and inquiry protocols that help translate a school's vision into classroom practices, these prominences stabilize norms of collaboration, bolster psychological safety, and maintain a safe, stable environment in support of instructional improvement.

➤ *Transactional Leadership and Its Limitations*

Transactional leadership, by contrast, relies on exchanges that link compliance to explicit rewards, sanctions and monitoring of performance with a governance model of articulated roles, standardized procedures, and short-cycle accountability. In the education sector, its mechanisms entail the use, for example, of contracts of goals with teachers, checklists for classroom observation associated to merit pay or corrective action plans, and routinized channels of communication that convey norms and expectations, as well as the associated consequences with procedural clarity. These can provide stability to routines in times of change or crisis, but only if the authority exerted is perceived as legitimate, and communicative styles align with the faculty's cultures – conditions that may vary considering the diversity of the teachers' staff (Fisher, 2021). Thus, transactional management tools may cause a shrinkage of attention horizons to what is easily measurable, thus reducing room for relational work, collaborative inquiries, and culturally-proficient decision-making that produce durable systems of instructional practice. Constraints for black female principals multiply when culturally misaligned transactions tend to undermine trust, resulting in the default adaptation of message, trust-building mechanisms, and decision-making processes to avoid boundaries between compliance and commitment, and assuring the preservation of collective efficacy (Fisher, 2021).

Hence, transactional leadership is likely to limit black female principals in that exchanges may counter the intersectional demand for trust-building rather than accountability in a relational sense. If performance contracts and sanction-reward routines tap into racialized and gendered stereotypes, resistance or misperception of intent may lead to a challenge to legitimacy and less ownership of instruction values. A focus on narrow metrics may foreclose culturally-responsive chained communication and community outreach that families and students expect of black women in their roles, opposing the expectations from the role in the managerial coverage of transactions (Lomotey, 2019). Studies of leadership in these settings, through Black Feminist Thought and correlatively, show effectiveness placing black female principals rely on a leadership style based on narrative knowledge, care ethics and judgment grounded in the immediate context, which transactional exchanges may fail to capture under compliance schemes and incentive cycles (Lomotey, 2019). Thus, using transactional strategies is likely to lead to surface compliance rather than ownership, layers of emotionally labored closure and repair due to a rupture of trust, and a loss of capacity to coordinate collaborative inquiry that may keep teaching and learning steady amid social and academic diversities characteristic of many schools.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of literature supports earlier findings around the most effective leadership styles for black female principals, which are the transformational, culturally responsive, and instructional routines. Evidence links these identified gains for such principals to teachers' heightened collective responsibility within their schools, with the analysis suggesting that collaboration linked to vision, alongside organized feedback "cycles" reflect shared responsibility for student learning (Jang & Alexander, 2022). Additional studied showed that scores for ninth-grade math had a positive correlation with the schools involved, and that instructional leadership support – specifically routines for coaching, analysis of data, and monitoring of curriculum coherence – demonstrated a good fit with effective practice in trusted school cultures (Jang & Alexander, 2022). Such outcomes again resonate with earlier developments around the critiques of transactional routines: processes and procedures support the stabilization of functions, but sustainable improvements are more likely when leaders create a professional learning community, provide firm guidance aligned to expectations and culturally relevant communication, demonstrate ongoing instructional clarity and manage interruptions. The best "fit" based on these developments is thus one focused on communicative clarity, a well-established framework for distributed decision-making through the leadership teams, and context-sensitive coaching that promotes knowledge transfer between community information and standards-based pedagogy. This combination might sustain both commitment and measurable student achievement in terms of growth in schools that serve high-needs populations.

➤ *Key Challenges Faced by Black Female Principals*

Black female principals face barriers from intersecting structures of oppression that impact the way authority, communication and accountability is received by staff and community constituents based on racialized and gendered expectations. When instructional direction grounded in data is perceived as overstepping, the resulting increase in emotional labor to maintain trust at the same time that accountability and standards are enforced can other destabilize the authority base of the principal, particularly when policy priorities conflict with local cultural expectations. Acquiring mentors is made more difficult through continued systemic under-representation at the senior level, which also reduces the number of sponsoring or complying opportunities and the number of informal networks, which are typically conduits for resource flow, heightening feelings of isolation in critical decision-making situations.

Patriarchal values in the surrounding school culture, also sustained by community values, can depress relatively new participatory structures influenced by black women and dampen teacher interest and involvement in data use, coaching, and collaborative inquiries that sustain coherence in instructional direction. School resource deficits combine with this when principals are tasked with closing the gaps in systemic failures of staff turnover, program discontinuities

presumed available in the district, and lack of wrap-around support for students through time-consuming relational practices that, while critical for maintaining climate stability, are deflective of the need for curriculum coherence and sustained capacity development.

Finally, intersectionality also has an impact at the level of the opportunity structure to which black female principals are subjected. Both the meaning of their decisions and actions and the opportunities to distribute them within a district hierarchy are influenced by race and gender. Co-constructed with the perception of authority and care, prescriptive instructional guidance may be perceived as personal rather than professional, creating a context of tight monitoring with decreased tolerance for mistakes in high-stakes settings (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). As a result, access to mentorship, gatekeeping networks, and stretch assignments typically linked to promotions are altered, further entrenching the stratified career ladders in situations where objective performance metrics would suggest greater hiring equity. At the school level, intersectionality determines which leadership habits get staff traction – community-based communication and restorative practices are perceived as normal, expected, and embraced even when their immediate effects are muted – while the same principals must gain support for data-driven accountability without triggering stereotype reaction – a balance demonstrated by researchers across leaders' accounts of resilience and grit (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). Intersectionality, therefore, conditions the opportunity structure faced by black female principals as the co-impact of identity markers restructures how legitimacy, risk, and rewards are distributed across day-to-day practice and promotion paths.

➤ *Effective Leadership Practices Identified*

Synthesis distinguishes practices that optimize relationships around the work for instructional consistency with culturally-rooted approaches, allowing principals to match instructional quality with equitable results. They establish observation-feedback protocols that are organized and tied to PLC agendas, where short, frequent walkthroughs and notes that are actionable are used to reference the organizational vision, pedagogy, and data routines without threatening relational capital. In addition, they prioritize students' needs by aligning multidisciplinary teams (counseling and social work, special education, family liaison, etc.) to discuss learning gaps and psychosocial/academic supports; this student-focused approach extends the identity-based commitment of the leaders to care and high expectations (Aaron, 2019). To counter stereotype-informed framings, they implement transparent scripts for communication and protocols for public reasoning that describes their actions and decision-making, encourages feedback, and questions, and normalizes clarity of roles to stabilize legitimacy and inspire accountability. At the same time, they disrupt the negative framing of schools, by foregrounding the work of students in community gatherings, presenting the summary of student achievement dashboards with explanatory notes and allowing teachers as leaders to co-facilitate the processes of restoration; in this way, identity-aware practices of leadership

translate into visible and quantifiable returns for climate and instruction (Aaron, 2019).

To illustrate, the case of a midsized, urban high school, where the principal is a black woman, revealed biweekly walkthroughs connected to PLC agendas that merged actionable feedback and public reasoning protocols; clarifying instructional priorities and the criteria for decisions. Teacher teams in a school semester claimed increased sense of collective responsibility for ninth-grade algebra common assessments and pacing; echoed evidence of being connected with leaders and perceptions of greater collective responsibility (Jang & Alexander, 2022). At the same time, student work exhibition components and progress dashboards from the family-engagement strategy showed reduction of disciplinary referrals for core classes, while expectations remained as rigorous and openly communicated in transparent scripts. In another majority-minority campus, leadership team structures factored in special education and counseling leads to align unit plans with Tier 2 supports; teachers reported clearer expectations for differentiation, and increased principal presence in coaching instruction (Jang & Alexander, 2022). In both schools, structured cycles of observation and feedback, problem solving that involved many stakeholders, and communication grounded in a cultural understanding reportedly associated with increased ninth-grade math results and more consistent commitment from staff.

IV. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The signature pedagogy justifies leadership programs to include transformational, instructional, and culturally responsive routines with explicit practice for disrupting role expectations based on race and gender. The curriculum should implement case-based simulations, public reasoning protocols, and evidence-based coaching cycles, alongside mentorship networks reflecting Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory to ground judgment in context (Lomotey, 2019). To sustain learning post-preparation, district policy should establish sponsored mentoring, workload safeguards for community-focused leadership, and evaluation rubrics that prioritize relational trust, distributed solutions, and benchmarked instructional coherence over narrow outcome indicators. Concomitantly, policy funding should establish research-practice partnerships that produce mixed-methods evidence of equity-focused routines, mitigating the field's dependence on dissertations and qualitative design through coordinated, multi-site studies with common metrics (Lomotey, 2019). Such actions would promote alignment between preparation and policy to practices documented as effective in building collective responsibility, staff stability, and connections between culturally-based communication and instructional improvement across diverse school contexts.

➤ *Impact on School Environments*

A composite approach that integrates transformational, instructional, and culturally responsive routines for climate change supports each of these practices in normalizing open communication based on relational trust with high expectations, criteria for decisions that are apparent and shared responsibility for performance improvement. As trust grows, teachers are more fully engaged in PLC participation, feedback received requires norms to preserve pacing and assessment coherence to promote gains in core areas that can be achieved when focus on instruction and responsive interventions prop up each other. Student achievement responds positively to data cycles that are reinforced with family-inclusive communication circling, supportive behavior rather than reliance on grounds to assume violations of classroom agreement that would lead the code to narrow outside growing access to support without losing focus on rigorous work (Johnson, 2021). Morale among staff is enhanced with leadership patterns that make acknowledge labor related to identity in the building of roles, a distributed influence through leadership teams, structures for coaching where professional growth connects to their way of doing rather than a checklist of compliance based on a lack of trust (Johnson, 2021). All of these practices are correlated together to lessen the pressures of turnover, enhance collective efficacy and create predictable routines that support and momentum in academics when policies are remolded or changes take place affecting resources, time frames or specific centers for development, creating literally the ground that will bend around cycles of instructional coherence and climate instability.

Consequently, the composite approach to leadership discussed here has potential to drive cultural shifts by realigning norms toward participatory professionalism based in trust and shared inquiry rather than compliance-based routine. As principals institutionalize protocols for transparent reasoning, mentoring, and distributed teams, these routines spread both upward to district-level expectations and sideways across schools, creating shared language for understanding decision quality and relational accountability. When paired with structurally-supported collaboration, culturally responsive communication creates lasting connections between schools and families and community partners, which shifts improvement efforts from a series of episodic initiatives to substantive partnership efforts that support both academic and engagement outcomes (Washington, 2021). Over time, systems for professional learning shift incentives to prioritize collaborative problem solving and consistency across classrooms, and evaluation rubrics begin to recognize relationships, mentoring, and shared decision-making as central to leadership effectiveness rather than minor or even tangential activities (Washington, 2021). This shift becomes routine, normalizing equity-oriented practice as business as usual so that the routines of black female principals can be emulated as the new benchmarks for the organization's expectations and cycles of continuous improvement.

➤ *Policy Development Considerations*

By enacting these protections, policy will embed evaluative systems, mentoring supports, and workload safeguards in a leadership routine that preserves the instructional coherence and trust that black female principals need to enact their work. First, district evaluation rubrics might account for the use of transparent reasoning protocols, collaborative inquiry, and community-connected communication alongside measures of student growth to protect against stereotype-based misinterpretations of positional authority and care (Johnson, 2021). Second, statewide and district policies might provide financial support for sponsored mentorship and peer networks for aspiring leaders established by experienced black female administrators, as well as for protected time for instructional coaching cycles and family partnership advocacy that typically require additional relational labor (Johnson, 2021). Third, procurement and staffing policies might allow flexible assignments for deans, counselors, data coaches, and other roles that reduce the need for increased stability in discipline, approaches to socioemotional needs, and instructional pacing during change. Finally, grievance, media, and crisis response policies might codify fair-process protections and shared decision-making procedures to ensure that leaders who "bring others to the table," including through processes that tend to the strong feelings accompanying contested contexts, "secure ownership" (Johnson, 2021).

Policymakers may also create dedicated funding streams to ensure that black female principals participate in cohort approaches to leadership institutes, coaching, and time off for practice-based learning connected to instruction and culturally responsive routines. Accredited preparation providers can be compelled by state agencies to use race- and gender-responsive simulations, mentorship from successful black female school leaders, and partnerships with high-needs schools to ensure that training connects with retention-supporting initiatives found for black educators (Farinde-Wu & Griffen, 2019). Sponsored mentoring and peer networks within schools can be established formally by districts along with stipends and evaluation credit. Micro-credential pathways can offer proof of expertise in parent and community engagement, restorative practices, and data-driven coaching and interventions. Evidence-based coaching and professional learning community (PLC) facilitation contracting can be fostered through procurement policies, while staffing decisions can encourage the flexible assignment of early-career deans, counselors, and data coaches to preserve instructional pacing through periods of growth and change. Finally, accountability policies should introduce metrics for the quality of mentoring approaches, equitable access to professional learning, and communication processes, which can help direct school and district resources to the under-preparation and under-representation of black women leaders in education (Farinde-Wu & Griffen, 2019).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

It is recommended that districts and schools develop an implementation plan to tie organizational leadership routines to continued mentoring, protected time, and focused evaluation criteria that align with both instructional coherence and culturally responsive communication. Develop a cohort mentoring structure, led by existing black women building leaders, with coaching cycles, peer observation, and public reasoning protocols scheduled in school calendars to begin developing a practice of collaborative anchoring of decision quality. Develop release time and paid roles for partnerships with the community, to attend to the additional connection-based labor often disproportionately shouldered by black women leaders, and align support with retention objectives outlined in the experiences of Black women educator exits (Samuels et al., 2021). Embed teacher-facing professional learning that references and embeds the realities of black women working in the classroom to help bridge the gap for why leadership priorities around data usage and significance, restorative practices, and family outreach should be seen as a value for each students' success (Samuels et al., 2021). Finally, revise evaluation rubrics to hold a place for the quality of mentoring, the functioning of distributed teams, and the transparency of communication practices as factors, alongside the hard data growth statistics, and align this with the opportunity for accessible micro-credentials and resource allocation flexibility for deans, counselors, and data coaches.

➤ *Strategies for Professional Development*

Simultaneously, district-sponsored professional development might integrate racial-literacy workshops, case-based role play of disputed decision-making scenarios, and structured coaching cycles that privilege instructional coherence and community partnership. It should also feature cohort-based, protected-time institutes for black female principals in which participants analyze public reasoning protocols, practice feedback scripting, and co-design PLC agendas connected to walkthrough evidence; such cohorts might be co-facilitated by experienced black women leaders and incorporate cross-role study with teacher leaders. In addressing racialized, workplace stressors, provider might embed collectivized spaces drawing from narrative inquiry and counter-story circles, practices found to sustain educators of color in their work using community, analysis of racialized interactions and dynamics, and pragmatic strategies for resistance and healing (Kohli, 2018). Mentoring in this space might be sponsored rather than volunteered; pairing principals with senior leadership members brokering access to networks, resources, and stretch assignments, while conducting monthly performance clinics around data use, restorative justice discipline, and family partnership routines. Finally, micro-credentials might validate mastery of the following: racial literacy, communication transparency, and distributed problem-solving; the recognition connected to these competencies could be visible in observable routines and student-facing outcomes.

➤ *Encouraging Inclusive Leadership Models*

To uphold inclusive and culturally responsive leadership, district-embedded structures must be created to normalize racial literacy, protect time for community-engaged work, and credit transparent reasoning and distributed decision-making in evaluation systems. Programs must create cohort-based networks of black female principals and their allies that integrate case simulations, counter-story circles, and performance clinics on data-informed coaching, thereby decreasing isolations while integrating instructional coherence with equitable practices (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). Preparation providers and districts can codify sponsored mentoring that brokers resource access and stretch assignments while micro-credentials adjudicate deep learning in culturally responsive communicating, restorative approaches, and PLC facilitation linked to observable, predictable classroom routines. Also, PD calendars must institutionalize affinity spaces for Black women educators and integrated cross-role learning with teacher leaders that uphold their well-becoming and resilience in racialized contexts; the resulting inclusivity may serve as pipeline feeders for leadership teams (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). Finally, funding formulas and staffing rules must allow for flexible deployment of counselors, deans, and data coaches to nourish trust-rich climates and ongoing cycles of instructional improvement.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was suggested that leadership practices that combine elements of transformational, instructional, distributed, and culturally responsive leadership models are best suited to support the demands of black female principals. Evidence from the analysis indicated that vision-based communication, regular feedback processes and structures, leadership team frameworks, and decision-making protocols that are based on transparent reasoning and operate on a fixed timetable all contribute to instructional coherence, build collective responsibility, and fortify trust in schools with diverse student populations. It was also acknowledged that decisions based purely on transactional leadership tools serve as a mechanism for gaining compliance in the short term, but undermine trust and relational capital and encourage a focus on measurable outputs that prioritize outcomes from individual pursuits rather than a commitment to seeking out new, evolving practices through community-based efforts. As such, it is important to choose a model that promotes reasoning in the colors of race and gender as the behaviors gained through these habits unite authority, care, and accountability from those entrusted with fostering these qualities in an environment where they are continuously in question, and where emotional labor runs high. To this end, it was argued that the following practices should be actively encouraged: mentoring and/or coaching approaches based on cohorts led by experienced black women; protected pathways for community partnership work; evaluation rubrics that give weight to reasoning processes and distributed problem-solving; and micro-credential pathways that are linked to observable routines in practice.

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