

**BRIDGES OVER TROUBLED WATER: EXAMINING THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF BLACK, FEMALE, SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

by

LaWanda D. Mitchell

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy



Department of Educational Studies

West Lafayette, Indiana

December 2021

THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Dr. Marilyn Hirth, Co-Chair

Department of Educational Studies

Dr. LaMonica Williams, Co-Chair

Department of Educational Studies

Dr. Alice Johnson

Department of Educational Studies

Dr. Richard Olenchak

Department of Educational Studies

Approved by:

Dr. Ayse Ciftci

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving mother, Mrs. Mary Ann Mitchell, to my supportive brother, Torricellus Mitchell, and to those who came before me, my ancestors, whose wildest dreams are the reason this is possible.

Mom, your encouragement gave me the confidence necessary to challenge broken systems while your memory gives me the strength to continue to do so; Torricellus, your consistency in pushing me to challenge my own thoughts and perspectives made me a better woman, both inside and out; Ancestors, your belief in all that I could be, gave me the drive and the determination to fight for Black excellence. Because of each of you, I write this dissertation, doing the work, deliberately and unapologetically.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is important that we learn humility, which says there was someone else before me who paid for me. My responsibility is to prepare myself so that I can pay for someone else who is yet to come.

-Maya Angelou

First, giving honor to God who is the head of my life, I acknowledge that I can do nothing without Him. I offer eternal thankfulness to His faithfulness in providing perfect peace that allowed me to complete this degree.

To my parents, Mary Ann and Rocellus Mitchell, words cannot begin to express the depth of gratitude I have for your sacrifices and for everything you did to get me where I am; none of this would be possible without you. You were my biggest cheerleaders, and even in your absence, continue to be my biggest inspirations. I love you to life. Rest in Peace.

To my big brother, the iron that sharpens my iron, I cannot say thank you enough for your continued support, your continued strength, and your endless. You will never truly understand how much I admire and look up to you. You are and will always be my first best friend.

To my big sister, Sharon Coachman, for being a constant positive light and compass in times when I thought I'd lost my way. Thank you for always believing the impossible was possible and that God had an incredible plan for my life that would change the world. Your visions continue to inspire me to greatness. I love you more than words can express.

A special thank you to Dr. Dennisha Murff whose thoughtful words, encouragement, and love always help make the foggy areas of life more clear. Your continued belief in me, even when I did not believe in myself, inspired me to always reach higher. You are one of my she-ros and I thank God for you everyday.

To Dr. Denita Harris, thank you for your continued faith that I was "enough" for this program. I can't thank you enough for your recommendation and your unwavering belief in my abilities. Nothing compares to your words of encouragement. I love you dearly.

To Dr. Joyvina Evans, thank you for being my prayer partner and always serving as a constant reminder that God has a plan. You pushed me to continue to circle and to pray without ceasing. I am forever grateful for our friendship and our sisterhood. You are the definition of #BlackGirlMagic.

To Dr. Judy Alston, whose divine connection has been life changing on so many levels. You have been an anchor of faith, confirmation, and affirmation throughout this journey. God hand selected you as my Jackson Scholars' mentor and I am forever grateful for your ability to speak those things that did not exist as though they did. Your spirit and your heart is undeniable and I am forever thankful for your support. Thank you for being my mentor and my Big sister. I am forever at your service.

To Ms. Kelly, my Indy mother, my Alabama neighbor, and most importantly, my soul sister. You have been one of life's greatest blessings. I pray that you continue to shine bright like the diamond you are as this world has always been yours. Your service to others is immeasurable and your heart loves like none other. Know that I love you to the moon and back and I thank you for just being you.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Marilyn Hirth, Dr. Alice Johnson, Dr. Robert Olenchak, and Dr. LaMonica Williams. Thank you for serving as my extended support group who provided love and moral support. I am blessed to have people in my life so dedicated to my success.

Lastly, the completion of this dissertation would not be possible without the Black female educational leaders who participated in this study. You welcomed me into your lives, adding so much to the person that I am today. You are a part of my heart and have served to make me better. I consider each of you models of Black excellence as you personify #BlackGirlMagic everyday. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to the depths of my soul for your magic, your excellence, and your light. I love you all tremendously.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	10
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	11
Background of the Problem	13
Statement of the Problem.....	14
Purpose of the Study	16
Research Questions	17
Significance of the Study	17
Theoretical Framework.....	18
Definition of Terms.....	19
Assumptions, Limitations, & Delimitations	20
Researcher Bias & Ethical Consideration.....	21
Conclusion	24
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	25
Historical Struggles of Black Women in the U.S.	26
Black Women & Family Relationships	32
The Strong, Black Woman.....	33
Black Women & the Community	34
Sisterhood: Black Women’s Relationship with One Another	36
Racism & Black Women	39
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	41
Black Feminist Thought	43
Black Women Involvement in Education & Leadership	44
Black Females in Leadership Positions	46
Black Women in Predominantly White Organizations.....	49
Chapter Summary	53
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	55
Introduction.....	55
Research Design.....	56
Qualitative Research.....	56

Phenomenological Approach.....	58
Research Questions	59
Setting	59
Participants.....	59
Data Collection	61
Instrumentation	62
Interview process	62
Validity.....	63
Reliability	65
Data Analysis	65
Conclusion	66
CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	67
Introduction.....	67
Review of Critical Race Theory as Theoretical Framework	68
Review of Black Feminist Thought as Theoretical Framework	69
Interview Participants	70
Individual Profiles of Interviewees	71
Ms. Bella.....	71
Dr. Darla	73
Dr. Carmen	74
Dr. Sasha.....	76
Conclusion of Individual Profiles	78
Findings: Emergent Categories.....	78
Category One- Systemic Racism within Predominantly White Districts/Organizations & Institutions	79
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category One: Systemic Racism within Predominantly White Districts/Organizations & Institutions	85
Category Two- Treatment Through Stereotypes & Microaggressions.....	86
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Two: Treatment Through Stereotypes & Microaggressions	92
Category Three- Internal Struggles	92

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category 3: Internal Struggles	101
Category Four- Health	101
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Four: Health.....	104
Category Five- Need/Desire to Prove Others Wrong and/or To Stand Up for Oneself	104
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Five: Need/Desire to Stand up for Oneself/Prove Others Wrong.	110
Category Six- Sisterhood.....	111
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Six: Sisterhood.....	116
Category Seven- Authenticity.....	117
Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Seven: Authenticity	122
Chapter Summary	123
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION	124
Introduction.....	124
Purpose of the Study	124
Study Design.....	124
Discussion of the Findings.....	126
Assertions.....	127
Assertion # 1 - Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions have an underlying current of systemic racism and sexism that makes it challenging for Black, female school principals to thrive and survive within their system.....	127
Assertion # 2- Black women often view their roles as leaders in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions as a form of activism and social justice, hoping to break down walls and barriers within the system.	132
Assertion # 3- Black women often develop sisterly relationships or sisterhoods as a survival technique to acknowledge, address, and receive support for the treatment they experience while serving in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions..	136
Recommendations for Predominantly White School Districts, Organizations, and Institutions	142
Recommendation #1- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must find ways of forming positive, supportive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their Black, female school principals.....	144

Recommendation #2- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must begin to see Black women as valuable assets both as individuals and as members within their organizations.	146
Recommendation #3- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must provide professional development and ongoing training with a focus on cultural competency, equity, and inclusion, assessing, teaching, and training employees on ways to break the cycles of oppression, systemic racism, and sexism that still exists within their organizations.....	148
Recommendations for Black, Female School Leaders	149
Recommendations for Future Research	151
Conclusion	152
REFERENCES	155
APPENDIX A: INVITATION LETTER.....	161
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	163

ABSTRACT

Although Black women are slowly ascending to roles of leadership, because of the unique challenges associated with being a Black, female school principal, there is a crucial need for further studies that dive into the cultural perspectives of leadership, particularly from the perspective of women of color. On many occasions, the voices of Black women go unheard as many people assume that issues that pertain to women in general pertain to Black women in the same ways (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p.1). For Black females with an interest in their cultural heritage as well as excellence in leadership, this creates an intense need and drive for continual research both personally and scholarly. Beyond underrepresentation in the field, Black female principals often face discriminatory practices that create distinctive obstacles that impact their ability to thrive as school leaders. The microaggressions, sense of isolation, and invisibility many Black women experience often leads them to build their own community of supportive Black women to encourage and uplift each other on their leadership journey. This research study explored the lived experiences of Black female principals in predominantly white districts and how sisterhood is used as a means of survival. For organizations and school districts seeking to improve the culture and climate of their work environments for women of color, this study creates an opportunity for these entities to learn about the needs of Black women in order to meet them.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I AM WHERE I AM because of the bridges I have crossed, Sojourner Truth was a bridge, Harriet Tubman was a bridge, Ida B. Wells was a bridge, Fannie Lou Hammer was a bridge, Mary McLeod Bethune was a bridge... (Oprah Winfrey, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 39)

For Black women in leadership positions seeking to find bridges over troubled waters, the journey to safety can often seem turbulent and unstable, especially when working in predominantly white spaces. Access barriers are often inevitable realities for many Black women, including blocked opportunities based on the color of their skin. “Because both their race and gender are beyond the norm in corporate America, black women, like other women of color, face the burden of being “double outsiders” (The Executive Leadership Council & The Executive Leadership Foundation, 2008, p. 9). While many organizations profess to be committed to change and progress, many Black women continue to experience difficulty securing and/or remaining in leadership positions.

Although Black women have often proven their abilities as leaders, they are still known to experience limited access to advancement opportunities despite their qualifications. According to a research report commissioned by The Executive Leadership Council and The Executive Leadership Foundation (2008), Black Women Executive Research Initiative found:

In spite of the fact that Black women are graduating from college and graduate school at unprecedented rates and are joining the ranks of U.S. companies in equally impressive numbers, they are not moving into the senior positions at the levels one would expect from such a robust pipeline of talent (p. 9).

Monts (2012) explained, “Black women had to wrestle with issues White women did not” (p. 38). This finding is still very much true today. Regardless of their progress, societal norms place Black women in subordinate roles in comparison to men and white women in society, especially regarding to leadership. In a study by Patitu & Hinton (2003), the authors revealed the

experiences undergone by Black women in administrative and leadership roles, highlighting that Black women in hostile environments needed support and that this lack of support resulted in sexual harassment, budget constraints that affected their salaries, verbal abuse, and often being ignored, isolated, and alienated, particularly at predominately White institutions. According to their findings, racism seemed to be more of a factor than sexism, disclosing that “race was more salient in their efforts to retain their positions and seek promotion” (p.81).

Myers (1991) explained Black women carry the dual stigma of being female and black in a society that has devalued both (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 27). Because Black women have faced harsh and cruel forces in society, there are a few common threads that truly connect them. The stronger of these seems to be their resistance to racism and sexism. McNeil (2001) found that the challenges and opportunities shared by women who have endured injustices helps develop a special bond that is defined as *sisterhood* (as cited in Muhammad, 2012, p.5). Black women who champion the concept of sisterhood feel an innate sense of obligation to support other Black women striving to achieve personal and professional success.

Because of this sisterly support, many Black women find it easier to persist. Despite their lack of recognition and having to prove their professional capacity at every turn, Black female leaders have still managed to find ways to help each other attain professional and career success. This desire and willingness to support other Black women on their journey to achieve specific goals is crucial to the continual development of future Black female leaders. The primary purpose of this research is to conduct a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions and the influence of sisterhood on their leadership experience. In doing so, this research aims to identify

tools, techniques, and strategies needed by the next generation of Black, female school leaders seeking to find a bridge over troubled water.

Background of the Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), only 13% of school principals are Black females. Even in the current year of 2020, Black women still have limited opportunities and less than favorable experiences in achieving career success, especially within predominantly white organizations. Although they no longer must endure the injustices of slavery; today, they still have to fight against racialized sexism and gendered racism in order to ensure that future generations will benefit from their journey and their experiences. Mostly out of necessity, Black women continue to learn how to adapt and how to prevail in life and in leadership. Even in the face of adversity, historically, Black women have learned to take on the leadership role in the family, in the community, in education, and in social issues. Therefore, more research must be devoted to telling their stories, incorporating their lived experiences and how they overcame negative experiences for the benefit of the next generation.

Although Black women are slowly ascending to roles of leadership, because of the unique challenges associated with being a Black female school principal, there is still a crucial need for further studies that dive into the cultural perspectives of leadership, particularly from the cultural perspective of women of color. Because Black women are actively seeking access to opportunities of advancement, having literature that shares information that can build bridges to safety and to success is vital to the continued growth of not just Black female leaders, but the Black community.

Statement of the Problem

Beyond underrepresentation in the field, the contributions of Black female leaders to other Black female leaders have traditionally been left out of the leadership discussions. Although the pedagogy of cultural studies is growing, the problem resides in the lack of research on how Black women view leadership, specifically their lived experiences while serving as leaders in predominantly white educational organizations. Patitu and Hinton (2003) explain research on Black women faculty and leaders in higher education is difficult to find. They believe “this paucity of literature and research reflects the scarcity of African Americans in academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative positions” (p. 79). Gilkes (2001) affirms,

“Black women have either been invisible to researchers who have approached the history and social life of Black people armed with presumptions of mainstream social sciences, or these women’s visibility has been overlooked as unimportant to the larger questions governing the research” (p.8).

According to Nance (2016), “topics by and about Black women are not easily categorized within the disciplines of ethnic studies, African American studies, feminism, gender studies, or critical theory” (p.12). Moreover, Nance claims epistemological research about Black women conducted by Black women is deemed unremarkable in mainstream academia. For Black females with an interest in their cultural heritage as well as leadership, the scarcity of literature creates an intense need and drive for continual research both personally and scholarly. Because of the unique journeys of Black female leaders, there is much to learn from them, who as a group, have shaped, guided, and transformed spaces and places since the era of American slavery. Although questions about their leadership roles have been raised, findings presented by a minority insider's perspective are regarded as dubious and unlikely to be published in professional journals (Brunner & Payton-Caire, 2000; Henry, 2001; Morrison, 1992).

As Felix (2018) reports, research on the racial assaults experienced by female K-12 school leaders are scant. Black women principals have reported being dismissed by white colleagues and not allowed to express their opinions during discussions, receiving criticism by their superiors and colleagues about the way they dress and wear their hair, and being paid less than their male counterparts (Reed, 2012). Black college professors have reported feeling unwelcome and excluded by their white colleagues, in addition to being challenged about their competence and authority by white students (Pittman, 2012). Even with reports such as these, very little recognition and studying has been given to the voices of Black, female school leaders who are often eager to share their own stories and their own experiences concerning leadership and their professional journeys.

For far too long, Black women's voices have gone unheard as many people assume that issues that pertain to women in general pertain to Black women in the same ways (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 4). However, "Gender stereotypes undoubtedly interact with other stereotypic perceptions such as those for ethnicity. The limited research on gendered ethnic stereotypes suggests that African American women are considered more aggressive and hostile..." (Madden, 2005, p.5). Differences between leadership roles and female gender roles leads to prejudicial judgments and actions (Eagly & Karau, 2002), not to mention the "double oppression of racism and sexism born for African American women when their subordinate status was assumed and enforced by white and black men as well as white women" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p.19). Black women should no longer have to remain in a category of unsung heroes and leaders with their stories remaining untold. Instead, there should be an obligation and responsibility to continue to contribute to the personal and professional growth and success of Black women

through the sharing of their lived experiences and the ways in which they have continued to learn to adapt, to persist, and to prevail in leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for conducting this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white school districts and the influence that sisterhood has on their leadership journey. A phenomenological approach was selected as this type of qualitative inquiry is most concerned with the experience of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As described by Johnson & Christensen (2020), the purpose of phenomenological research is to obtain a view into research participants' life-world and to understand their personal meanings (i.e., what something means to them) constructed from their "lived experiences" (p.422). This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to understand the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders and how the phenomenon of sisterhood is used to provide support and encouragement during their journey. Because Black women continue to rise above the challenges they face in leadership, this study seeks to document their stories in literature for the benefit of the next generation of aspiring Black, female school leaders.

The goal of this research is twofold. First, to provide a blueprint for the next generation of Black, female leaders who aspire towards school leadership. Secondly, to give voice to the stories of Black, female school leaders, documenting the good, the bad, and the ugly of Black women's journey to and through leadership. In sharing their experiences in school leadership, the researcher seeks to provide a guide for organizational strategies that will allow predominately white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions the ability to promote and to support the advancement of Black, female school leaders within their organizations.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white school districts and the influence that sisterhood has on their leadership journey. To explore the gravity of the problems that Black women face in leadership, while also giving voice to their stories, documenting the good, the bad, and the ugly of Black women's journey to and through leadership, this study poses the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts?
2. How do Black, female principals use sisterhood as a strategy for survival?

Significance of the Study

This research adds to the limited body of knowledge that is currently available regarding the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts. Specifically, the research informs the literature about the collective experiences of Black, female school leaders by expounding upon barriers and struggles Black women have faced in this country to not just attain equality in society, but also in positions of leadership. It is the goal of this research to give voice to a group of people often left voiceless in the realm of leadership. Because Black women have had to learn how to prevail in life and in leadership, often in the face of adversity, this research may also be used as a resource for other Black females with an interest in learning about leadership from a cultural perspective, including the strategies that Black women have found to be successful in attaining, in retaining, and in excelling in their leadership positions.

Very little research brings awareness to the cultural phenomenon of sisterhood within the Black community and how Black, female school leaders have learned to use this tool as a means of survival. This study acknowledges Black women's cultural contexts to the realm of leadership

while also giving voice to a phenomenon that is well known within the Black community. By sharing the lived experiences of Black women, not only can we identify the unique challenges Black women face, but we can also tell their stories. This unique perspective, giving homage to the historical struggles Black women have faced, in addition to the support systems they often create to survive, could serve as a stepping-stone to the next generation of Black, female school leaders seeking to find strength in the face of adversities.

Additionally, this research can be used to make recommendations to predominantly white institutions, organizations, and/or school districts who seek to support their Black, female school leaders. For school districts seeking to improve the culture and climate of their work environments for women of color, this study creates an opportunity for these entities to learn about the needs of Black women and to meet those needs. Further, this research could be used to continue to develop or cultivate the leadership skills of their Black, female employees seeking positions of leadership within their organization.

Theoretical Framework

Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, this research aims to not just assist in sharing Black women's stories, but to also help Black women reclaim their experiences using their own voices and perspectives. In order to do so, this study addresses four different areas: Black women, racism, sisterhood, and leadership. Since our stories are not always told, the opportunity to shed light on the journey and experiences of Black women as they ascend to roles of leadership is of immense importance to me. Likewise, the aspiration of exploring sisterhood and its influence in the leadership experiences of Black, female school principals is a considerable feat. However, as a Black, female researcher, I have a responsibility to help other women, specifically Black women, understand her history so that she may write her

own story. Although a Black woman's leadership journey has not always been easy, there have always been other Black women to assist along the way.

Definition of Terms

This section defines key terms, starting with a definition of the population of interest.

Black Women: The 2000 U.S. Census describes "Black or African American" as a person having origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005, p. 1). For this research, **Black women** are defined as women whose birth origin is the United States of America and who identify as Black. Also used interchangeably with African American women.

Sister: According to McDonald (2007), a sister is a term that identifies women of the same gender and ethnicity or family ties; specifically, Black women. It is "intentionally used as a term of endearment to signify a more purposive attachment to other Black women and/or to specific others with whom they share the same values, ambitions, priorities, and intentions" (p. 68). Muhammad (2012) describes a sister as a woman who has profoundly impacted another woman's concept of Black womanhood and what it means to be a Black woman.

Sisterhood: Muhammad (2012) describes sisterhood as a closeness or bond developed between two or more women. Sisterhood encompasses the act of each woman being honest, truthful, loyal, thoughtful, and supportive of one's dreams and aspirations (Mayo, 2009).

Leadership: Leadership is a phenomenon that has been defined and redefined for decades. Alston (1996) states, "researchers have defined leadership according to their individual perspectives and aspects of this phenomenon of most interest to them" (p. 14).

For the purpose of this study, Hart's (1980) definition of leadership will be used. According to Hart, leadership is the process of influencing one or more people in a positive way so that the tasks determined by the goals and objectives of an organization are accomplished. The leadership role can either be assigned or assumed. It has a complex blend of behaviors, attitudes and values, and can occur in a small organization where everyone is known or in a complex bureaucracy where few people even in a department know each other (as cited in Alston, 1996, p.14).

Assumptions, Limitations, & Delimitations

This research was built on assumptions. An assumption is a realistic expectation of what will happen during the research process. It is something believed to be true but without evidence to support this belief these things have to be "assumed" (Patton, 2002, as cited in McBryde, 2010, p. 12). The assumptions for this research include assumptions around the participants' responses, the understanding of the research topic, the understanding of the interview process, and the proper gathering of information.

This study assumes that the responses by the participants will produce a solid consensus of meaning, understanding, and definition concerning leadership and sisterhood as expressed above. Additionally, the researcher assumes that the participants will have a vivid understanding and meaning set to their lived experiences as Black, female school principals in predominantly white educational organizations. Given the knowledge level of these individuals, it is assumed that the questions chosen will be easily applicable for all involved, leading to in-depth responses from participants. Lastly, it is also assumed that the information gathered from the responses of these participants will be presented in an unbiased and honest way.

As with the assumptions, there are also several assumed limitations of the research study. First, studying the lived experiences of Black, female school principals, including the phenomenon of sisterhood, includes many variables that could be difficult to address in one study. For that

reason, some of the possible limitations of the study include the area in which the research is set to take place, the target sample, and the sampling method.

The first limitation of this research could be (1) the geographical location of the research participants. To provide the researcher with accessibility to potential participants and to ensure an adequate number of participants, research participants will be selected from the Midwestern region of the United States. Although there are many commonalities in the shared experiences of Black women, the factors and variables affecting Black, female school principals who are geographically situated in the Midwest in comparison to those in other portions of the United States, could be slightly different. Additionally, the influence of sisterhood may also be different for this same reason; (2) the target sample could also be a limitation as the study participants will be Black women, varying in ages. For that reason, the results of the study may not be representative of other races, cultures, and age groups. In addition, the small number of participants may limit the generalizability of results; (3) the sampling method used for this research could also be a limitation as purposive and snowball sampling will be used in order to recruit potential participants in the Indianapolis area; (4) the involvement of the researcher as an integral part of the interview process, as well as the nature of the interview itself, may inadvertently influence participants' responses and therefore the results of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2009, as cited in McBryde, 2010, p. 12).

Researcher Bias & Ethical Consideration

One's personal experience represents a critical rationale and background for why we choose to conduct a particular study (Bernal, 1998). Bernal (1998) communicates that our personal histories, invested interest, and racial and cultural backgrounds, play a complicated role in the analytical process. It is for this reason that I use this section to identify myself as a researcher, in addition to providing my personal reasons for conducting this study.

As I reflect on any potential bias, several aspects come to mind. As a Black woman, born and raised in the south, this subject matter is near and dear to my heart. Not only have I had the opportunity to grow up watching the struggles that many Black women have faced within their personal and professional lives, but I have also had the privilege of journeying down the same paths of educational leadership, experiencing similar lived experiences that have driven my passion to educate and uplift women. Because I am a Black woman telling the stories and the lived experiences of other Black women, for the purpose of this research, I took extra care to ensure that participants were not influenced by my personal emotions, desires, or biases. Additionally, because I have a relationship with the majority of women selected for this study, I was intentional in making sure to follow interview protocols, listening attentively and staying focused on the overall goal of sharing their stories. This approach made certain that I would not add my thoughts or opinions to their statements. Furthermore, this strategy ensured that any bias was kept in check during the data collection process.

Throughout this research journey, my experiences have shown me that the theorizing and essential knowledge of women of color was, and still is, a missing perspective. As Alston (2005) described, “there remains a paucity of research” (p.675). As a researcher committed to revealing the plight of Black women in leadership, as well as celebrating their journey, I am dedicated to this work and to being as honest and transparent in communicating the results of this study as I possibly can be. It is my hope that in doing so, not only can I assist in changing the current trajectory of Black women's success in predominantly white educational organizations and institutions, but that I can also provide insight into our world, our journeys, and our experiences in leadership. My personal history and positioning as a Black, female educational leader provides me

with a cultural and a professional lens that allows me to both understand and to sympathize with the experiences of Black, female leaders from an insider's perspective (Bernal, 1998).

Of my 14 years as an educator, ten of those years were spent teaching, leading, and serving in predominantly white school districts. During this time, I have personally observed, firsthand, the devastating effects of racism on the educational, professional, and personal experiences of Black women. As a millennial, I've observed Black female leaders as they experienced microaggressions in the workplace of being undermined, undercut, and/or not given the credit they deserve. As a Black female administrator who has also experienced racism and the negative impact it can have on the life and journey of a person, I can openly admit that I too was subject to these same microaggressions. I have continuously watched myself and other women of color be overlooked and/or not given the power nor the respect that they deserved. Unfortunately, as Black women, this is a story that we know all too well. Black voices are not always heard, nor are our stories always shared or believed. Constantly trying to dismantle a system meant to oppress you can be quite exhausting, frustrating, and even dangerous. In fact, these experiences can leave behind scars that can take years to heal.

Nevertheless, these experiences have all led me, and others, to conclude that being a person of color in roles of leadership in the educational setting can be a hard and difficult road to navigate. Without the right guidance and support from those who have learned to navigate the waters, one can become lost or overwhelmed in the chaos of the workplace. Thanks to the Black female leaders who surrounded me throughout my journey, I was given opportunities to glean from their wisdom, their knowledge, and their experiences, all of which continue to guide me to this very day. In fact, many of these women still serve as a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, and a giver of support and encouragement years later. Although the information gained through these learning opportunities

have greatly enhanced my experiences as a leader, I will be deliberate in ensuring that I did not allow my personal learning knowledge to impede upon the information gathered within this study.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview on the nature and importance of this study. It defined the purpose of the study, identified both the problem and significance of the research, and posed two research questions. It also identified key terms to provide a guide for the remainder of the study. Additionally, the goal of providing tools, techniques, and strategies as a guide for future Black female leaders was expressed in Chapter One. The following chapter, Chapter Two: Literature Review, further outlines the topic of Black women, providing a review of literature on their historical struggles, their present-day struggles, sisterhood, and leadership, just to name a few.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

You see, we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeats, so that we know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose. I didn't run away – I rose right where I'd been knocked down. And then that's how you get to know yourself. You say, hmm, I can get up! (Maya Angelou, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 20).

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts and the influence that sisterhood has on their leadership journey. Further, the purpose of the research is to explore those variables that impact and influence the personal and professional success that Black female leaders can attain in roles of leadership. As a result, this chapter reviews literature on Black women, leadership, and sisterhood in relation to the support provided by other Black women. The specific aspects of this chapter include the historical struggles of Black women, leadership in the Black community, the benefits of sisterhood, and barriers to leadership for Black women.

For Black women who have an interest in their cultural heritage and leadership, it is no secret that Black women have been overlooked in our books and literature for far too long. As Nance (2016) advocates, epistemological research about Black women conducted by Black women is deemed unremarkable in mainstream academia. Johnson (2000) highlights, “Despite their distinctive contributions to American education, their educational philosophies, their struggle for group survival and institutional transformation have been ignored by American educational history (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 31). Consequently, Black women have often remained in a category of unsung heroes and leaders, often with their stories untold. In spite of their performance, their contributions were traditionally left out of the history and leadership pedagogy, consciously

or unconsciously communicating to Black women that they were insignificant, or worse, invisible.

Gilkes (2001) states,

“Black women have either been invisible to researchers who have approached the history and social life of Black people armed with presumptions of mainstream social sciences, or these women’s visibility has been overlooked as unimportant to the larger questions governing the research” (p.8).

Questions about their social status have been raised before; however, very little recognition and studying has been given to their lived experiences within their leadership roles. In view of Black female leaders, this creates an intense need and drive for continual research. Especially since there is much to learn from Black women, who have been known to shape history time after time. Even with the many boundaries and glass ceilings created to limit their success, Black women have managed to find ways to succeed, nonetheless. For that reason, there is an innate sense of obligation and responsibility to share the good, the bad, and the ugly of Black women’s experiences in hopes of continuing to contribute to the personal and professional growth and success of Black female leaders through the selected research topic. Not only can this literature teach Black women the benefit of learning more about the sisterly relationship between black women, but it can also assist those seeking guidance on how to achieve personal and professional success as a Black woman in an unfamiliar space.

Historical Struggles of Black Women in the U.S.

According to Collins (2000), “the vast majority of Black women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression” (p. 4). Collins describes oppression as any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Throughout history, in order to justify denying Black women access to resources, Black women have often been portrayed as savages or less than

human. Thompson & Neville (1999) state, “this portrayal has helped Whites not only to justify their brutal or exploiting treatment of these groups but also to project their own violent proclivities onto people of color” (p. 188). As Collins specifies, “race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States” (p. 4), all of which continue to be an issue today. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the struggles that Black women have faced, relative to the historical context of American history, are unlike that of other women. In order to truly understand their struggle and their journey, one must not only look at the modern day experiences of Black women, but one must also take a thorough look at the historical experiences of these women along the way.

This passage, taken from Lanker’s (1989) book, *I Dream a World*, describes the journey of Black women using the words of Dr. Maya Angelou. She states:

Black women whose ancestors were brought to the United States beginning in 1619 have lived through conditions of cruelties so horrible, so bizarre, the women had to re-invent themselves. They had to find safety and sanctity inside themselves or they would not have been able to tolerate those tortuous lives. They had to learn to be self-forgiving quickly, for often their exterior exploits were at odds with their interior beliefs. Still they had to survive as wholly and healthily as possible in an infectious and sick climate (as cited in Peterson, 1992, p.1).

African American historian La Frances Rodgers-Rose also described the journey of Black women explaining:

The Black woman has emerged out of a history of oppression. She survived the long middle passage from Africa to America, bringing with her many of the diverse characteristics of her African mothers- not only did she bring with her the ability to raise strong sons and daughters, but she also brought with her a sense of independence, knowledge of warfare and a commitment to the survival of her race (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 15).

The journey through life and to success for the majority of Black women has been a fight from the very beginning. As history details, Black slave women were born into situations in which they found themselves always having to fight for whatever humanity they could attain. Jones (1985)

explored how Black women have been exploited and persecuted throughout modern history, suffering at the hands of other people, and rising out of slavery. They were treated as nothing more than a person's property, denied respect, and would suffer beatings, verbal insults, denial, and ridicule as they labored through degrading tasks while also conceding to their slave-master's sexual advances. In order to simply survive, Black women had to give in to such terrible happenings just to protect their husbands, their children, their loved ones, and even themselves from being beaten and/or sold. For Black women, this was the only way of elevating their social rank in order to protect themselves from their vicious overseers and their mistresses (Jones, 1983, as cited in Monts, 2012, p. 5). Because of these situations, the Black slave woman grew to understand that struggle and resistance were going to be a part of life for her (Peterson, 1992).

In order to survive, she knew this same understanding had to be passed to her offsprings. Thus, Peterson (1992) explains that the responsibility of passing on to the next generation the ability and capacity to withstand possible physical abuse, mental anguish, and assaults to their dignity, caused Black women to adopt characteristics that are not often understood by those outside the Black community. Collins (2000) explains, this legacy of struggle among Black women suggests that a collectively shared, Black women's oppositional knowledge has long existed. In her opinion, this collective wisdom spurred Black women to "generate a more specialized knowledge, namely, Black feminist thought as critical social theory" (p. 12). She supports, "just as fighting injustice lay at the heart of the U.S. Black women's experiences, so did analyzing and creating imaginative responses to injustice characterize the core of Black feminist thought" (p. 12).

Within Black feminist thought, Black women work to reclaim Black women's ideas, discovering, reinterpreting, and, in many cases, analyzing for the first time, the works of Black women thinkers who were so extraordinary that they did manage to have their ideas preserved. In

reclaiming Black women's ideas, Black women are able to discover other Black women who had been silenced, to reinterpret existing works through new theoretical frameworks, and to search for Black women's expressions in alternative institutional and organizational locations, all of which lie at the core of Black feminist thought. Additionally, this reclaiming of ideas helps to clarify and reveal the Black woman's true experience as told from her perspective. This awakening that occurs as part of Black feminist thought requires acknowledging not only how Black women outside of academia have long functioned as intellectuals but also how the challenges they face continue to keep them oppressed. As Collins (2000) maintains, Black feminism remains important because Black women constitute an oppressed group. "As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed" (Collins, 2000, p. 22).

From slavery to Jim Crow, Black women have been historically reduced to the lowest status jobs in U.S. society. These jobs were physically oppressive, emotionally burdensome, and often required them to work under precarious and substandard conditions (Gilkes, 1990; Jones, 1985; Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). Although both White and Black women have been traditionally relegated to "female" jobs, being granted the opportunities to move into the professional realm carried a unique meaning for Black women born prior to the civil rights era (Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). Black women who made their way to college and became teachers had a strong sense of pride as the profession required higher levels of skill and far less subordination to and control by White employers (Shaw, 1996; Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). However, with the passing of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in the 1960s, Black principals and leaders found themselves suffering from a big loss of administrative positions. This problem was a focus of an empirical study conducted by McCray et al. (2007), who contends that advances in school

desegregation following the first twenty years after *Brown* resulted in changes in placement of Blacks in school leadership positions. According to McCray et al., because of the effects of *Brown*, Black principals were faced with obstacles in getting positions in predominantly White schools. Based on this contention, it was alleged that Black principals could only be effective leaders in a school that was predominantly Black, whereas White administrators were considered better leaders in more diverse schools (Monts, 2012).

Tillman (2004) also points out several reasons why the 1954 *Brown* decision was significant for Blacks in principalship. Tillman explains, prior to the *Brown* era of schooling, Black teachers, principals, and parents played central figures in the educating of and the influencing of Black students. Black principals, who also served as representatives of the Black community, were considered the key authority on social, economic, and educational issues. They were also known to be responsible “for establishing the all-Black school as the cultural symbol of the Black community” (p. 102). The work of Black principals in the post-*Brown* period contributed to the theory and practice of educational leadership as these leaders established norms and expectations for the Black community during their times as leaders. Although the *Brown* decision was intended to remedy the educational inequities that existed, Tillman highlights the decision resulted in the firing and demotion of thousands of Black principals, leaving many Black leaders without a platform to continue to lead and to establish the cultural symbols of the Black community.

Another legacy of the Civil Rights Movement was the provision of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This particular provision opened employment and career advancement opportunities in white-collar professions and government jobs for Black women (Amott & Matthei, 1996; Jones, 1985; Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). Additionally, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 barred gender discrimination in any education program or activity receiving

federal monies, which opened doors for women to move up to the ranks of school leadership (Mertz, 2003; Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016).

It is ironic to note that advancements in employment opportunities for Black women during the post-civil rights era led to a decline in their longstanding pursuit of careers in the teaching profession (Gordon, 1997; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; King, 1993a, 1993b; Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). Thompson & Neville (1999) advocate that “although many significant advances have been made since the civil rights and Black power movements- considered by most scholars to be the pivotal movements in American race relations- racism continues to plague U.S. society” (p. 155). In their review of the social psychological literature on aversive racism, Sue et al. (2007) agreed that although the civil rights movement had a significant effect on changing racial interactions in this society, racism continued to manifest and impact the United States. Within their review, the authors highlight President Clinton’s Race Advisory Board which concluded that:

(a) racism is one of the most divisive forces in our society, (b) racial legacies of the past continue to haunt current policies and practices that create unfair disparities between minority and majority groups, (c) racial inequities are so deeply ingrained in American society that they are nearly invisible, and (d) most White Americans are unaware of the advantages they enjoy in this society and of how their attitudes and actions unintentionally discriminate against persons of color (Advisory Board to the President’s Initiative on Race, 1998, as cited in Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

For the above reasons, Alston (2000) explains, “although women in general are moving more and more into powerful positions in education and other occupations and professions, African American women are still a serious minority” (p. 525). Irrespectively, education is one among a few careers that afford Black women attainable opportunities to advance into leadership, even though barriers to their advancement continue to persist (McGee Banks, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1999, Loder, 2005; Nance, 2016). Despite the barriers and stumbling blocks created for them, Black women have remained persistent throughout the injustices they have endured. Since the beginning of their journey in the U.S., their actions have demonstrated not only a commitment to making a

difference so that others could succeed, but they have also served as a call to action in hopes of creating a better world for themselves, those they love, and the women who come behind them.

Black Women & Family Relationships

To understand the characteristics that Black women have had to adopt, including those characteristics that she needed to pass on to the next generation, one must go back to her roots. Peterson (1992) believes because family is the primary socialization unit for the Black child, much as it is for other cultures, the Black woman's role is vital. For the Black child who must learn how to survive within a society that has a long history of systemic and institutionalized racism, the family, specifically the mother, holds the primary responsibility of sharing her knowledge and wisdom with her children. For Black families, these lessons are crucial for their ability to survive. How they learn to cope with these oppressions relies heavily upon how well they learn them (Peterson, 1992, p. 66).

According to Peterson (1992), Black family relationships have long been misunderstood. To outsiders, some of the lessons Black mothers pass on to their children are very harsh; however, the intent is never to be cruel. Dr. Angela Davis, prominent African American educator and activist, explains for the Black mother,

...children have represented the very special promise of freedom for an entire people. Even as Black people's efforts to hold on to and strengthen their family ties were cruelly assaulted, the family has remained an important cauldron of resistance, forging and preserving a vital legacy of collective struggle for freedom (as cited in Peterson, 1992, p. 67).

Because the Black mother was the key communicator of the morals, values, and culture of the Black family, she was adamant these lessons and ethics of life needed to be passed from one generation to the next. She fully understood that if her family was going to survive, it was her responsibility to supply them with the tools they would need to make it. For the Black mother,

there was a deep knowing that the keys to freedom and to success were dependent on what she learned and what she was able to teach her immediate family as well as her extended family. For Black families, the survival of the extended family was just as important as the survival of the immediate family. Especially since Black families were on this journey to freedom and equality together.

White (1984) explains that the notion of family unity and connectedness and interdependence is viewed as the unifying philosophic concept in the Afro-American experience (as cited in Peterson, 1992, p. 67). He advocates that the family survives through collective responsibility, resourcefulness, and resilience. In *The Strengths of Black Families*, Hill (2003) believes the extended family among Blacks is not only a source of strength but also a protection against isolation in the larger society (as cited in Bell, 2006, p.19). For this reason, the survival of the Black woman's immediate and extended family was not just essential for the survival of the Black community, but also for the Black race.

The Strong, Black Woman

Throughout their lives, Black women continue to survive by drawing strength from their relationships with their mothers and grandmothers. When asked about their successes or even their failures, Black women can often be heard speaking of the strong lessons they learned from mothers or grandmothers, all of which have made them the women they are today. Because there is an emphasis on responsibility and achievement in the Black family, many Black girls grow up with the confidence that when times get hard, they are not going to fall apart (Peterson, 1992, p. 69). Instead, they understand that when those challenges, tribulations, and times of unfairness arise, they have what it takes to survive simply by recalling memories and stories about the experiences or lessons from their mothers and their grandmothers.

Within the context of the family, the Black female child is “constantly exposed to a cadre of women in authority and decision-making roles” (White, 1984, as cited in Peterson, 1992, p. 67). As these females grow older and see their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters take on responsibility, they learn that they must be responsible as well (Peterson, 1992, p. 67). Because Black mothers understood that life for a little Black child will be a struggle, she was persistent in ensuring that her daughters understood that part of being a strong Black woman consisted of having a strong work ethic. Hence, Black families believe that young Black girls have to be prepared in a special way if they were to have any chance at all to break free and create a space for themselves (Peterson, 1992, p.67). The influence that Black mothers have on their daughters is not necessarily an essential point; however, what is essential is the different way in which many Black women and Black girls have to be raised due to the unavoidable and sometimes unforeseen circumstances. To cope with the hurt and defeat, the Black mother knew that her daughter would need certain skills and characteristics.

AS BLACK WOMEN IN AMERICA, WE ALL HAVE AN INNATE SENSE that strength is a part of our ancestral constitution. Our legacy as black women began in Africa and it was built upon a very real strength. Nothing about that legacy is mythical. Strength is the infrastructure of a black woman’s life. Whether we flourish or flounder, we call upon that infrastructure of strength in order to traverse the mountains and valleys of our lives. This much I know for sure: black women are wired to be strong (Victoria Rowell, as cited in Bell, 2006, p.6).

Black Women & the Community

In many ways, the strong Black woman, with its glorification of strength and caregiving, is one of the foundations of Black womanhood (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). This characteristic of Black womanhood can be seen within every aspect of the Black community, often where Black women have been a significant force of strength and influence. Part of this strength includes a feeling of oneness that evolved from their ties to their families and their role within the Black

community. Martin and Martin (1985) describe this feeling as a form of racial consciousness or the keen awareness by many Black people of their history and condition as a people and their overwhelming desire to uplift their race to a state of dignity and pride. They explain,

Racial consciousness meant considering other Blacks as your brothers and sisters- all fighting a common battle to be free. It also meant having pride in the accomplishments and contributions of Black people and confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles and to advance (Martin & Martin, 1985, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 23).

Within the same context, Martin and Martin (2002) advocate that the connections and caregiving within the Black community is grounded in spirituality of what is referred to as a *religious consciousness*.

Religious consciousness, like fictive kinship ties and consciousness is a key mechanism for spreading black caregiving from the family to the community. Religious conscious blacks see Jesus Christ as the quintessence of the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood- as the greatest caring, giving, and sharing role model to be found on the earth (Martin & Martin, 2002, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 24).

Due to the racial and religious consciousness of Black women and the influence they had on those around them, there was a deep understanding that connections and caregiving were the survival mechanisms of the Black community. If the family was going to advance, each generation had to be stronger and go further than the generation before them. For that reason, many within the Black community felt a sense of responsibility to provide support and guidance based on the consciousness and the experience tied into the teachings of the Black women in their family.

...in the black experience... resiliency and revitalization of the human spirit are facilitated... by the knowledge that one is not alone... Through this sharing, beginning with the extended family, we reach out and touch others and are connected to them in a series of interdependent relationships guided by a spirit of cooperation, mutual aid, beginning with the extended family... At the core of the Afro-American worldwide view with its emphasis on human vitality, openness to feelings, collective sharing, mutual support and creative synthesis is a holistic, humanistic conception of human beings and how they should relate to each other (White, 1984, as cited in Bell, 2006, p.19).

Cooperation rather than competition proved to be an important factor in the Black struggle as Black women often drew together in support networks within their own communities. Part of helping, supporting, and uplifting the spirit of each other included the sharing of experiences, often causing Black women to feel joined by a sense of sacredness and/or racial and religious consciousness. Peterson (1992) believes the sharing of these experiences has been essential to the survival of the Black community (p.82). Blacks who succeeded were very conscious that a victory for one person was a victory for all.

Sisterhood: Black Women's Relationship with One Another

Because a victory for one was a victory for all, many Black women will tell you how important it is for Black women to support and build each other up. This source of kinship and connectedness to each other is sometimes hard for outsiders to understand. McNeil (2001) found that the challenges and opportunities shared by women who have endured injustices helps develop a special bond that is defined as *sisterhood* (as cited in Muhammad, 2012, p.5). In the Black community, the terms sister and sisterhood are widely known and celebrated to describe a Black woman who serves as a personal confidant, positively impacting another woman's concept of Black womanhood and what it means to be a Black woman.

A ROOM FULL OF SISTERS

*A room full of sisters, like jewels in a crown
Vanilla, cinnamon and dark chocolate brown...*

Now picture yourself in the midst of this glory
As I describe the sisters who are part of this story.

They were wearing purples, royal blues and all shades of reds
Some had elegant hats on their heads.

With sparkling eyes and shiny lips
They moved through the room swaying their hips.

Speaking with smiles on their African faces
Their joy and laughter filled all the spaces.

They were fashionable and stylish in what they were wearing.
Kind sisters who were loving and caring.

You see, it's not about how these sisters appeared
Their beauty was in the values they revered.

They were smart, articulate and well-read
With all kinds of Black history stored in their heads

Jugglers of professions, managers of lives
Mothers of children, lovers and wives

Good-hearted reaching out to others
Giving back to the community and supporting our brothers.

All of these sisters struggled the path
Suffered' from prejudice, endured the wrath.

But they brushed off their dresses and pushed on the door
And they came back stronger than they were before.
Now, imagine if you will
The essence and thrill.

As you stand feeling proud
In the heart of this crowd.

A sisterhood of modern Sojourners today
Still out in front blazing the way.

*A room full of sisters, like jewels in a crown
Vanilla, cinnamon and dark chocolate brown.*

(Mona Lake Jones, 1993, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 14)

The study of the phenomenon of sisterhood and its impact on the leadership development of Black female school leaders is of special interest to this researcher professionally, culturally, and personally. As a Black woman and a Black female school leader, I grew up hearing about the strength, persistence, and resilience of Black women. I was always taught that Black women were the heart and the soul of the Black community. Peterson (1992) explains that most Black women have experienced and understand the concept of extended sisterly relationships and the tradition of willing to help a sister. She states, “If it were not for the faith and strength of the Black woman, we would not have survived as a people” (Peterson, 1992, p.3).

Because this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the historical struggles of Black women who had to learn to lean and depend on each other for survival, sisterhood is a term often used amongst Black women who refer to each other as sisters. You see, “There are sisters and then there are sisters...” (Lindberg, 2004, as cited in Muhammad, 2012, p. 55). For Black women, sisterhood describes a closeness or bond developed between two or more women. These women are often willing to support their fellow sister for not only the good of the individual person, but also for the good of the collective body. In *Speaking Truth To Power* (1996), noted Black Women’s historian, Darlene Clark Hines states:

Black women in all eras understand the multilayered realities of their oppression and exploitation and develop an array of survival strategies and functional identities. On plantations and farms of all sizes and purposes, black women developed networks with each other, and where feasible, they embraced their own form of Christianity, crafted a distinct morale code, and fashioned permeable family boundaries that freely made room for blood relatives and fictive kin. The extended, flexible, adaptable black family is as much black woman’s invention as it is an African retention. In other words, part of the requirements for survival dictated that black women, when necessary, reconfigured and re-imagined families, communities, and themselves. Survival mandated that they develop private identities and inner worlds known only to their own (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 29).

Although it is rather difficult to provide one standard definition for sisterhood, it encompasses the act of each woman being honest, truthful, loyal, thoughtful, and supportive of one’s dreams and

aspirations (Mayo, 2009). In her book, *Learning from Other Women*, Carolyn Duff (1999) shared the sentiments of African American women she interviewed who expressed that coming together and sharing goals, experiences, wisdom, and encouragement was not just a necessity, but also extremely important for them to receive affirmation of self (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 46). According to these Black women, women of color need each other for emotional, relationship, and career support. This type of support, or coming together in sisterhood, brings a wholeness and a spirituality that Black women recognize in each other. Because of this understanding, this connectedness, and this support, Black women are able to keep moving forward despite the challenges they encounter.

Perhaps more so than any other time, when Black History Month rolls around, African American women look back with pride and praise at the creativity of Phyllis Wheatley, the daring Harriet Tubman, the oratory of Sojourner Truth, the bravery of Ida B. Wells. We reflect on countless others- artists and activists, educators and entrepreneurs- who have made enormous contributions toward the empowerment of the African American community and the betterment of our nation. To the roll call of *sheroes* with name recognition we could easily add the names of thousands of lesser known women... we celebrate these women as *lights* along the freedom trail, indicators of how far we have come. I sometimes fear, however, that we forget that we still have a long way to go. Today when an African American woman receives well-deserved recognition... she is often cheered not only for her specific accomplishments, but for being the *first* African American of the *first* African American woman to have done so... the fact that we are still celebrating *first* is evidence that true equality has not yet been achieved... the twenty-first century and still we are not free. As has long been the case, our primary adversary is racism... (Cole, 1993, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 28).

Racism & Black Women

The Black woman has had to cope with problems dating back to slavery, from the emasculation of the Black male to childbearing under conditions of slavery, to being treated as nothing more than mere property. Although Black women no longer must endure the injustices of slavery; today, they still have to fight against racialized sexism and gendered racism in order to ensure that future generations will benefit from their journey. Despite their horrific history and

their past, it is racism that has been cited as a critical factor in explaining the present underrepresentation of Black women in management in corporate America (Bell, 2004). As Monts (2012) highlighted, racism and sexism were two of the major barriers encountered by African American women who aspired to leadership positions. Within her research, she advocates “racism has the greatest disabling effect on how African-American women progressed” (p. 3).

Although racism has been part of the experience of Black Americans for hundreds of years, “the face of contemporary or aversive racism is significantly different from blatant acts of hostility and discrimination” (Holder et al., 2015, p. 165). In an extensive review of empirical research on racism, after controlling for the effects of class and other relevant variables, Smith (1995) concluded,

In education, in the sale and rental of housing, in access to mortgage loans, in employment, in access to health care (including certain surgical procedures), in the purchase of an automobile or in the punishment of the use of illegal drugs, American institutions continue to operate so as to produce racially disparate outcomes (as cited in Thompson & Neville, 1999, p. 155).

The establishment of President Clinton’s 1997 Race Initiative signified the need to understand the persistence of societal racism, in addition to the need of developing collaborative efforts to combat it (Thompson & Neville, 1999).

According to Bell (2006), racism has had a major impact in the leadership development and basic survival skills of Black women in this country as they have been doubly victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions (p. 27). Bell explains being a woman and being Black makes them part of two groups which have a history of being treated as inferior in American society. Myers (1991) advocates Black women carry the dual stigma of being female and black in a society that has devalued both (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 27). Because Black women have faced harsh and cruel forces in society, there are a few common threads that truly connect them. The stronger of these seems to be their resistance to racism and sexism. Alston (2005) has further

provided a better understanding of the hardship of Black female leaders and the experiences and strategies they have undertaken to achieve their goals. She explains not only do Black women have to learn to negotiate sexism in society but they must also contend with racism while working for larger social purposes.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Within these social purposes, a theoretical framework known as critical race theory (CRT), was generated by scholars of color who study law and legal policies and who were concerned about racial subjugation in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). According to research by these scholars, persons in power designed laws and policies that were supposed to be race-neutral but still perpetuated racial and ethnic oppression. As Monts (2012) explained, the concept of CRT considers how issues of racism are still a prevalent form of discrimination and that these issues should be considered in policies and programs. Dixon and Rousseau (2005) argue that the emergence of critical race theory required a new vocabulary that could name the race-related structures in law and society. According to their research, there are six unifying themes that define the CRT movement:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges historicism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law...
Critical race theorists. . . adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.

5. CRT is interdisciplinary.

6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (Matsuda et al., 1993, as cited in Dixon & Rousseau, 2005, p. 9).

Monts (2012) advocates critical race theory can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience. Critical race theorists maintain ideas such as color blindness and meritocracy systematically disadvantage people of color and further advantage whites. As expected, critical race theory requires that today, the role played by race must be acknowledged in order for progress to be made (McCray et al., 2007). Dovidio et al. (2002) calls attention to the fact that modern racism is more likely to be expressed as covert, indirect, and more ambiguous, thus creating challenges in identifying and acknowledging its occurrence. Within their research, Wong et al. (2014) explains the concept of racial microaggression, describing how these subtle insults towards minorities are hidden in everyday interactions leading to undetectable tendencies which help to widen the gap of racial realities. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) report, avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to “redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone notices and condemns” (p.22). Once the role of race is truly acknowledged, Black women and other people of color will be allowed to convey the experiences, the lessons, and the knowledge they possess in a way that is empowering and meaningful to us. This is the essence of providing minorities with a voice or a counterstory to challenge the dominant story and to acknowledge the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of colour as sources of knowledge (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005).

Black Feminist Thought

Part of gaining this voice exists in the themes of Black Feminist Thought. “This framework is shaped and produced by the experiences black women have encountered in their lives, even though others have documented their stories” (Howard- Hamilton, 2003, p.21). As Collins (2000) explains, reclaiming Black women’s ideas involves discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing, in many cases for the first time, the works of Black women thinkers, Black women who have been silenced, and Black women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals. In doing so, Black women can search for voices and expressions in alternative locations while also reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks, clarifying Black women’s experiences and ideas.

The need for clarification not only speaks to the power of the dominant group to suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups, but it also illustrates how being in “outsider-within” locations can foster new angles of vision on oppression. Additionally, Collins advocates the need for Black feminist thought and practice as it responds to a fundamental contradiction of U.S. society, highlighting the fact that democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens. Yet, the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists. Because Black women as a group continue to remain oppressed, the need for Black feminist thought will continue to exist. This fact does not mean that all Black women within this group are oppressed in the same way. Instead, it simply means Black feminist thought’s identity as a “critical” social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups (Collins, 2000, p. 9).

Black Women Involvement in Education & Leadership

Educate a man and you educate an individual;
Educate a woman and you educate an entire family.
Malcolm X

Due to necessity, Black women have historically taken the leadership role in the family, in the community, in education, and in social issues. Unfortunately, despite their exhibited leadership in various areas, there is still a lack of research devoted to the leadership of Black women. Although Black women have a rich history of achieving and promoting education and leadership roles throughout the Black community, their work is not always acknowledged in the literature. Johnson (2000) said it best when she stated:

Although there is a body of research that takes into account the educational experiences of Blacks, there is a scarcity of literature dealing with the history of African American women in America, specifically in education, which would provide a context for analyzing and understanding their overall experiences. Despite their distinctive contributions to American education, their educational philosophies, their struggle for group survival and institutional transformation have been ignored by American educational history (Johnson, 2000, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 31).

Nearly a century ago, the renowned African American leader, W. E. B. Dubois illuminated the historic role of Black women as the *intellectual leadership of the race*. To generations of African Americans, education held the key to freedom and opportunity, and for the Black woman, it possessed an even more potent value (Hine, 1996, as cited in Bell, 2006, p.30). Tied in with the notion that hard work is the only way to transcend a negative environment is the belief that a solid education is needed. For many Black families, education is something to work hard for and many Black mothers sacrificed a great deal so that at least one of their children could go to school (Peterson, 1992, p.69). After all, “Education offered Black women a possible escape route from sexual harassment, rape, and even domestic abuse” (Hine, 1996, as cited in Bell, 2006, p.30).

Get an education and nobody can take it away from you!, was the rally cry for generations of Blacks since Emancipation. Education, an avenue of opportunity

that had been blocked during slavery, was regarded as a way to empower, uplift, and serve the Black community and as a principal path to collective and personal upward mobility. (L. Benjamin, 2000, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 30)

McClain and Spencer (2000) contend that from slavery until contemporary times, the African American female could make only limited contributions to society at large because of educational limitations and inadequate recognition from a dominant society (as cited in Monts, 2012, p. 4). As Collins (2000) states, “many Black women academics struggle to find ways to do intellectual work that challenges injustice. They know that being an academic and an intellectual are not necessarily the same thing” (p.16). Even though more Black females have gained an education, they are still not part of the upward social mobility experienced by many others. As a result, improving in educational status has not ensured social mobility. Although many Black women have and continue to gain an education, they are still not always looked favorably upon in many educational contexts. Andrews (1993) noted that the “double whammy of race and gender... compounded by the attainment of a high level of education, predictably creates problems on both a professional and personal level” (p. 182). Not only do Black women have to learn how to negotiate sexism in society but they also have to learn how to face racism while working for larger social purposes.

Although Alston (2005) affirms that the tenacity of Black women that has led to their positions and their demonstrations of leadership has not been extensively studied, her analysis of the Black woman’s styles of leadership has provided a better understanding of the hardship of Black women’s experiences and strategies undertaken to achieve their goals. Within her study, Alston spotlights the challenges faced by Black female leaders and advocates that success has been acquired by facing many hardships, basing that analysis on what was termed “the conceptual framework of tempered radicalism” (Meyerson, 2001, cited in Alston, 2005, p. 677) and “servant leadership” (Alston, 2005, p. 677). Alston defines tempered radicals as “individuals who identify

with and are committed to their organizations and also to cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization” (p. 677), explaining that “servant leadership” did not designate that Black females saw themselves in the role of servant. Instead, she explains, servant leadership meant wanting to serve as female leaders by demonstrating a sense of efficacy, dedication to educating children, and practicing survival skills (Alston, 2005). As Alston reveals, Black female leaders often make a personal choice to serve and to lead at the same time. She advocates the leadership evidenced by tempered radicals/servant leaders embodies a spiritual connection, a self-will, and a determination that exhibits qualities of self-knowledge, humility, and commitment that often leads to making change and/or trying to make something better.

Black Females in Leadership Positions

One of the major difficulties in conducting scholarly research on leadership from a cultural perspective is the lack of academic literature on women of color. Nance (2016) states, “an extensive search for dedicated qualitative and quantitative research on Black women educational leaders produced limited results, with much of the research in education focusing on the experience of teachers and what happens within classrooms” (p. 8). Although there is a growing body of literature on women studies, i.e., feminist theory, its primary focus has to do with the women’s movement, which has not been inclusive of women of color’s issues (McBryde, 2010). Byrd (2009) explored perceptions and stereotypes that affect Black, female experiences in the workplace and in leadership positions, specifically. Within this study, Byrd confirmed that Black female leaders do experience barriers such as racism, sexism, and classism on their journey to lead (as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 69).

In an article on the barriers to equality, Rowe (1990) describes the invisible barrier of the glass ceiling that keeps Black women and other minorities from making it to the top of traditionally “Anglo” male institutions, including the field of education. Rowe maintains these discriminatory behaviors cause pain and “also may constitute for minorities and women a situation they cannot control, evade, or ameliorate” (p. 161). Morrison et al. (1987) describes the phenomenon known as the glass ceiling, as a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher level leadership positions. When it comes to glass ceilings, Kent et al. (2010) explains, “the idea is that systemic impact is created via formal systems (such as performance evaluations, promotions, training, etc.) and informal systems (such as who talks with whom, who gets to attend which events, etc.) such that it impedes the advancement of women to higher levels” (p. 53). Although Rowe notes that a number of U.S. institutions have begun to address the problem of prejudice, “discrimination maintains itself in a wide variety of ways, working within the dominant culture and within the person being discriminated against” (p.154), thereby, keeping women and minorities barred from certain occupations within society and within institutions.

Within her research, Rowe (1990) also advocates that subtle barriers maintain their strength as subtle discrimination through a wide variety of “micro” events, or “microinequities” that work by keeping minority people out. These discriminatory microinequities are described as tiny, damaging characteristics of an environment, distinguished by the fact that one cannot do anything about them. They are “actions which are unjust toward individuals, when reasonable people would agree the particular treatment of the individual occurs only because of a group characteristic unrelated to creativity and work performance (for example, sex, race, religion, age, or country of origin)” (p.155). Situations in which a minority person is not introduced, when Black people are not invited to strategy meetings, when problems are blamed on the person who is obviously

different, and when failure is expected from the person of difference, are all considered microinequities and part of the glass ceiling phenomenon within organizations. “Although some will find the examples banal and trivial, for the persons who were the objects of each example, these sentences were full of pain” (Rowe, 1990, p. 154).

While organizations confess to be committed to change and progress, many Black women continue to experience difficulty securing and/or remaining in leadership positions. Although women have proven their abilities as leaders, improving organizational performance, increasing motivation among their followers, demonstrating exemplary communication styles in leadership, and often being considered more transformational than their male counterparts (Hite, 2004; Robbins & Judge, 2011, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p.1), they still experience limited access to advancement opportunities despite their qualifications. Regardless of their progress, social norms place women in subordinate roles in comparison to men in the society, especially regarding leadership. Intersectionality provides an analysis of “how the intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example shape group experiences across specific social contexts” (Collins, 1998, p. 208). According to Alston (2005), the paradigm of intersectionality (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991) seeks to understand multiple, connected lines of difference and inequality. This concept helps to account for the complexity of Black women's lived experiences, recognizing that race, class, and gender are markers of power creating intersecting lines used to reinforce power relations and forms of oppression (Collins, 2000). These social barriers are intensified for African American women given additional societal hardships driven by racism, compared to women of nonminority descent (Hite, 2004; Lott, 2009; Peters, Kinsey, & Malloy, 2004, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p.2). For this reason, it is imperative for Black women to create opportunities to level the playing field.

For Black women already in positions of leadership, there is an opportunity to help their fellow *sisters* by promoting success collectively rather than individually (Muhammad, 2012, p. 12). After all, the hope of future generations rests on the backs of those who have already achieved personal and professional success. The wisdom and knowledge that *sisters* share with one another from their experiences is priceless. Not only does it afford them the space to share fears and concerns with someone they feel they can trust, but it also provides the opportunity to learn invaluable lessons with someone who understands their daily struggle. Because there is an embedded responsibility for many Black female leaders to pass on to the next generation “a capability to withstand mental anguish . . . and assaults on their dignity” (Peterson, 1992, p. 65), the guidance that other Black women can provide to each other during their journey to leadership can be instrumental in the development of important skills necessary to continue to survive and prosper, especially in predominantly white organizations.

Black Women in Predominantly White Organizations

Black women are often in the shadows in the workplace suffering from years of invisibility in domestic and service work, where their contributions are attributed to others or simply ignored (Collins, 2000). In American organizations, the cultural practice of leadership has primarily been defined and shaped by White male beliefs and experiences, negating the experiences of others, especially those of Black women. This conditioned worldview and belief system of leadership, predominantly shaped around Western culture, can be found portrayed throughout our country from our political systems to our education systems.

According to McCray et al. (2007), because of the effects of *Brown*, Black principals were faced with obstacles in getting positions in predominantly White schools. Within his study, McCray et. al found that the placement of Black candidates in positions of leadership remained

“under diversified” and predominantly White (p.253). Monts (2012) concluded that based on this contention, it was alleged that Black school principals could only be effective leaders in schools that were predominantly Black, whereas White administrators were considered better leaders in more diverse schools. In agreement with McCray et. al, Monts reiterates that “racist beliefs and dual school systems have been responsible for the view of African Americans as second-class leaders and administrators as compared to their White counterparts” (p.43).

Even in the current year of 2021, Black women still have less than favorable experiences and limited opportunities within predominantly white organizations to achieve career success. Access barriers are often inevitable realities for many Black women, including blocked opportunities based on the color of their skin. “Because both their race and gender are beyond the norm in corporate America, black women, like other women of color, face the burden of being “double outsiders” (The Executive Leadership Council & The Executive Leadership Foundation, 2008, p. 9). In a study by Nance (2016) examining the narratives of Black women educational leaders within the majority-white institution of Mji Public Schools, participants revealed experiencing microaggressions tied to their specific racial and gender identities. While serving within their educational settings, Black women participants reported experiencing a range of microaggressions, including having their opinions not taken seriously by people of other races and feeling alienated in spaces based on individuals’ unwillingness to sit near them. Additionally, Nance highlighted that participants often felt the expectation to serve as a spokesperson for their race or their race and gender group. These types of microaggressions create a sense of isolation and invisibility that many Black women experience.

Since the publication of Sue et al. (2007), there has been more scholarly interest in psychology on this construct of racial microaggressions, as qualitative and quantitative research

“has increased exponentially” and identified “the types of, responses to, and consequences of racial microaggressions in a variety of settings with multiple racial and ethnic groups” (Wong et al., 2014, p. 197). According to Felix (2018), this new focus into various settings appears in recent psychology and counseling research, providing relevant insight for exploration of racial microaggressions and educational leadership. Holder et al.’s (2015) study examining the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace and coping strategies used by Black women managers in corporate American positions called attention to the microaggressions experienced by Black women. By studying the lived experiences of these Black, female leaders, Holder et al. were able to categorize these women’s experiences of racial microaggressions as invisibility, exclusion, environmental, stereotyping of black women, and assumed universality of the black experience.

Within the Black experience, racism has been cited as a critical factor in explaining the underrepresentation of Black women in management in corporate America (Bell, 2004). “Although racism has been part of the experience of Black Americans for hundreds of years, the face of contemporary or aversive racism is significantly different from blatant acts of hostility and discrimination” (Holder et al., 2015, p. 165). In a study exploring factors of concern for Black, female faculty and administrators, Patitu & Hinton (2003) reveal the experiences undergone by African American women in administrative and leadership roles at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Within their study, Patitu & Hinton identify issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, climate, isolation, salary issues, coping strategies, and institutional ethos that ultimately affect retention, promotion, tenure, and job performance of Black women. In order to address these issues, they concluded support was vital to Black women who worked at predominately white institutions. Without this support, they found Black women were labeled as

ineffective in their positions, as well as, experienced sexual harassment, budget constraints, denial of programming, verbal abuse, and being ignored, isolated, and alienated.

For that reason, Black women are often left to find support and comfort from each other. Despite glass ceiling practices and other barriers that hinder Black professional women's career growth, leadership opportunities, and their experiences at work, there is no doubt that women are advancing in America (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005; Robbins & Judge, 2011, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p.2). Particularly in corporate, public, and private organizations, minority female leaders are stepping up to the challenge of leadership but are embarking on unfamiliar territory (Hackman & Johnson, 2004; Hite, 2004; Lott, 2009, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 5). For example, this year, Kamala Harris made history as she became the first Black woman Vice President. Not only did she shatter barriers that have allowed mostly white men the privilege of serving in this position for the last two centuries, but in her first speech as Vice President elect, Harris paid tribute to the women, particularly Black women, whose shoulders she stands on.

While examples like these do exist, there is still a crucial disparity in the opportunities for advancement and other fundamental aspects that increase the possibility of continual growth within organizations for Black females (Hite, 2004, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p.2). Because women are becoming more visible or acknowledged as leaders in traditionally male dominated positions (Brown et al., 2010, as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 4), the need for support and guidance is even more evident. Afterall, "the lived leadership experiences of Black female leaders in the 21st century can facilitate a new look at the principles of leadership in education" (Alston, 2005, p. 685).

Chapter Summary

Throughout history, Black women have led from the fields and from mountains; they have organized their troops while sitting at kitchen tables and in church pews, they have protested in front of convention centers and at the back of the buses, at rallies in the streets... They have left an indelible image in the memories of their descendants; fiery spirit, religious devotion, and an uncompromising belief in their ability to achieve the impossible (Reid-Merritt, 1996, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 40).

When black women told the stories 'bout their real lives and actual experiences, they proved the power of art to demolish stereotypes; and if power is the ability to name one's own experience... a first step toward power, for it celebrated the legends of black women, weaved dreams into myths that allowed us to recover and name our own past (Mary Helen Washington, as cited in Peterson, 1992, p. 31).

Chapter Two has provided a historical overview into the dynamics of the Black woman, specifically her role and influence on her family, her community, her sisters, and her workspace, all factors that contribute to the Black female leader's experiences. The goal was to explore those variables that impact success for Black female leaders, identifying any barriers, roadblocks, strategies, and techniques noticed along the journey. As a Black, female school leader curious about how those who look like me have led or still lead today, this research is imperative to the fabric of who I am as a person and as a leader. From the struggles that we've faced, to the mountains we've climbed to reach success, Black women have proven that the impossible can become possible with hard work and persistence. Thanks to the support of their sisters, Black women have learned to lead with authenticity and confidence in their ability due to her innate sense of strength and continued drive to set the pace for the next generation who follows behind them. Chapter Three will draw from this literature review in order to provide an outline of the research method proposed to further this study.

I have come to understand that my African-ness does not diminish my American-ness and vice versa. My identity is not an either/or proposition. Rather, it is both/and. In the same way my scholarship and my personal/cultural life are not either/or propositions. I do scholarly work that both challenges and enhances my personal/cultural life. I live a personal/cultural life that challenges and enhances

my scholarly work. I am a colored girl who has attempted to make life in the academy satisfying and meaningful enuf (Ladson-Billings, 1997, as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 7).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There is no doubt that Black women's journey to leadership has been one of struggle and triumph. The purpose of this study was to detail the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white school districts, documenting those factors that affect their journey to leadership in these spaces. Despite the documented adversities associated with Black women who wish to attain and hold leadership positions, the objective was to give voice to the stories of present-day Black, female school leaders, documenting the good, the bad, and the ugly of a Black woman's journey to leadership. Additionally, the objective was also to share the influence that sisterhood has on their leadership journey.

The goal of this research was twofold. First, to provide a blueprint for the next generation of Black, female leaders who aspire towards school leadership. Secondly, to give voice to the stories of Black, female leaders, sharing their journeys and their experiences as a guide to the next generation of Black female school leaders who are looking for themselves in the literature. In sharing the experiences of Black women in school leadership, the research aims to provide strategies for predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions seeking to promote and to support the advancement of Black, female school leaders within their organization.

This chapter describes the research methodology and highlights the phenomenological design utilized in this research study. This qualitative phenomenological study as described in Chapter One is designed to explore the lived experiences of a select group of Black women who hold or have held a principal's position within a predominately white school district/organization. The goal of this study was to give voice to a group of people often left voiceless in areas they have often flourished. The research study was also designed to document the phenomenon of sisterhood

and the influence that it has on Black women's journey through school leadership. In doing so, I have identified the barriers to success, the success strategies, and how sisterhood was used to influence the leadership journey of these Black female leaders. This chapter describes the method and the reasoning for the processes selected.

Research Design

To gain a better perspective on the factors affecting Black women in leadership, a qualitative approach to research was selected, specifically, the phenomenological approach. The phenomenon for this research study was the lived experiences around sisterhood and the sense of obligation felt by most Black female leaders towards helping each other succeed. Research in lived experiences and sisterhood have been predominantly qualitative in nature.

Qualitative Research

Patton (1985) explains:

[Qualitative research] is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting- what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting- and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting... The analysis strives for depth of understanding (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (p. 6). They express the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning- making, and describe how people interpret what

they experience. Further, Creswell (2009) advocates qualitative research is used to explore a concept or phenomenon that includes variables that are unknown. Additionally, he explains that there are four characteristics of a qualitative research problem. The four characteristics are as follows:

1. The concept is undeveloped or underdeveloped due to the lack of preceding research or theory.
2. The current theories are either inappropriate or incorrect, which could include biased inclinations or inaccurate assumptions.
3. There is a need to develop or further explore an occurrence or to advance the theory.
4. The nature of the phenomena is not fitting for quantitative inquiry. (as cited in Weatherspoon- Robinson, 2013, p. 90)

This study fits all four of Creswell's characteristics of a qualitative research problem. For example, the research on the lived experiences of Black, female school principals is underdeveloped due to the lack of preceding research. The current leadership theories are not inclusive of the cultural perspectives of Black female leaders, nor are they without bias towards certain traits and characteristics that Black women display as leaders. Additionally, there is a need to explore the experiences and the stories of Black women further. Furthermore, there is also a need to explore the phenomenon of sisterhood and its impact on the leadership experiences of these women in order to advance the theory and phenomenon of sisterhood and sisterly support in leadership.

Phenomenological Approach

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. From the philosophy of phenomenology comes a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness. According to Van Manen (2014), phenomenologists are interested in our “lived experiences” (as cited by Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). The phenomenological approach is a type of qualitative inquiry that is concerned with the experience of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of phenomenological research as described by Johnson & Christensen (2020) is to obtain a view into your research participants’ life-world and to understand their personal meanings (i.e., what something means to them) constructed from their “lived experiences” (p.422). According to Patton (2015), this type of research is based on

the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon... the assumption of essence, like the ethnographer’s assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pg. 26).

Sharing the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white spaces, through their own words, will provide the reader with a clear image of the unique challenges Black women face and the various strategies they use to survive in these settings. Additionally, Black women shared their stories around the spirit of sisterhood and how engaging in this phenomenon influenced and/or impacted their leadership journey. The strategy of inquiry utilized in this study consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with participants to gain their experiences, perceptions, opinions, and knowledge.

Research Questions

As revealed in the research literature, Black women face many obstacles on their journey to leadership. To explore the magnitude of the barriers faced, including those factors that positively or negatively influence the Black woman's journey to leadership, this study posed the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts?
2. How do Black, female principals use sisterhood as a strategy for survival?

Setting

The Midwestern Region of the United States was selected as the geographic location for the research study to provide the researcher with accessibility to potential participants and to ensure an adequate number of participants.

Participants

Creswell (2007) recommends that in a phenomenological study, the participants must be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and that they must be able to speak to that experience. In an effort to obtain a greater understanding of the lived experience of Black, female school leaders and how the phenomenon of sisterhood impacts their leadership journey, the goal to secure four Black women was established based upon those individuals meeting the following criteria: 1) identify as Black or African American; 2) work or have worked (within the past 10 years) as a school principal within a predominately white school district or organization; 3) have participated in the shared ideology of sisterhood or have felt a sense of obligation to form a relationship with another Black woman seeking support.

This research study employed multiple methods of recruitment. The participant selection process occurred in two phases. The initial phase of the participant selection process utilized purposive sampling. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposeful sampling is used when “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). In purposive sampling, the researcher specifies the characteristics of a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals who have these characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 254). Because purposive sampling is a nonrandom sampling technique, the researcher solicited persons with specific characteristics to participate in this study. The researcher’s goal was to secure participants through her own connections; however, if that attempt failed and all four participants were not secured, the researcher was prepared to move forward with her second method of recruitment.

The second method of recruitment utilized snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, each research participant who volunteers to be in a research study is asked to identify one or more additional people who meet certain characteristics and may be willing to participate in the research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 254). Johnson and Christensen (2020) explains this sampling method can be especially useful when you need to locate members of hard-to-find populations; therefore, each of the participants recruited from the purposive sampling were asked to identify other potential research participants.

Participation was requested through an email invitation that included a consent form providing an overview of the study. From the pool of participants described above, four were selected to be interviewed. During the interview process, open-ended questions were asked that allowed the participants to share their lived experiences as Black, female school leaders, the strategies they used to achieve their success, and the obstacles they have had to overcome along

the way. Additionally, the interviews sought to discover the influence that sisterhood has on the leadership experiences of Black, female school principals.

Data Collection

The literature review of this study started the data collection process as it guided the development of the research questions, purpose, and significance. To limit potential bias in the research study, data was collected by conducting in-depth one-on-one interviews. Since the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts and the influence that sisterhood has on their leadership journey, the study employed a semi-structured interview approach, collecting data detailing what the participants experienced, how the experience made them feel, and what they gained from the experience. This format allowed the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in semi-structured interviews:

1. Interview guides include a mix of more and less structured interview questions
2. All questions used flexibly
3. Usually, specific data required from all respondents
4. Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored
5. No predetermined wording or order (p.110).

Because the objective of the study was to gather various perspectives on the lived experiences of Black women in these spaces, this format left the flexibility for the participants to share the good, the bad, and the ugly, providing the space and opportunity to tell their stories, using their voices, which are often omitted from the educational leadership perspective. From this group

of Black women, the researcher also intended to hear how the phenomenon of sisterhood was used as a means of survival to develop, propel, or mentor themselves (or each other) along their journey. For the above reasons, semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to use their voice and tell their stories in ways that assured they could be heard using their own words. Not only did this method allow the researcher to explore a deeper level of understanding and clarity of information, but it also allowed for engaging in reciprocal communication with the participants. Although it was more time consuming compared to structured interview methods, the researcher believes the advantages of gaining the desired information outweighed the disadvantages.

Instrumentation

The subjects were selected based on the information provided in the *Participant* section of this study. The participants were invited to participate in the study verbally via Google Meet by the researcher. A formal invitation letter was emailed to each participant who was interested in participating and is included in the appendix. Additionally, prior to interviews, participants were asked to read and complete an informed consent form. Once the consent form was signed, the virtual interviews began using the Google Meet platform.

Interview process

Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of the participants' responses. Seidman (2006) advocates that the interview takes place in three phases with each phase lasting no longer than 90 minutes to provide sufficient time for the participant to respond to the interviewer's questions. For the above reasons, each interview lasted approximately one hour. The first interview was an opportunity for the participant to share as much information as possible about their life history relative to the research topic and leading up to their present leadership

moment. In the second interview, participants were provided with an opportunity to share details about their lived experiences, including the influence that sisterhood had on their leadership journey. The third and final interview provided the researcher with an opportunity to ask any follow-up questions, in addition to providing participants with an opportunity to reflect on the “meaning” of their experience.

From the interview process described above, the researcher gained thick descriptions that were used to explain and to explore the professional world of these Black women. Not only did it allow the researcher to provide real life narratives, stories, and examples to help readers better understand the experiences of these women, but it also allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon of sisterhood based on the opinions, behavior, and experiences of these Black, female school leaders. Upon collection of the data, the researcher interpreted it for evaluation, making sure that the interpretations of the lived experiences of these Black, female leaders were as precise and detailed as possible.

Validity

Interview: The research questions were developed because of the lack of literature concerning the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders, combined with the review of literature on Black women, sisterhood, and leadership. Creswell (2009) asserts that validity in qualitative research means “that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 100). To ensure that validity is, at least, considered in this qualitative portion of the study, the researcher established clarity on the interview questions by leaning on a panel of experts composed of four professors of education who are also members of the dissertation committee, as well as one additional panel member who has no direct connection to the study in order to provide objectivity.

Additionally, Creswell (2009) also suggests that the researcher can promote validity of the study by “clarifying the bias the researcher brings to the study” (as cited in Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013, p. 101). To do so, the researcher refrained from making any prejudgments or displaying biases and preconceived ideas about the participants’ lived experience or about the phenomenon. This allowed the researcher the ability to receive new knowledge through an open mind, with the goal of absorbing information as if it is the first time learning about the specific topic. This process was vital to the study as it allowed the participants and the researcher to be as transparent and open as possible. According to Van Manen (2014), this level of transparency and openness is a form of *epoche*, in which the researcher brackets or isolates biases to be open to the experience itself (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). During this process, the researcher sets aside everyday understandings, judgement, and knowing and revisits the phenomena. Once the researcher has released any preconceived notions and prejudgments, she can listen attentively to the participants without adding her own opinions or feelings.

Further, triangulation was utilized as Merriam & Tisdell (2016) explains, triangulation- whether you make use of more than one data collection method, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories- is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of your research (p. 245). To increase credibility and validity, participants were able to review the information upon completion of the transcription in a process known as member checking. During member checking, each participant was invited to provide respondent validation of the themes and interpretations to increase the validity of the findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, as cited in McBryde, 2010).

Reliability

Interview: The meaning of qualitative reliability “indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (Weatherspoon- Robinson, 2013, p.101). To ensure reliability of the qualitative portion of this study, the researcher employed a sound protocol in conducting the interview. Additionally, to increase reliability, participants were able to review the information upon completion of the transcription.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was gained through the in-depth interview process. The first step in analyzing qualitative data is to make sure that after all the data is collected, that the researcher takes a step back from as many personal feelings about the work and analyzes it as objectively as possible (Neuman, 2003, as cited in McBryde, 2010, p. 59). According to Johnson and Christensen (2020), a researcher should use the interview data to reduce the statements to the common core or essence of the experience as described by the research participants, searching for *significant statements* (a few words or phrases, a sentence, or a few sentences) that have relevance to the phenomenon being studied. During this process, the researcher will code and group each response, marking segments of the text data with symbols, descriptive words, and/or category names (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020) explain:

“Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to data “chunks” or units of varying size and can take the form of a straightforward, descriptive label or more evocative and complex one (e.g., concepts, value, or metaphor)” (as cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 544).

Because this research employed a phenomenological approach, the researcher searched for significant statements, determined the meaning of statements, and searched for themes and categories that identified the essence of the phenomenon. Johnson and Christensen (2020) explain

it is here that the researcher should use member checking as a validity check whenever possible in this process. For that reason, the researcher had the participants review the interpretations and descriptions of the experience, especially the statement of the fundamental structure of the experience.

Conclusion

Chapter Three began by reintroducing the purpose and the goals of the study followed by the proposed research design. This section included discussion on qualitative research, highlighting the advantages of this design method for the current study. This section also lent itself to the restatement of the research questions, including outlining the setting and the participants. Phenomenological analysis was outlined, and the methods of purposive and snowball sampling were also explained and used as the method of sampling for this study. The process of data collection was explained and outlined, detailing the utilization of semi-structured interviews. Validity and reliability were discussed, including utilizing an expert panel, epoche and bracketing, coders, and triangulation. A discussion of the data analysis process was included, once again explaining the coding process to ensure reliability as well as member checking for validity. In Chapter Four, the actual process is described, including information introducing the participants, the method of data gathering through personal interviews, and the research findings and emergent categories for the study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white school districts, detailing those factors that affect Black women's journey to leadership in these spaces. Aligned with the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, this section consolidates the experiences of Black women for analysis. This chapter presents key insights derived from four in-depth interviews of four Black female school principals. The objective of documenting these experiences was to give voice to the stories of present-day Black, female school leaders as they reflected on their personal and professional growth as Black women and school leaders. Additionally, the objective was also to share the influence that the Black cultural phenomena of sisterhood has had on their leadership journey. From the data collected during interviews, categories were identified, and from these categories, assertions were defined.

Chapter 4 has been divided into four sections. The first section provides a review of frameworks used to initially analyze the data. The second section provides an overview of each interview participant through an individual profile. Section three presents the findings and emergent categories along with responses and reflections shared by each participant. Additionally, a synthesis of the recurring theme from each category is provided. Each of these sections includes direct quotes from the participants. The use of direct quotes provides an understanding of the individual's personal perspectives of their experience. Lastly, the fourth section provides a summary analysis of the categories that emerged.

Review of Critical Race Theory as Theoretical Framework

To examine the lived experiences of Black women in the context of society, Critical Race Theory served as a foundation. The data from the interviews were analyzed using the three primary objectives of CRT: (1) to present stories about discrimination from the viewpoint of people of color; (2) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously acknowledging that race is a social construct; and (3) to deal with other matters of dissimilarity, such as sexuality and class, and any injustices experienced by communities (Parker & Lynn, 2002, as cited in Graham et al., 2011, p. 2). To review, Critical Race Theory (CRT) “focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded within the framework of American society” (Creswell, 2007, p.28). Additionally, CRT focuses on the experiential knowledge of ethnic minorities and their communities of origin with respect to race and race relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT can be used to scrutinize the ways in which race and racism directly and indirectly affect ethnic minorities (Yosso, 2005). Essentially, CRT examines racism as both a group and individual phenomenon that functions on many levels, and it offers a means by which to identify the functions of racism as an institutional and systemic phenomenon (Stovall, 2005, as cited in Graham et. al., 2011, p. 2).

CRT developed in part out of critical legal studies identifying the heavy legacy that haunts the political and legal domains within the US legal system. Within these domains, claims for justice were inadequately addressed, especially since racism continues to directly shape the US legal system and the ways in which people think about the law, about racial categories, and about privilege (Harris, 1993). Now that CRT has made its way into other fields of study such as sociology and education, it is concerned with the racial subordination, the prejudice, and the inequity that continues to exist within these spaces. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) note the following main ideas in CRT: a critique of liberalism, the use of storytelling, the influence of

structural determinism, and examination of the intersections of race, sex, and class, a debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism, a perspective of cultural nationalism/separatism, and the need for a critical pedagogy.

Review of Black Feminist Thought as Theoretical Framework

As a stand-point theory, Black feminist thought creates a space to articulate interlocking forms of oppression and gives voice to Black women's fight for justice. Part of gaining this voice exists in the themes of Black feminist thought. The study of Black feminist thought (Collins 1991, 1998, 2000) is an application of intersectionality because it firmly places Black women at the center of analysis in order to study their experiences, their actions and the knowledge they have gained from these experiences. According to Collins (2000), the multiple aspects of identity mutually construct each other. For Black women, being female influences their experience as Black and being Black influences their experiences as females. Therefore, there is importance for understanding the intersection of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, as cited in Edwards, 2016, p. 65).

For that reason, Black feminist thought supports centering the experiences of Black women leaders, to examine their experiences within their leadership roles. Collins (2000) advocates the need for Black feminist thought and practices as it responds to a fundamental contradiction of U.S. society, highlighting the fact that democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens. Yet, the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists. Because Black women as a group continue to remain oppressed, the need for Black feminist thought will continue to exist. This fact does not mean that all Black women within this group are oppressed in the same way. Instead, it simply means Black feminist thought's identity as a "critical" social theory lies in

its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups (Collins, 2000, p. 9).

According to Howard-Hamilton (2003), “This framework is shaped and produced by the experiences black women have encountered in their lives, even though others have documented their stories” (p.21). As Collins (2000) explains, reclaiming Black women’s ideas involves discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing, in many cases for the first time, the works of Black women thinkers, Black women who have been silenced, and Black women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals. In doing so, Black women can search for voices and expressions in alternative locations while also reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks, clarifying Black women’s experiences and ideas. The need for clarification not only speaks to the power of the dominant group to suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups, but it also illustrates how being in “outsider-within” locations can foster new angles of vision on oppression.

Interview Participants

Four Black, female school principals were selected to participate in the interview phase of this study based on meeting the criteria of: 1) identifying as Black or African American; 2) working or have worked (within the past 10 years) as a school principal within a predominately white school district or organization; 3) have participated in the shared ideology of sisterhood or have felt a sense of obligation to form a relationship with another Black woman seeking support. Interviews were conducted to allow for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of Black women school principals.

During the interview process, open-ended questions were asked that allowed the participants to share their experiences as Black, female school leaders, the strategies they used to

achieve their success, and the obstacles they have had to overcome along the way. Additionally, during the interview process, identified elements that added additional insight into the lives and experiences of each participant then served as the topics for further interview prompts. The additional insights offered during this interview process provided invaluable data points to illustrate a deeper understanding of Black women's experiences while also providing an in-depth view of the phenomenon, which for this study included how sisterhood influences their leadership experience. The four principals selected were assigned pseudonyms that were utilized in the data analysis section and are hence known as Ms. Bella, Dr. Darla, Dr. Carmen, and Dr. Sasha.

Individual Profiles of Interviewees

Ms. Bella

Ms. Bella is a 47-year-old school principal who holds a Master of Science in Elementary Education/Kindergarten. She has teacher and administrator certifications, earning all of her degrees and certifications from institutions in the Midwest. She has over 24 years of experience in education with 13 years as a principal in a large urban school district. Her pathway of experience in education includes being a 2nd, 3rd, & 5th Grade teacher, a Title One Reading Teacher, an Instructional Coach, and an assistant principal. Ms. Bella reports that she does not fit the mold or the average statistics for a person in leadership in the field of education. She was married, divorced, raised by a single parent, she's female, and she's black, all rare characteristics of those in leadership in predominantly white school districts. Yet, she describes her journey as being one that was blessed and highly favored, arranged by God himself. Without His guidance, she believes her journey into leadership would not have been possible. She credits her background and her upbringing as to why she doesn't take anything for granted as well as why she is always lending a

helping hand. She is a member of a few sisterhood groups ranging from her sorority, her church ministry group, and her sisterhood of Black women educators. According to Ms. Bella, one of her goals is to help women grow however she can.

As a young mother of three and a “GG” (grandmother) of two, Ms. Bella describes herself as a strong and independent Black woman who has faced many adversities in life. As a teenage mother who was also born to teenage parents, she recalls spending the majority of her childhood being raised by a single, strong Black woman. Although her parents divorced when she was younger, Ms. Bella details that education was key in her household. According to Ms. Bella, the push for higher education was always there. She credits her mother for laying that foundation, describing her as the rock who always spoke with high expectations, constant affirmation, and relentless love and support to her and her siblings. Even after she became pregnant as a teenager, she recalls all the words of affirmation and positive seed that her mother gave her. She recollects her mother making it very clear that she was disappointed but also reinforcing that fact that she would be alright. “It's not the end of the world”; “You're not the first and you definitely won't be the last to get pregnant as a teenager”; “You will still go to college”; and “You are a beautiful, strong, Black woman”, were all phrases that she recalls hearing repeatedly throughout her childhood. She recollects not even being allowed to say the word “can’t” within her household as her mother believed, reiterated, and reinforced that they could do and be anything they thought they could.

Throughout her elementary, middle, and high school career, Ms. Bella made good grades in school. In elementary and middle school, she was coined the teacher's pet and was often left in charge inside of the classroom. She recalls always having the mindset that she was going to be a teacher because she loved school and she loved learning. Because she grew up in an environment

of poverty, her mother pushed the fact that education was known as the route out. Even after what some would consider a setback of teenage pregnancy in high school, her push for higher education continued. This push she credits to the strong foundation laid by her mother as she never made it seem abnormal that she had a child so young. Instead, she was still supported and encouraged to dream big and to keep going. Ms. Bella reported that although she had to grow up fast, she always had a great support system behind her. She gives thanks to her mom and her sister for making a situation that should have been difficult, a lot easier than most had it. Because of their love and support, she is a self-proclaimed strong, independent Black woman.

Dr. Darla

Dr. Darla holds a doctorate of education in Educational Studies with a focus on Educational Leadership. She also earned the following degrees: Masters in Education, Bachelors in Early Childhood/Kindergarten-Primary Education and Elementary Education. She has teacher, administrator, and superintendent certifications, earning all her degrees and certifications from institutions in the Midwest. She had 23 years of experience in education and 14 years as a principal. At 45 years of age, she is embarking upon a new journey of district leadership, leaving her principal's position to become the district's new Curriculum Coordinator. Her pathway of experience in education includes being an elementary teacher, an assistant principal, and an elementary principal. Not only has she received state recognition for excellence in her position, but she has also started her own consulting firm serving districts across the nation.

Dr. Darla grew up in the Midwest and is the oldest of three girls. She has been married for over 20 years and has three children of her own. She explains how she's had a strong family foundation, a strong church background, and a very strong upbringing. Born to teenage parents who worked very hard to give her and her sisters a great foundation, she felt very supported in her

small town, calling it a great place to be raised. From a young age, she recalls it was always an expectation that education was important and that her parents sent her to school to learn and not mess around. Her parents strongly believed education was the way to the next level. They could often be heard saying, “That’s how you will prosper” and “That's how you will make a better life for yourself”. According to Dr. Darla, they reiterated these points often along with constant words of encouragement, motivation, and affirmations. Although her dad never finished school and her mom graduated after having her, Dr. Darla describes her parents as some of the smartest people she knows. She recalls how they were always telling her how smart she was, reminding her that she was going to do great things in this world.

Dr. Darla was the kid that always wanted to be a teacher but never an administrator. She loved learning and going to school; however, there were many times where she was the only person of color in the space. This experience continued throughout her educational career and now her professional career. Because she’s usually been the only person of color in her spaces, she experienced the racism that the world can bring starting as a little girl. For this reason, she was taught from an early age to stand up for herself. She credits her boldness and courage to her family upbringing and her dad reinforcing, “don't let these people treat you like that:” “You tell them what they're going to do; You tell them how it's going to be; If you let people walk over you, that's what they are going to do.” These phrases have been constant reminders throughout her life to speak up for herself whenever she needs to and to keep fighting the good fight.

Dr. Carmen

Dr. Carmen holds a doctorate of education in Education Administration. She also has earned a Master of Science in Secondary Administration and a Bachelor of Science in Secondary English/Education. She has a teacher, an administrator, and a superintendent certification. She

earned all her certifications from institutions in the Midwest, having almost 30 years of experience in education and 14 years as a principal. Her pathway of experience in education includes being a High School English teacher, a Middle/Junior High School Assistant Principal, and a Ninth Grade Center Assistant Principal. Currently, she serves as a Middle School Principal in a large suburban school district in the Midwest. Additionally, Dr. Carmen serves as the President of the State Association of School Principals and is known for making history by becoming the first Black female to be principal in her district almost 14 years ago. Additionally, this also meant she became the First Black principal within her county. Not only has she been named the State Middle School Principal of the Year, but her building and staff have been featured in ED weekly magazine as well as featured in a documentary on their instructional practices.

Born to a teenage mother, Dr. Carmen grew up living with her grandmother, her aunts, and her uncles. Although she moved around a lot as a little girl, she explains she had a strong sense of family. She credits this upbringing as to why she was very rooted in the church. She has lived in various states and countries; however, even as a little girl, she recalls “feeling some type of way” because the schools were segregated while others were desegregated. She reflected over living in a tiny house, in a crowded neighborhood and seeing the bigger houses on her way to elementary school. It was at this young age that she realized what a difference it was between the black world and the white world. After moving to North Carolina with her military stepdad and her mother, Dr. Carmen recalls hating it. She recollects going through a lot of racial issues and experiencing a lot of blatant racism. She reports hating going to school and riding the bus because it was overcrowded and there were kids on the bus who would always tell racist jokes. She recalls this being a difficult time for her; however, she credits this awareness as having a really huge impact on her life. She believes it was this thinking and this realization that started her down her path of

really wanting to research more about desegregation and the impact it has on the African American community.

Despite some of her experiences in school, Dr. Carmen has always loved school and loved working with children. She recalls people would often talk about how she was able to command respect from younger kids and get them to do just about anything that they needed to do. She remembers having a lot of compassion from teachers growing up, which she believes, culminated in her choice of wanting to be a teacher. Throughout her educational career, she recalls having black and white teachers that were very strong and committed to education whether she was in Germany, Indiana, or North Carolina; however, she does not credit any one person for placing her on the trajectory of becoming an educator. Instead, she credits these teachers for building her confidence as a young girl as they sprinkled blessings throughout her life that made her feel that she could be whatever she wanted to be.

Dr. Sasha

Dr. Sasha is a 34-year-old school principal who holds a doctorate in Educational Administration and Leadership, a Masters' degree in Education and a Bachelor's degree in English and History. She has a teacher, an administrator, and a superintendent certification, earning all her degrees and certifications from institutions in the Midwest. Dr. Sasha has served as a High school English teacher, an assistant principal, and an elementary principal in large urban school districts for over 12 years. Currently, she serves as the Middle school principal in a large urban school district of over 32,000 students. She has received various awards as a school leader ranging from the Junior Achievements 40 under 40 as well as the African American Excellence in Achievement Award.

Dr. Sasha comes from a proud family tradition of service in urban education, as both of her parents worked in the field of education. Her mother was an elementary school teacher, while her father was a principal and superintendent for many years. Within her home, she reports her parents had a culture of high achievement. There were no excuses to be had within their household. She credits their desire of high achievement as her push to always do the best that she could do. Even when it was hard, she credits their support and words of affirmation for giving her a sense of ability to persevere. According to Dr. Sasha, this type of support transcends the feelings of wanting to quit, advocating that she is in competition with herself and always wanting to do better than the last year or prior to.

Dr. Sasha is the youngest of three siblings, having a sister who is four years older as well as a brother who is 10 years older. As children with parents in education, she reports their profession allowed her and her siblings to view education very respectably. She saw their passion for urban education and for students of color and how much work this profession required. She recalls sitting at the table with her family and hearing the stories of kids who'd had light bulb moments as well as the seemingly rewards and benefits of being in the profession. Dr. Sasha explains education has always been respected in her family, along with always doing your best and always caring about others.

Throughout her elementary school career, Dr. Sasha went to a predominantly white elementary school which she felt was very lackluster. During her middle school and high school career; however, all schools she attended were predominantly black. During high school, she recalls attending a special program that was medically focused due to her enjoyment of math and science. She remembers wanting to be a neurosurgeon like her role model at the time, Dr. Ben Carson, who she eventually ended up meeting as a student. It wasn't until an experience as a

summer camp counselor did she realize her love for teaching elementary and middle school students. It was here that she realized that she did not like science as much as her parents wanted her to. She had an awakening that she was only pursuing this career path because it was what her parents wanted her to do. Consequently, Dr. Sasha decided to pursue a career in education, against her parents' desires and wishes and considers it one of the best decisions that she has made.

Conclusion of Individual Profiles

The four Black women who participated in this research study have diverse life stories and range in age from 35 to 51. For that reason, this research presents a glimpse into the multi-dimensional, multi-layered, multi-faceted lives of Black women. The individual profiles of each Black woman who participated in the in-depth interview phase of this study, presents a peek into understanding each participant's personal background, life experiences, and perspectives. It would be inadequate to attempt to summarize the depth of these individuals' life experiences as Black women in either a table or graph. The patterns and themes that are analyzed in this chapter are based upon data that emerged from both the literature review and the voices and life stories of the women in this study.

Findings: Emergent Categories

Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were analyzed and coded to allow categories to emerge. During this process, the researcher coded and grouped each response, marking segments of the text data with descriptive words and/or category names. The researcher searched for significant statements, determined the meaning of statements, and searched for patterns that identified the essence of the Black, female school principals' lived experiences along with the phenomenon of sisterhood. Additionally, it was here that the researcher used member

checking as a validity check, asking participants to review their statements and descriptions of their experiences, especially the statement of the fundamental structure of the experience. Many of the categories were directly related to the questions being asked by the researcher; however, several categories emerged due to similar experiences that were shared by two or more principals during their answering. The coded interview data were then organized by the common categories that emerged.

Seven categories emerged from this data and include (1) Systemic Racism within Predominantly White Districts/Organizations & Institutions, (2) Treatment through stereotypes and microaggressions, (3) Internal Struggles (4) Health Concerns, (5) Need/Desire to prove others wrong and to stand up for oneself, (6) Sisterhood, (7) Authenticity. The categories are aligned with the overall research questions guiding this study, which were:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts?
2. How do Black, female principals use sisterhood as a strategy for survival?

Category One- Systemic Racism within Predominantly White Districts/Organizations & Institutions

One of the central and prevailing categories that emerged from this study was the racially unsafe space these women found themselves in. The oppressive, racist environments described by the participants created realities of having to choose between saving themselves from continued traumatic experiences and continuing the pipeline of educators of color, especially women, in a predominantly white school district. Because educational leadership, whether in predominantly white locations or not, have historically been occupied almost exclusively by White men, certain aspects of these predominantly white school districts, organizations, and even institutions seem to

employ racial and gendered stereotypes and microaggressions that consequently cause Black women to employ survival strategies. In response to the perceived intimidation that occurs in a White male-dominated educational context, Black women are often torn between what is healthiest for them or continuing to endure the trauma in the name of advancement for leaders of color with aspirations of leading and educating children. Being both Black and female are the intersecting social constructs that create the need to address the racism and the oppression they experience head on. In their fight to be seen as equals on their leadership journey, Black women have appeared to resist the social constructions of racism, creating opportunities that would not ordinarily exist for them. Below, participants provided examples in which the intersectionality of their identities as Black, and as female, appeared to be at work in these traumatic environments.

Ms. Bella:

There are things that are systemically placed on us as black women. These systemically placed things can sometimes cause us to place ourselves in certain stereotypes that they have created for us. Think about it, same thing with the whole role between the woman and the man and how we place ourselves in that category. We do the same with believing that black women have to work even harder than everyone else. That's a stereotype that we have continued to do to ourselves because it's been systemically embedded within us.

Ms. Bella reports:

Organizations are starting to realize the need for cultural diversity and responsive conversations because their behavior and treatment has been brought to their attention. We can now see this same shift moving into the school system. The thing is, it's not new to us. It's new to them, but we have been living this all of our lives... We're black. Yes, we are excited about the equity work that our district is starting to do and excited to serve in this capacity but don't act like it is new to us because we have been living it all of our lives as Black people. I'm actually loving being a part of this journey we're on and helping our district and school continue to learn and share on this topic.

Ms. Bella explains:

I think there are moments of appreciation, when you can tap into the expertise of talking about culture, even though sometimes it's not always received. But I think when they need you, I feel that there is value sometimes for you. Just not all the time. The big institutions sometimes capitalize on your strength and your lack of fear. But for us, we're always making sure we're treading the lines like we're supposed to so that they don't catch us coming sideways. And they know this. They know we are not afraid of hard work. We're not afraid, you know, to push to the next level. I think the strength of us to do the hard stuff that they may not want to do adds to our value for them.

They want me to put my blackness to the side, but I can't put it to the side. I'm not willing to put it to the side. I'm not being disrespectful because I am black. It's not like I'm just going to support black because I'm black. I'm going to support everyone.

In these predominantly white spaces, there's this belief that "you must be different" because of your position or your education. Even your black families assume that you must be different, which was always very surprising to me. But I'm not. I understand the struggle. I understand the statistics that say that there's no way that I should be sitting in the seat that I am sitting in.

Dr. Darla:

These organizations were not created with our needs in mind. We were kind of like placeholders at the table to show diversity is here. They needed to show the world, Oh, we do have people of color in our administration. But when it comes to the needs of race, power, racism, nobody wants to look at that because that couldn't possibly be their organization. So, I feel as though we look good for people in white organizations, but they don't want to do that real work. So, when we begin to push and demand for that work to take place, then all of a sudden, we cause an issue. They start to say there was nothing wrong before you got here...until so and so got here and yada, yada, yada. I know within these last couple of years, there has been more pushback. As a person who has been in administration for 18 years, I've heard and seen so much. I knew that it was for the look. I realized they thought that I looked a certain way... the way that they thought I should look. And because of that, they thought I was gonna play this game. But then they found out they got something totally different than what they expected to get... an actual black woman. They thought I was gonna play the game with them and toe the line, but when there is injustice being done, I just can't. I just can't sit there and watch it. I've gotten to the point where I tell them. I shared with them at one point, if this is who you are, I'm probably not the right person for this spot.

Dr. Darla explains:

I don't want to have to wear a mask. At this point, I won't. I feel like anyone who feels that they're different, and I'm talking different as in race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, whatever... Anything outside of that dominant culture narrative. Those are the people who feel they have to put on a mask when they enter these spaces. They cannot be real. They cannot talk the way they like to talk. They cannot share what they want to share. They have to basically be fake... like a masquerade ball... like, let me just put this mask on and get through this and then I can get the heck up out of here.

There is this disbelief that white people have that we cannot be intelligent or that we must be the exception to the rule. But that's not true. We ARE actually doing great things; they just don't want to highlight it or acknowledge what we are doing. This is why we sometimes develop the whole imposter syndrome or why certain stereotypes really do threaten us. They want to always make excellence an exception for black people. Since you are doing good, you must be special. You must not be like them (other Black people). Well actually... We are not the exception...

Dr. Darla reports:

I've felt this whole "different" thing being around them for so long, I just started responding that I'm actually just like them. It's just that nobody believed in them. We are not the exception to the rule, we are not different or special. We ARE like other black people.

When we step into a room, we have to prove that we belong in that space. Whereas, they just walk in the space, and they could be brand new, yet, they're like... Hey, I'm here. I got something to offer. This is who I am. We, on the other hand, have to be quiet or are told don't sit together with all your sisters. We have to do so many mental exercises just to go into their space. Like I said, this creates that whole imposter syndrome of, am I good enough to be here? Then people try to think I'm cocky when I know I'm supposed to be here. It's a no-win situation.

Dr. Carmen:

... And so what I found in my research was that there's a hierarchy to leadership, particularly in education, where you have the white man, then the black man and the white woman, and then the black woman. And even with that, typically, you have the white male, of a high school, and you have a white female of an elementary school. There is this belief that we cannot manage and lead white people, and a lot of it has to do with stereotypes. I remember when I did my interview, one of the school board members asked me how would you relate to white children? And I kind of paused for a minute thinking, did you ask these other white people how they can relate to white kids or how they gonna relate to black kids. I remember thinking in that split second that these concerns are real, like, they really thought that I was

not going to be out here handling these kids. Now, even though I came from a mixed race school, most of my kids were white, you know, we were coming close to 50/50. I just remember telling them that I relate to children. I love kids regardless of race and that my background experiences of living overseas and living in North Carolina had created me for this position... so it has nothing to do with race, it has to do with how I'm going to make these kids' lives better in the capacity that I serve. But there is a very real fear.

Dr. Carmen suggests:

Like I said before, there is this real belief that we cannot manage and lead white people. I think what happens is, when you're in an all-white community, there's definitely this sense of entitlement. I think it's really hard for them to sometimes open up their doors and opportunities to people of color because I think that there is this belief that we are less than. So, it's crazy because why am I the first black principal in my district in all of this time? I was even the first black person in the entire county. Even since then, we've had a couple of Black females, one was a friend of mine, who got run off because the people did not like them. It's kind of like the same reason why a lot of these communities are talking about this whole CRT thing. They have no idea what critical race theory is. They just know that they don't want it because they don't want to talk about racism. They don't want to be made to feel bad about privilege and power and all those things. I just think it's that simple. I think that there's just a fear or a belief that we are inferior and that we're not going to do the best possible job that we can do on the job. And again, it goes back to that hierarchy. Even in schools if you look around, most of your superintendents are white men. Most of your high school principals are white men. I just think that they don't want to give us those opportunities based upon the stereotypes that we have been given unfortunately, as Black women.

So, this leads to a fear in general of black women in leadership and all the stereotypes that come along with it. Especially being in a white school district in a white community. When you're steeped in whiteness, I just think that there's a fear anytime someone of a different color tries to enter. For example, I think it was very interesting that several more people, once they found out that a Black woman was going to be the principal, decided that they wanted to leave. When they had the chance before, you know, before knowing who the principal would be, they waited... but once they found out I was black, they were gone. So, there's already this fear and add to that a fear of having a new principal, it's a lot. I think it's just that fear of the unknown. Who is she? How's it going to be to work for her? And we all get that when we have a new boss, right? But I think with a black woman, it's magnified based upon implicit biases.

Dr. Carmen recalls:

I have seen black women be pinned against each other, particularly pinned against someone who was more likely to play the game. I just trust and believe in God that He is my source. And that I'm not going to play any games with anybody and

compromise who I am just to get another job position. I have not been promoted by the white people that I work for because of the very reasons that I've given. I simply refuse to compromise who I am. I believe that God has something bigger, greater, and more awesome for me. If I just wait on Him, it will happen.

What's so interesting to me is that I am the President of the State Association of School Principals. I still recall the Executive Director talking about how years ago, when membership was at its lowest, they looked around and realized there was no diversity there... just a bunch of white men. He called it the good ole boys network in education. I'm so glad that now they're trying to make changes and include more women. But then I think, hopefully more black and brown people will follow.

I have been doing this for almost 30 years in a mostly white area. They've gotten better in terms of hiring people of color since I became the first Black female leader; however, I still do not see many people of color in central office roles like assistant superintendents and things like that.

Dr. Sasha:

I think the mindset of some predominantly white districts or organizations towards Black women is that we can't, we're not able, and we're not capable. They have a fixed mindset that they're in power and that they're the authority. A lot of the white people that I ran into would ask to see the principal or the person in leadership and I would come out. They would refuse to speak to me. Instead, they would go above me, you know, to speak to my boss. But then my boss would give the same directive that I would have given, or my boss tells him to go back to the school to talk to me because that's a school issue, not a district level issue. And so, it was a lot of those power struggles. That happened a lot. I would also say that a lot of that fixed mindset was that they could talk to you any kind of way. I think that they still believe that they have more power than you. Especially in regards to how they would talk to you and how they train their children to speak to you. So often, the children would be just as disrespectful as their parents. It was because the parents had taught them that you don't have to respect that individual. Kids would get suspended and the parent would still send their kid the very next day. It was confusing, like, just completely disregarding what I said or what was done. Some of the teachers would do some of the same kinds of things. You'd go through a professional development, give them some ideas about classroom management. Give them strategies for discipline and all of those kinds of things. And they would still have the same classroom management issues and wouldn't use any of the strategies. They didn't believe that they would work for them because they're white. To them, those strategies would only work for a black person, not understanding that the strategies were universal and actually research-based strategies not based on any kind of race. So just a lot of power struggles, in regard to just respect.

Dr. Sasha explains:

Historically, we've always been the lowest rung of all social ladders. You have women, who are already considered lesser than and didn't even have the ability to vote. At the same time, we've always been at home, supposedly cooking and cleaning, child rearing and all of that. Then you put on top of that, being black and the most disenfranchised population of people that can be. And so, we are constantly having to fight against stereotypes, actual social justice, and the systemic issues that are in our society. Every single day, you gotta put on your combat boots as if you're going to war. You're not necessarily always going to war against white people, but you're also going to work in what could seem like a war-like environment. We talk so much about the racism that exists in their spaces, but there's also issues that we have within our own race. Issues with black men and the lack of respect that they have for the Black woman. When you compile all of that with my age, it's just always a hard, hard battle. And sometimes you feel like you're always losing.

I have other friends (Black women) who work in leadership in predominantly white organizations that are non-educational and to hear their stories... all of our stories are very similar. And so, I think that we're all facing the same situation in terms of racial experiences and encounters. It's definitely not for the faint of heart. Black women just have to keep going to open these doors. I truthfully wouldn't choose to do anything else. There's nothing else that would fulfill me the way that this does. It takes a certain level of grit and perseverance. It's challenging but it's a challenge that I welcome every single day. And, you know, I love being a black woman. I think that makes me the best person for the job because I am a black woman.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category One: Systemic Racism within Predominantly White Districts/Organizations & Institutions

For Black women who are acutely aware of their history, working in predominantly white school districts can cause them to recognize certain patterns of history repeating itself in these spaces. Recognizing the hierarchy of leadership and recalling that Black women were once the lowest on the social ladder causes many Black women to feel that they do not belong or that they are not considered good enough. Some feel they must be overly prepared as a method or as a social behavior to meet the expectations placed on them by the organization. Because of the endless stereotypes, the feelings of being used and abused, or the unrealistic expectations to place their blackness to the side, all four participants shared battles they constantly fight just to be seen as an

equal. On a daily basis there may be power struggles meant to remind black women of their place. Due to fixed mindsets and the assumption that they must be the exception, there is a pressure placed on Black women to wear masks and to play the game. For that reason, some Black women do not always make it within these types of oppressive environments. Instead, they are shunned and replaced with a new Black representative that will be more willing to conform and play the game that the other Black woman failed to play. Unfortunately, it is a traumatic cycle that many Black women hope to one day dismantle within the system.

Category Two- Treatment Through Stereotypes & Microaggressions

Another prevailing category of this study was the treatment received by all four participants as they led in predominantly white school districts. As a result of their race and gender, factors outside of their control, these Black women recalled being subjected to negative treatment throughout their leadership journey. Scholar and author of Black feminist thought, Patricia Collins, wrote:

In U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. Negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (Collins, 2009, p.7)

The participants describe oppressive personal and professional experiences that they viewed as a result of the stereotypes and perceptions attached to their race and/or gender, including the treatments they received. In each example provided, the intersectionality of their identities as Black, and as female, appeared to be at work. This analysis of their multiple identities caused them to be stereotyped, mistreated, and often viewed as threats in order to regulate their behavior and to suppress and/or inhibit their advancement.

s. Bella:

As a Black woman, I have not had the same opportunities as my colleagues/counterparts nor the same treatment. If and when we choose to speak up and/or to disagree with the majority, we are usually made to feel like outsiders. I started feeling the divide after I disagreed with information that was presented in a meeting about my school. At this particular meeting, incorrect information and data was presented and shared with others without even asking for my input on my school. After speaking up, you could tell by the divide and the silent treatment that I was in trouble. All I was doing was trying to fight for resources and services for my kids by pointing out the incorrect information and correcting the narrative that was being told about my school. I explained that I can show you the correct data if you'd asked; however, you didn't. They had an entire retreat about my school and didn't invite me or ask me for the data; yet they expected me not to correct them and state the facts? This is one of the reasons why Black women feel undervalued or not valued enough. Oftentimes, our input is not even asked for.

Ms. Bella advocates:

They really do make every effort to make sure that you understand that you are still just a black woman. Through the use of subtle, disrespectful comments that are obviously towards you or treatment as if you are invisible, they let you know that you may be smart, but you're not going to be the smartest person in the room. Whether you are or are not, they are going to make sure that you understand you are not going to be the smartest person in the room. They make it clear that you may be in charge of your school, but if I want to exert my energy, I will, and you will quickly know your place... Know your place by knowing that you are inferior. It's hurtful knowing that you can be giving your all and still be treated unfairly for no apparent reason.

Coming to me is really never anything for my benefit, even though they try to blow smoke to make it seem like it is. Instead, it's really just for their benefit. I honestly don't feel like I really have anyone to look out for me within my supervisory positions. It is so obvious that there is differential treatment. I want you to invest in me and look out for my good like you do your white counterparts. Instead, they send us in to set the building up for the white administrator to come in and be set up for success. No one cares enough to set us up for success. We have to go in and make our own way to success. We are sent in as the change agents. Keep in mind, we are good enough for certain schools within the district but not for others. So, like I said, we are sent in and asked to shake up buildings or to continue the equity and inclusion work in certain buildings so that the work will not be lost. So, we end up taking these positions and these moves, even though they are usually lateral moves; yet we do not receive the recognition or acknowledgment for the work that we are continually asked to move and do. They'll acknowledge us in private but not in public. We are not nominated for awards like our white counterparts, nor do we receive recognition for our work. Instead, they just try to work us to death.

Ms. Bella reveals:

I also feel that I am judged differently because of the color of my skin and how I have to present myself with my clothing or my hair or how I have to articulate myself. It's just different for us. And I also feel that in my profession, some things that my colleagues do that they may not get in trouble for, it would be easier to discipline me than my white colleagues. So automatically, it doesn't matter how nice I am or how good I am in my profession, there is still a way that I am looked upon. Especially early on in my career as a young black girl who was also a single mother working with these white middle-aged women.

I can remember when a few white males wanted to know why we (Black women) always sat together. I remember thinking, why are you concerned about where we sit as though it's Black girls coming in here and sitting together all the time? Why is that a problem? Did you not look at your table and notice that you sit with all white people every time?... But it is just like a problem or feels like a threat if we're all gathered together and talking. We're just like, oh God, okay, y'all know we got to separate... But that's ridiculous for us to even have to feel that it's real. Yes, they usually say it in a joking sense but we still feel that pressure like all eyes on us. I remember this one time this white lady walked up all boldly and said, "Oh can I join your sister girl group?" Who does that? But that is what happens to black women in groups all the time. We don't go up to their groups and ask to join their white groups. We're just judged automatically because we have this sisterly bonding and because we're black. It's like it's a bad thing. Without the love that is shown from this sister group, I honestly don't know where the support would be. It's important for them to know we talk a little bit, that we have conversations, that we support each other. We get advice and suggestions from each other on how to handle certain situations and even sometimes handle things together. It wasn't a secret; we just didn't make it open. So, I was intentional about letting them know about this relationship. We talked about issues and concerns on the side, and when you're bringing something to me that you may have said something to her, I want you to know that I already know about it.

Dr. Darla:

When you know you've put in all this work and your colleagues around you do half of what you do, but yet, they're the ones getting the awards and being recognized while we're the ones over here sacrificing... sacrificing our lives... that's the part that makes it so hard. Because you know that you are exceptional, especially when compared to them. They don't even come close to us. And so, you see it. We're good enough to work at the school level, but we're not good enough to work at the higher levels.

I've learned that people treat you differently depending on who you are. As a black woman, when we step into a room, we have to prove why we are in that space. Because of the stigmas in society that we are not smart enough and that we couldn't

possibly be more qualified for this work than a white person, we have to prove ourselves. Sometimes I think we do it by trying to make ourselves smaller so as not to appear as a threat. Imagine the effects that has on someone. We learn to not say too much... You monitor what you say. You keep your mouth closed. You affirm them. You make them feel special and wonderful. You learn that your job is to make them feel comfortable and not to bring too much discomfort to the scenario by not challenging them too much. Even if you know that you have something that's just as good or better to offer, you just keep your mouth closed. And then you make yourself so small, like you're almost invisible. Especially when you're the only one here and so you can't rock the boat too much. Most decide to just go along to get along and do what we have to do. This is why I started to speak up. I am good enough to be here. I know I'm supposed to be here as I belong in every space that I enter. It's not being cocky. It's knowing your worth and the value that you bring to this organization.

Dr. Carmen:

We are always being ignored. I'm actually having a hard time now with the microaggression of trying to minimize my accomplishments. I am constantly being overlooked for awards and things like that... and again, having some of my accomplishments being minimized even in my school. Like they are making a deliberate effort to say, she's not that great or her schools are not that good. I remember one time, my Superintendent talked about how our school had the highest growth rate on our state standardized test. My school was the only school to have the highest growth rate and to pass all four quadrants... and that's out of the 22 schools we have in our district. And so, he said something like, "Oh, well, yeah, that's, that's great... but he could not attach it to my leadership." Now, when test scores are low, and we don't perform well, it's about me and what I did or didn't do. So, just not getting the recognition, or the kudos, or the accolades is just another example of just some of the microaggressions that you deal with to make you feel smaller.

Even though we usually have more experience and a better degree, I've noticed that they put the white woman in charge of the white schools with the least issues. I don't know if it's because of that whole myth of the strong black woman and that we can take it. But it's just crazy to me. We already know the myth of the strong black woman is steeped in racial stereotyping, right from the black woman being the caregiver and the backbone of just about everybody. I think that there's this belief, even for us as Black women, that we are superhuman and that we can take it all on. I do believe we've got to take some responsibility for buying into that as well. Even for me, a lot of what I do, I do it because I believe that I can... and oftentimes, I don't always ask for help. Just because we make it look easy doesn't mean that it always is easy. I think that that's where that myth comes from. People don't know the hours that I spend working or the times that I'm upset. They don't know the times that I've spent crying or the times that I'm telling my friends about stuff that I need to get done. I just get it done. I don't want to say that it's a sign of weakness to go ask for help because I've asked for help before. But I think, for me,

when given a task, I just try to do it and make it happen. Because we do things sometimes and we make it look easy, people automatically think we got it and that we can do it. Nothing bothers her. She's teflon. Actually, I'm not... but you've given me a job to do and I'm going to try to do it. Whereas, I think sometimes with white women, you know, they're to be protected. They don't always get the hard pass that we get. It's just different. I think it's just a different demeanor in how we are treated overall. And because of how we've been treated, as a result, we act like, "I guess I better do what nobody else is going to do for me"... So, it's kind of cyclical almost. My hope and my goal has always been to break down those barriers, those thoughts, and that treatment. I hate it because I see so many of my wonderful young sisters getting passed over for those positions and then having to find their niche in other jobs that are not their dreams. Once we recognize this pattern, like when I talk to people about my dissertation, I scream to the rooftops that it's all based on stereotypes.

Dr. Carmen recollects:

I recall having to have a conversation about a black woman's tone. I've had some people who would try to say that because of the Black woman's tone and how she speaks, it makes people afraid. I've had to have several conversations with people where they didn't necessarily like what I was saying, however, if what I was saying was coming from someone of a different skin tone, it probably would have been taken better. Because of the tone, they felt like I was angry at them. I've had to explain a couple of times when I didn't like the behavior that I'm seeing exhibited, my tone is not going to be singgy or songy. But that doesn't mean that I am angry right now. And so, I think there's this issue for some people that when they have to take feedback from us, and it's negative feedback, it's misconstrued as something other than what it is. I've noticed that my assistant principal can say some of the same things that I've said, and it's taken better because of how he says it. So that's where the whole angry Black woman thing kind of comes into play. I'm not one who usually backs down from a challenge nor am I going to sit here and smile all the time. I have a right to be angry when I am in fact angry or when I feel like being angry. I know how I feel. And so, it's unfortunate when people are intimidated because they start to feel inferior and then they try to destroy your credibility as a Black woman. It's really sad. They want us to ultimately know that as white people, typically they yield the power.

I have discovered that when you are a confident, competent black woman, the whole angry black woman myth serves to justify how people treat you or don't treat you. For black men, I have found out that they're deemed as arrogant when people don't want to deal with them. Similarly, I have heard that as a smart black woman, I can be intimidating to others. If I have an opinion, it can make others feel I have an issue. I can recall a situation in which I had an assistant superintendent who stereotyped me as being angry. And when that didn't stick, because the people that knew me, knew that's not how I carry myself, he tried to instead say that I didn't share my knowledge with other people. And so when I was meeting with my director, this white guy, and he said, "Yeah, Crystal, there's a perception that you

don't share.” And I'm like, “What are you talking about? When you were a principal, have you forgotten about all that I shared with you?” He then went on to explain that a particular colleague was saying this because when I do book studies and when I provide PD, I don't tell my colleagues what I'm doing or what to do. I thought to myself, are you kidding me... If they ask me, I will share everything that I have. And I told him, I said, what really makes me mad or what really pisses me off, is that that's your job. Your job is to provide that type of information to me and my colleagues. It's not my job. And I said, at this point in my career, I feel like I'm damned if I do speak up and I'm damned if I don't speak up... And right now, I just don't give a damn. I thought for sure that I had lost my job after that. But for me, that was me calling out the bullshit. Because if I hadn't, they would still try to carry on that same narrative. And I'm like, No. I'm not gonna let you define me like that. We're not going to play this game. And so, I think for me, after being in my role for so long, I just stopped playing it safe. And I started trusting God more. I felt like if this is not where I'm supposed to be, He was going to lead me someplace else. I'm just trying to do my best job, that's it. But with that I realized, being my authentic self was very intimidating to a lot of people. The fact that I seek information out and that I am always looking, reading, and trying to learn what's coming down the pipeline in education is intimidating for some people. A lot of my white colleagues didn't do that. So, when we would have conversations, I'm able to speak to stuff. Because I could do that, well then it became she's a know-it-all. No, that's not it at all. I'm just always trying to be the best leader I can be. So, we have it tough out here as Black women. But I do believe we have to stay the course, call the mess out when we see it, and hold people accountable for their issues, not allowing them to make them our issues.

Dr. Sasha:

I think that we've all probably experienced some pushback from people that didn't always like what we've had to say, especially when it came to dealing with certain people or just changes and improvements. We get a lot of pushback because of whatever thought and belief that they have in their head about us. Because of that, I think we've all had to deal with stereotypes. I remember a situation where someone came into the school and stated they wanted to talk to the assistant principal or to the man in the office. I remember saying, “Oh, you can talk to him, but I'm his boss and I'm gonna tell him what to do...So have at it”. I think situations and experiences like this are just way too common. Just having your position and your authority challenged all the time, sometimes by your teachers, but more so by white parents, is exhausting. Even my black parents, who can sometimes be the worst, are relentless. They try to make it a personal issue when it really isn't personal at all.

Dr. Sasha explains:

As Black women, we are all affected by these stereotypes. We work really hard to make sure that we do not fall into that stereotype of being angry, being dumb, being ghetto, anything along those lines; yet we are often being passed over. I know I have a lot of incredible friends with doctorates that have been passed over for

positions that they were more than qualified for. I don't ever want anybody to think that I got the job just because I was black. So, it's always wanting to be better, wanting to be the best that I can be, wanting to be a role model to my students of color. I want them to see that you can be a person of color who is highly educated, and who is, somewhat not at the top... but at the higher end of their career in terms of career trajectory.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Two: Treatment Through Stereotypes & Microaggressions

For Black women, the evidence is clear that there is a stark difference between their treatment and that of their white counterparts. Because of certain stereotypes, perceived identities, and judgements placed on Black women, they are often met with unfair treatment. When and if they choose to challenge the system and/or to speak up against any of the injustices they experience, they are often shunned. Consequently, they may also be met with pushback and mistreatment through various forms of microaggressions such as invisibility, isolation, silencing, being ignored, overlooked, undervalued, and/or alienated. All these tactics are intended to make Black women feel inferior and keep them in their place. At the same time, these various forms of treatment are used to make them feel like outsiders, not worthy of advancement nor of awards and recognition. Instead, Black women should know to stay separated from one another, keep quiet, and work hard. In doing so, they may be allowed to continue to serve in their current capacity. The forms of oppression described and detailed by all four participants communicating why Black women often feel they are treated differently than their peers all align with the literature related to negative stereotypes assigned to Black women and the treatment they often receive.

Category Three- Internal Struggles

The third prevailing category revealed throughout the study was the internal struggles Black women experience as a result of their desire to lead schools, especially when serving in

predominantly white school districts. The internal struggles of leading while Black can sometimes take both a mental and an emotional toll on Black women's well-being. Feeling the burden of representation, having to serve as the spokesperson for one's race and one's gender group, and having to deal with the covert and subtle insults from one's peers and/or bosses can be rather difficult to deal with. Although both White women and Black women may confront negative gender stereotypes and treatment, "women of color most often have to attend to all of the areas of minority difference for them and how these sources of identity influence their struggle to achieve success and feel comfortable in majority dominated organizations" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p.173). The traumatic experience of being stereotyped, mistreated, and viewed as threats can cause Black women to experience mental anguish that most women do not forget. The internal struggles of serving in predominantly white spaces appeared to be at work in every participant's journey.

Ms. Bella:

Nobody even knows about the internal struggles that we're dealing with at the same time. We just continue to work because it is all for the children. If I really stop to think about all of the struggles we've been through to get where we are, those stereotypes do start to get into our heads and come into play. We begin to doubt ourselves because we've been trained to believe these stereotypes from a very early age. It's that systemic piece that we have to hate, and we have to recognize within ourselves. I think some of the struggles black women face is that we are looked upon to be able to take it all and to handle it all... we are expected to handle way more than others. I think we know what we have, and that we usually understand that what we have is enough... but somewhere, we start to question ourselves. We start to question how we're going to say this or articulate ourselves in such a way that we don't come off in a stereotypical way or as the angry black woman... or whoa is me. I think we're always constantly questioning how we're going to approach something or if we don't question it, are we just going to go with it? We are constantly having to explain or defend ourselves, our actions, and our approaches. We have to over explaining things in a certain manner so that they are not always called into question. This is why we are forced to develop thick skin. It's hurtful knowing that we can be giving our all and still get treated unfairly for no apparent reason other than our color.

We have been taught to treat people how you want to be treated, but that's not always what we get in return. I think my background of just how I grew up and just working in ministry and believing you are here for a purpose shapes what I do and how I do it. Even with the stereotypes and belief that we can't do it, that you're not smart enough, that you're not smarter than me...we still have to keep pushing. I feel that I'm here to serve a God given purpose and he has me here to do the job. So, the storms may come, but I know that I will make it through. Without God, I probably would have been gone a long time ago or been in jail or something. I'm just saying... it's been difficult.

Ms. Bella recalls:

I did not expect to experience so many teachers not giving their best to their students. Because so many people decide to go or to leave, whether you push them or they leave on their own accord, you still start to question yourself. You begin to question, is this a good trait or a bad trait that I'm causing people to leave. I truly did not think I would be helping so many people out of a teaching position or out of the building. It hit me hard and caused me to question and struggle with, am I going to be known as THAT principal? I recall this one time my boss made a joke that if you wanted to get rid of a person that you haven't been able to get rid of, then you could just move them to Bella's school. It caught me off guard and I was like, "Whoa, wait a minute... is that good? Is that a good thing that you say that or a bad thing?" I never really got an answer; however, I quickly realized I didn't need her answer and that it really shouldn't affect me. I cannot allow someone to sit in my building and not give their best to our students. This is part of the reason why I believe I have overall support, just not trusted support. There have been things that have happened that have caused me to feel this way. I feel supported, I just don't feel that trusted support. Does that make sense... You know, trusted support is different because with trusted support, I can go to you with anything and talk about anything without feeling like I'm a failure or that I'm being judged or that I should know this already. In the back of my mind, I'm having just a little concern about them because they share things inappropriately and without explanation. It's just different with my sister group. I can go to them and be like, yeah, I'm overwhelmed... I'm having heart palpitations. I don't know where these feelings are coming from. I'm going to go to the doctor. I'm having anxiety. I can't trace where it's coming from. I know it's a trigger somewhere, but I can't find it. Just pray for me. And I know that they will and that I have that support with them.

I remember hearing a black male teacher say that the struggle is different for him. When he walks into a meeting room or some kind of conference room, he is quickly scanning the room and deciding, am I going to sit over here with the few black people or am I going to sit over there? His comment made me stop and think, oh, I do that when I walk into a room also. You know, it's kind of automatic. I walk into a room and I'm like, oh, there's my sisters. We sit together all the time, even though we were told to separate at one point in our career. That comment hasn't always sat right with me. We don't always have to sit together but to be told that we need to separate and branch off, it's not okay. This is our comfort zone. No one tells the

white men at the tables or the white women sitting together that they need to separate. So why are they telling us Black women that we need to separate?... It's rather different for us.

Dr. Darla:

When white women get together and they talk, nobody asks them questions. When white men get together and talk, nobody asks them questions... they're just talking. When we're (Black women) talking, there has to be something going on to them. I remember sharing that that bothers me. You know, if I want to sit next to my colleague here, who's a black female, I can't. Nobody ever mentions when Amy and Sarah sit together, it's not even a topic of conversation. That's just what they do. If we sit together, there has to be something going on. So, I think that is a huge thing. That really just bothers me to my core. We're supporting and being there for each other because we're experiencing the things that you don't experience... You just don't. And they don't like hearing that. But it's the truth. So, I always tell them don't wonder what we are talking about. We are just over here talking. There's nothing secretive going on. You're welcome to come sit if you'd like... but, you don't.

When you get into this place, there are people who seem to want you to understand that you are not worth much, that you are not enough, and that you shouldn't be at this table. Not just as a woman, but also because you are black. You know, white women can be some of our worst enemies. I remember a group of white females told me, "you just have this presence when you walk in the room and it's hard for some people to deal with. Like, your energy just fills the room without you saying a word." And I said, "Well, what's that got to do with me and changing who I am? I can't shake it... You said, I haven't even said a word,...that I just walked in the room. To me, that sounds like a personal problem." So, they need to step their game up a bit and leave me alone. And so, I think when it comes to that imposter syndrome and the whole stereotype threatening piece, as Black women, you go through so much mental gymnastics because they want you to change yourself throughout the day to fit their needs. Keep in mind, these needs can change from day to day and from week to week. So, when they need me to be that person they want me to be for that black mama, it's okay. But when white parents come, they state, "Okay, wait, this is a very high profile family", so they want you to treat them and do extra special tours and things, and it's not okay. I feel like Mrs. Bojangles around here. It's so infuriating. And so, when you know that you put in all this work, and your colleagues around don't do half of what you do, but they get all the awards, all the accolades, all the public speeches, it's frustrating. I mean, they don't do jack but talk and hang out with them and go work out together and go to their parties at their houses. All while we're over here sacrificing our lives, our health, our families, our leisure time, and our spiritual growth because we got to do more, we got to be better, we got to do extra. It just keeps on going and going and going till you end up with a heart attack somewhere.

Dr. Darla explains:

With all of the mental gymnastics I was going through, I had to literally grow so much that if I did not, I would have mentally died in this space. I think for me, I got to a point where I was tired of being tired. I'm tired of not getting enough sleep. I'm tired of being distracted when I'm at home. It was starting to take a toll on my family life. Once I found out other people weren't having to sacrifice like I was and they were instead out drinking on each other's patios, posting stuff on social media, and doing all kinds of other stuff, I was done. It was evident they weren't doing what I was doing. That's when I decided that enough was enough. And so that's the part that is so hard because you know that you are an exceptional leader but you're having to work 150% harder for people that don't even stand up to you. Like, if you literally put you side by side, they wouldn't even come close to adding up to what you do. This caused me to constantly start to doubt myself because when you get into this leadership role, there is so much pushback. Even though you know that your goal is to create a teaching and learning environment where everybody can thrive, in a place where kids are getting an exceptional education, you still get that push back.

When I walked into that space as a teacher and a leader, I was under the notion that everybody was doing what I was doing. I'm not saying I was the best teacher in the world, but I was pretty good... I love my kids... I'm here for these babies. The things that I saw, I mean, there was some great instruction taking place, don't get me wrong. But there were some things being said and done to children that I was like, "O, M, G, you have got to be kidding me. There's no way. There's no way. This has got to be fake. I know they are not doing this IN FRONT of me." Like, this is a human being you're talking to. This is an innocent child and you're using some of the most degrading language. And it was mostly towards children of color. I remember looking like this is not okay. Like what in the world is going on? It floored me. I was so stunned; I couldn't believe this was actually taking place. My heart was broken. So, I just started fighting and advocating for these kids. I started fighting for these babies since nobody else seemed to be doing so. I was fighting battles all while wearing a heart monitor. It became very clear; however, if the principal wasn't on board, I would just be spinning my wheels.

I recall some of my first staff meetings. You would go into the staff meeting, sometimes being the first person there, and you would sit down at a table. Shortly after, they'd all come in, look at you, and sit somewhere else. And then, they'd want you to get up and move to where they are... I stopped doing it. I started thinking like, Nah, y'all saw me. The principal would then say, "Oh, why are you not sitting with your team?" And I'd said, "I think the better question is, why didn't my team sit here with me?" They all would just look at me. They know that's not cool. They wouldn't do that to each other. But then, when they finally take the time to get to know you, they're like, "Well, no, you're not like them". I always find myself thinking, what do you mean I'm not like them? If you didn't get to know me, I would still just be another Black person with whatever ideas you have about

us. I would still be that scary, angry, or aggressive Black woman. But now that you know me, I'm supposedly so different.

Dr. Darla recalls:

I recall a conversation that I had with my boss's supervisor, the Assistant Superintendent, who asked me how I felt about things that were going on in the world knowing I was having a baby boy, and a black boy. I remember just falling apart and crying. I remember saying to her, "See this is what I'm saying. Even at the school level, there is this sheer destruction of young people's spirits and I can't do that. I have to get to a place where I'm in charge and where I can lead the way and really be the game changer for students."

...So, long story short, I interviewed for a position at their advice. They said it would be good practice for me if I really wasn't interested. I got the job and walked over there and thought, "Okay, this is just as crazy. What is going on?" There were hardly any people of color in the building at all. And with the kids, oh my goodness... if you weren't in the gifted and talented program, you couldn't have speaking parts in the programs. You couldn't do this, and you couldn't do that. So, as the leader, I had to break things down one by one. And when I tell you the ridicule, the persecution, the backlash, the lies, lies. I'm gonna say it again, the lies that were told on me. They wrote letters to the school board and letters to the superintendent trying to get me fired. I mean, how are you trying to get me fired when you the ones over here killing kids?... You kill them literally every day and laugh about it. Our white parents were like everything is great here. But the black parents and the Latino parents, they didn't even have a voice. I was determined to change that. But with those changes came tribulation. It took me a while and even came with health issues that didn't stop there. It just kept on coming to the point where I had to make some decisions about what I was going to do and whether or not I was going to keep fighting?

All in all, I knew I was never gonna stop advocating for kids. You get tired after a while. It begins to take a physical and mental toll on you and can be soul crushing at times. There are times when you lay in the bed and your mind is turned and you're thinking, "Well, I know I'm doing the right thing for these kids, but these people keep fighting me". I've even had someone say, "Well, maybe it's not good for the staff." And I'm thinking, well, maybe it's not good for the staff, but it's good for the children. Regardless, I knew that God would never leave me. He told me that he wouldn't.

I remember once, my dad had a Jaguar. My daddy was always rolling. He always had a nice car, whether it was a Jaguar or Cadillac or Lexus. He worked two jobs so he was like, I can do what I want to do. But he was always getting pulled over by the police on this strip row from the carwash to our home. And one day I was riding with him, and an officer pulled him. And he was like, "Be quiet. Don't say nothing. Don't you say a word. This is routine for me. They're gonna ask me if this car is stolen, or they're gonna say it was reported stolen." And I'm sitting here like

you're the only person with this car. He took it to a place and had it detailed just for him. Gold trim and everything. So, the man, the officer pulls us over. He comes up, says exactly what my dad said he was gonna say, "I need to check your license and registration. We believe this car is stolen." And I looked... and my dad touched my leg like, shut up... But I was furious. But you know, they let us go. And I was like, "Why didn't you say anything?" He was like, "Girl, I ain't trying to get killed. They do it at least once a week". I said, okay, but that was hard for me because he's telling me on one hand, you can do Baba blah, blah, but then you still dealing with this foolishness on the other hand. So, we had a hard talk about that. When you are dealing with white people, this is what you will have to deal with... And that helped to strengthen me when I became an adult and saw it for myself.

Dr. Carmen:

I think it's a strong dedication to the students. I think it's our desire to give back to our community. It is the maternal aspect within us. It's our duty. I think that we have this innate responsibility within us to do what is best for our kiddos. And I think that we do know what we're going into... We just bear the load. I think that we've always had to bear the load for years, just over time... you know, throughout slavery times. That's just who we've been. We've always just wanted to do the best for our kids. It's our dedication to our children, our African American students. I think I've always been a champion for my black and brown kids because I know they can do so much better than what we sometimes give them credit for now. I think when you're dealing with African American parents and African American students, you're sometimes met with opposition. When I first started the position, I was shocked, because I had a lot of my black parents that would challenge me. And the whole time I'm thinking, I'm here for your kids... I'm one of you. But I think that some of them see this person of authority, this Black person, and they automatically think that I'm better than them or whatever comes to their minds. I've also dealt with students who have come to me and have been very disrespectful. I've had to code switch when I needed to just to let them know I will deal with you the way you need to be dealt with. Sometimes I've had to get on their level and match their energy to get through to them. I know how to code switch if I need to, but why should I have to?

Dr. Carmen explains:

There is a blessing and curse that comes with this position. I think the blessing of being a black leader is that people get to see black women in a different light. If you're good at what you do, I think that's always great. I've had white kids come to me and say how happy they were that I was their principal. Not necessarily because I was black... they'd just never had a female principal before. And so, I think that those things and moments like that are definitely a blessing. In terms of being a curse, I think sometimes if you're the only one in an all-white situation, the curse that I've had to struggle with is that you are used as the token a lot. Being that token can get tiring. When you are the only person in the room that looks like you or that is in that particular role, others have no idea what it's like. As most of us as black people do, I do go into a room, scan the room, and look to see if I see any friendly,

familiar looking faces that look like me. And that can wear you out. That has actually worn me out.

I think I struggle sometimes because I show genuine care about everything that I do. Relationships are so very important. And so for me, I've been able to really invest in people to where I can get the most out of them. I've had teachers that have taken some risks. And they may not always do well, but I'm still there to support them and guide them. I've had people that were not the best teachers. Rather than cut them off, my goal has been to make them better and to get them to the place where they can do their best work. I protect my teachers. When I see things that are coming along the pipeline that I don't necessarily agree with. I'm there to protect them to the best of my ability.... However, when they're wrong, they know I'm going to tell them that they're wrong. But I'm going to tell them, coming from a place of love, respect, and honor. And so yeah, I think that it's like a test for us as Black women.

Dr. Sasha:

I'm black. I know... That's never gonna go away. Even after earning a doctorate degree while working full time as a principal, I think that would be something, right? I mean obtaining something that only 1% of the population has obtained is a huge, huge goal and payoff. But along the way, you still get the negative and snide comments from your white coworkers in regards to what you know. It's just very, very rude as to what they're saying along the way. So, for me, it just goes back to remembering what you're doing and why. This is how you keep yourself grounded in all of that. Working as an assistant principal, I worked in an all-white building, where I was the only person of color except for the custodian. It was myself, the custodians, and my behavior people who were all classified staff. And so just overcoming that, and at the same time, making sure you treat everybody with respect goes a long way as well. When you hold yourself to a high standard, people do notice that...White people noticed that a lot.

I do believe women of color will struggle with racism and probably the feeling of exhaustion. If you're a person who leads, you're probably going to have high standards for yourself. I wouldn't say all women, but probably women of a certain caliber or in a certain sector of life. For me, there was a lot of cultural switching that took place between being at work and being at home. I had to make sure that I wasn't playing into any stereotypes and that I was always deemed capable of doing the job. And so that was, you know, just in regards to maybe changing the tone of my voice or the words used... switching to, you know, standard or the king's English to speak. Even to changing the cadence of my speech so there's no feelings of attack. It feels a lot like you're just saying a speech all the time instead of just having a conversation with someone. So those little things like that. Always being on point or always having to be at your best all the time. You're working around a predominantly white Caucasian population, so you don't want to be stereotyped. You don't want to be known as the angry black woman or that bitch.

Dr. Sasha explains:

One of the struggles that first comes to mind is just in regards to my hiring practices. I think that my identity shows me that there's a lack of representation, and it is my job to fill these vacancies. I wanted my students to have more teachers of color, or just more staff of color around them. And then in regards to my interactions, I am constantly having to do a lot of cultural switching. There's a lot of cultural switching that takes place between being at work and being at home. Because I do work around a predominantly white Caucasian population, I don't want to be stereotyped. I don't want to be this angry black woman. I don't want to be that bitch. And so, I do see myself sometimes, especially early in my career, I felt as if I was struggling to live my own life. But now, I'm much more comfortable. My staff now is more like 50/50. I feel like I am also sticking up for my African American teachers as I see what is happening around them. And I have the authority and the power to actually help them. I'm actually a role model to all my students, not just my students of color... but yes, to my African American and especially my Spanish speaking students. We have a, you know, that cultural synchronicity. It's that shared experiences... those small things. And so, it's an unsaid I see you, you see me. And it just makes things great for my students. They needed to have more teachers and staff members of color around them and I saw it as my job to fill these vacancies with teachers of color. It goes back to Marian Wright Elderman. You can't be what you can't see. And so, we have to give our students the opportunity to see people of color who are defying racial stereotypes, who are educated, and who are in positions of authority. And so African Americans or teachers of color are able to do that with their students of color. Just having that cultural mirror, that first opportunity that they have and then their second opportunity, which is that cultural competency piece. It's the cultural synchronicity. And so that's what you have the shared sameness of culture. And that's when you know the relationships are a little bit different. I believe that the relationship between a black teacher or a teacher of color and their students of color are very different. Oftentimes it is just based upon their skin color, their ethnicity, you know, that kind of thing. And so, you that really does bridge the gap for them and gives our students a feeling of being capable. There have been different studies that have shown that white teachers oftentimes have that deficit mindset. They believe that students of color are not capable and that they're not going to be able to achieve and so they don't teach to the highest standards. They don't provide that rigorous instruction that our students need to be challenged and to be able to excel. And so, oftentimes with African American teachers, you get all those warm demands which creates and moves the needle on achievement.

I'm just going to be honest. At my school, the person before me was a black man. And I believe that he surrounded himself with things that he liked. It was predominantly middle-aged white women. And so, that's exactly what was in the building when I got there... all middle-aged white women. He's actually married to a white woman. And so, I think that's just kind of where he felt comfortable. In terms of the district, I think it just happens depending on the school and its leader. So, if a leader is cognizant of what they want, then that's what they're going to hire from their own biases or whatever that may be. Just being in the Midwest, what I've

found is when I was an elementary school principal, I searched high and low for black candidates... high and low. I was so excited in my first year as a principal to be able to hire black people... black teachers, but I couldn't find any. I found one, actually. And she left after her first year because it was so white. So, I think it has a lot to do with your area. I know when I talk to other people, especially those in the south, they say, "Wow, we have tons and tons of black candidates". And I'm like, "Wow, that must be nice". But at the same time, what I've come to find is that a lot of our African American candidates, they don't have teaching certificates. So, I've hired a lot of African American teachers that aren't certified. I put them on emergency permits or they've gone through the Teach for America program and after about two years, they're done because the space is so white.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category 3: Internal Struggles

One of the key challenges for Black, female principals seems to be their struggle to counteract and suppress the negative stereotypes, perceptions, and treatment that they experience on a daily basis. Despite credentials and leadership experience, these internal struggles of being questioned, being hurt, being isolated, separated, or abandoned still exist. These struggles often create doubt, confusion, and the need for certain behaviors, whether learned or natural, that will counteract the negative and often traumatic experiences along their journey. For all four women, the internal struggle experienced because of one's race and gender eventually served as motivators for their career pursuits and their leadership practices.

Category Four- Health

A fourth theme that emerged was the direct consequences of the oppressive environments and the internal struggles that Black, female leaders are often forced to endure. Being a part of a space that was not necessarily designed to suit nor meet your needs and that has historically been occupied almost exclusively by White men can take a toll on the mental, emotional, and physical health of Black women. Having to endure the racial and gendered stereotypes and

microaggressions that Black women are sometimes subjected to consequently leads to various health issues that all four participants detailed below.

Ms. Bella:

Nobody even knows about our internal struggles that we're dealing with at the same time. I've had health issues along the way that have felt completely overwhelming at times. When that anxiety hits, I have heart palpitations. And I can't even trace it to one specific thing... But you know there is a trigger somewhere. You feel like you are drowning.

Dr. Darla:

As a person of color, it's an unimaginable stress that is upon you every single day of your life until you get to that space where you just say, forget it. I'm good with who I am. And so, the anguish of the things that we have to deal with as a child, as a young student, as an adult in these predominantly white educational spaces that may not fully believe in us, does actually impact you as a teenager and as a young adult. If you don't get a hold of it, it can actually impact your entire life. Now, I actually think it's amazing that as a teacher I was able to see and experience some of the things that I saw and experienced. I knew that I wanted to do things differently. The toll that it can take on us, the unimaginable stress and anguish that a black child experiences in these types of educational settings can ultimately impact their entire life as well. We get it extra hard because we have to deal with the intersectionality of not only race, but also gender. Yet, we are expected to do so much more than the average bear while still taking care of our own family. We're expected to do everything and to do it with a smile and with no complaining. Don't say too much, do your job, keep your head down, keep your mouth shut, but still pull a rabbit out of your hat every single time. I feel like our wins are forgotten very quickly, yet our losses are put in our face continuously. I feel that for black women, our spirits are always murdered when this happens. Our spirits are just as murdered as someone who has been shot and our treatment should be similar to a shot victim. Instead, now you're dealing with 20, 30, 40, 50, 60-year-old women in the workplace who have had to continuously deal with this mess from childhood, all the way through college, and to that of the workplace. When you think about the toll that takes on us, I can't even imagine what our hearts look like. It reminds me of Dr. King's heart. You know when the doctors did an autopsy on his heart, although he was only 40, the doctors said he had the heart of a 60-year-old. I would definitely say Black women's hearts would be very similar to that because we have to do everything. It's different for white women. I feel like we struggle a lot in that area because we are expected to be able to handle the load with no complaints. That's why we feel like we have to put a mask on every day. This is why I tell people I'm not hanging out with people here. I'm going home. The work was literally killing me. I was in a fight for my health.

Dr. Carmen:

I think they like to keep us in those roles where, you know, we're dealing with all of the mess, which unfortunately, creates health issues for us. Because we have to deal with the additional stress of the low performance school or with just being tired of always having to fight or to show up as the token. I've had to go on anti-anxiety medication as a principal because of the stress that I was under from the people that I worked for. A lot of that had to do with just some of the microaggressions and the unrealistic expectations that they placed on me. I remember telling somebody that I felt like at one point, I was jogging on a hamster wheel....as I'm jogging on the hamster wheel, somebody is on the sidelines, throwing stuff at me trying to knock me off...and I'm holding on for dear life trying to keep going, all while calling on the name of Jesus....even when I'm hopping on one leg, they're still just throwing stuff. What happens a lot of times for black women in leadership is, we get so many curve balls thrown our way. Those of us that are successful are the ones that have taken those shots and kept standing and moving forward. We just keep going... but we're tired.

When I was an assistant principal, I remember having issues with migraine headaches. They started off as tension headaches; however, they soon became migraine headaches. I was having to go see a doctor to get medication because the headaches would occur on the job. I think when you have to deal with those irate parents, or you're constantly putting out fires while constantly being compared to your sister schools when nobody's comparing the demographic, they're only comparing the outcome... It can definitely cause a lot of stress. I know a lot of states now use your test scores in relation to your evaluation. So, if we know that schools with high minority populations and high free reduced lunch populations score lower and there's a direct correlation, then why am I being compared to someone who has no minority students and no free reduced lunch students. Why am I expected to have the same outcome? So, if you're expecting me to work harder than everybody else, which sometimes that is the expectation, it wears on your nerves. This is why I think over the last five years, I've become really aware of what it means to practice self care. We can only take so much. Luckily, I don't have high blood pressure, but I've known Black female school leaders and even Black teachers who have had high blood pressure and even have had heart issues because we are often tasked with dealing with more than most. I think it goes back to that strong black woman mentality. But just because I don't ask for a lot of help doesn't mean that I don't need it. When I do stop and ask for help, please show up in the way that I need your help, not how you want to give it to me.

Dr. Sasha:

I think that we bottle things in, and I don't think that that is conducive for our health. I've started doing much better with taking care of my mental health and just practicing self-care. I hired new people...that made a huge difference for me but in terms of just using self-care, I moved to daily journaling and prayer... lots of prayer, Oh... and this therapy. If you need to take some time off, take some time off. I'm a firm believer, they'll replace you if you work yourself to death. At the end of the

day, they will replace you within two weeks. That's why you can't be afraid to use your days off if you have them. It's funny because we know the teachers will take their time off, but when the principal takes a day off, it's oh my gosh! I got days just like you guys have days. That work will be there tomorrow and the next day. You can work until 12 o'clock at night and there's always going to be something left to do. So, I just believe that we have to do what we have to do for ourselves when it comes to our health and put ourselves first.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Four: Health

Black women have noticed that if allowed, their work can literally kill them mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically. Black female leaders have to deal with the unimaginable stress, anguish, and anxiety that comes along with suffering in silence. They often feel overwhelmed with the expectation of being able to do it all without complaining, speaking up, or receiving the accolades that they deserve. This causes them to often relive trauma and triggers as the treatment usually does not stop. Instead, it becomes a pattern. Because of this pattern, there are real consequences that can have lasting results that can and do impact the health and the livelihood of Black women. From heart palpitations to high blood pressure, to migraine headaches, the body's way of responding to stress can vary from Black woman to Black woman. Regardless of the age of the participant, it was evident that the predominantly white environments that Black, female school leaders choose to work in can sometimes bring about unforeseen health issues.

Category Five- Need/Desire to Prove Others Wrong and/or To Stand Up for Oneself

As explained previously, because educational leadership has historically been occupied almost exclusively by White men, certain aspects of predominantly white school districts, organizations, and even institutions seem to employ racial and gendered stereotypes and microaggressions that consequently cause Black women to employ survival strategies. These survival strategies are usually in response to the intimidation, threat, and treatment that occurs in

a White male-dominated educational context. Because their multiple identities are viewed as inhibitors, Black women often develop a desire and/or a need to challenge their oppressors by either proving them wrong and/or standing up for themselves. The employing of these survival strategies within their work environment not only helps to establish a form of self-awareness for the women, but it also serves as a form of self-awareness for those they encountered. This self-awareness for others and for themselves, serves as the motivation necessary to continue to do so.

The participants' experiences were significant enough to document because all four of these Black women cited personal, educational, and professional experiences in which they perceived the awareness of their racial and gendered identities served as inhibitors and the direct cause of their need to have to prove their worth, their value, and their usefulness. Although they did not consistently report the multiplicity of their race and gender as the issue, they did interpret their race as the biggest factor causing this need and desire to stand up for themselves and to intentionally prove others wrong throughout their educational and professional careers.

Ms. Bella:

There comes a point and time when you decide to stand up for yourself and prove people wrong. I've had to let some people know they don't make me and they don't break me... Because I've experienced so many negative experiences or wrong perceptions where people look at you and automatically judge you, I felt like I had to put it out there that that's not me and this is who I am. And you are going to respect who I am. You are not going to make my identity. If you don't know, and since you act like you don't know, then I am going to show you who I am.

I first started noticing this working in groups. When you give your ideas in a group, no one wants to acknowledge them. However, a few minutes later, they are repeated or restated by someone who is white, and they are the best ideas ever. Or when you give an idea, someone wants to come and change it or suggest it some other way, basically taking your idea like you didn't just what you clearly just said. If you do not speak up, people will literally steal your ideas, run with them, and take credit for them.

Ms. Bella explains:

You will encounter so many teachers who are not really giving their best to the students they serve. This cannot happen under you. It is frustrating when you have teachers who want different things for their own kids than what they are giving your students. That's not okay and it is your duty to speak up and change it. I have also encountered white teachers, mostly men who try to run things or those experiences where teachers have been unable to get their way and they try to question your authority or your knowledge. Some really despise having to listen to a black woman. You have to kindly and professionally remind them that they are not running anything, being sure to lay it all out for them and document, document, document. They truly believe that they can bully their way through since they have been able to bully other administrators in the past. When they are unable to do it to you, they go for the attack with those higher up with, "Oh that's a woman, she can't tell me what to do" or "I can push over her. This is a man's world".

As a black woman, I have had several experiences where I've had to prove others wrong or stand up for myself professionally. No one has ever just come out and said I don't think you can do this, but there are several examples of where it has been implied. I'll give you a specific example. One of the school board members and I were casually talking about the population of students that I was serving as I needed to make sure that they knew. And because I was stating that we needed to do something differently, incorporating new things like Arts and Science and even movement for our kids, they didn't quite understand. As we were looking at my data, another one of the board members stated that she had just been so worried about the school as the area had changed so much. The board member went on to state that it was once such a great area when the doctors and other families lived there. But now that black families had moved into the neighborhood and the elite parents had moved out, all of a sudden the community changed. It really bothered me that the only change that happened was that black people had moved into the same houses that the white community once lived in, paying the same amount they paid. But now, all of a sudden, it's a bad area or an unsafe side of town to even drive in. She went on to state, "I just don't know what we are going to do, or what we can do about this school." I kindly explained this is a great school, we have great children, and yes, we have a whole lot going on. Although we are the only school with so many apartments tied to it, I feel that we can and will control the factors that we can control. Her comments and what she was implying about our students and families really rubbed me the wrong way. She wasn't just judging the change of the school, but also me as I was the one in charge and leading it as if I wasn't capable of doing so. I thought about this thing for an entire year and even talked to my immediate boss about it. And then, I addressed it again at a school board meeting an entire year later, being very careful to detail the changes that had occurred. Even though she wasn't stating it directly, her comments made it seem like my school was a hopeless situation and I felt the need that what she was implying about myself, my students, my families, and my school was incorrect and that I needed to stand up for myself and prove that there are great things happening

here. I literally sat on that thing for a year but knew that I needed to come back around and make this very clear.

Dr. Darla:

You have to use your voice. Finding your voice is mandatory if you're going to survive in this work. If you plan on making it, you better find your voice and find it quickly. If not, you are going to hurt yourself or find yourself hurt mentally, physically, and emotionally. There's no way around it. You matter and people have to know what they can and cannot say and do to you.

We have to begin to speak up and not necessarily always in groups. Just because we are Black women, it doesn't mean that we should have to deal with the sidebar conversations and the passive aggressiveness or the smart little comments you want to make. People will try to get slick if you let them. They will try to use that entitlement that they have. But I will call you out. "Why are you staring at me?" "Do you need something?" Why?... Because I refuse to let you make me feel less than... Even in college, I noticed that when you are in predominantly white spaces, they want you to be quiet. They don't want you to say too much unless you agree with them. If you don't agree with them, there's something that must be wrong with you. And so, I got really bothered by that. So, I stopped doing group work. I decided that I was just going to do my own thing and what I wanted to do. I would stop doing group reports because I'd end up doing all the work or I'd give suggestions and they wouldn't use them. Or, in some instances, when I wasn't around to use them, they'd put a different spin on it and call them theirs. I couldn't say anything because then I'm being aggressive or confrontational or difficult to work with. No, I'm none of that...I'm just tired of your foolishness. I have a brain and I'm going to be heard or I'll just do my homework alone myself. I got to a point where I refused to completely shut down.

Dr. Darla shared:

I just got tired of people trying to push me around, trying to control my life, and trying to decide and monitor what I was going to say and how I was gonna say it. People that weren't working the way I was working but still getting all this credit and being seen as a wonderful administrator. I just got tired. As our wonderful Fannie Lou Hamer stated, I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. So, I started standing up for myself in a professional manner, because I know I'm good just like you know I'm good. You are not going to keep talking to me like this or treating me this way... Even when you are sitting at a table and you are sharing ideas, as a Black woman, there is still this sense or this treatment as if you still have to prove yourself. There's this belief that you got the job because you were Black, so, when we share ideas, we have to prove ourselves first. When or if you sit at a table and you share your ideas, it's crickets... Nobody says anything. But then two seconds later, one of them will say the same thing and it is gold and the best idea ever. That lasted for me for just a few months. And then I finally said, "Did the whole table not just hear me say that exact thing?" Their response would be something like,

“Well, no, you said....” And I would quickly have to say, “that's the same thing.” After so, for many of those instances, I just stopped working in groups because they were going to stop taking my ideas and pretending like I didn't just say what I clearly said. You get tired of them not taking your ideas or taking them and trying to put a twist on them and make it theirs. Enough was enough. I'm a very respectful employee and I'm a very respectful supervisor, but if I can't be treated like a human, then I can't stay here. And I literally said it. I can go get a job somewhere else if I need to. I don't mean that in an arrogant way. But see, God is not gonna leave me. He said he would not leave me nor forsake me so I'm going to be okay. So... I don't need to worry if I don't work here. That's fine. I'll work somewhere because God called me to this work. So, I know there's room for me somewhere. That's when they started changing their tune to “No, no, no, this is great. You're a wonderful addition to our district”. But for me, it was like why did it have to take all that?

Dr. Carmen reported:

I think it's our duty and our job to push back and to speak up on some of those stereotypes and microaggressions. For example, I know I've had colleagues that would interview black people and they'd say things like, “Oh, my gosh, I hope they're not lazy”. And I would have to speak up and say things like, “Well, what would give you that impression? Why would you think, you know, they're lazy?” There was another time when I was in a meeting with my white Director of Curriculum. Within this meeting, the director begins to talk about how articulate our new Director of Communication was, who happens to be a Black woman. I remember going to her saying, “Wait a minute, she's educated... She's the Director of Communications, she should be articulate. You know that's racist, right?” I speak up when I see these microaggressions because it's the right thing to do. Because of this, I have had certain people come back and say there's a perception that you're angry. And I'm like, again, “You know that's racist, right?” I am allowed to have my opinion. I am allowed to have my feelings. Why is it that you guys want to regulate how I feel? You don't do that to anyone else. I will never forget, one of the first teachers that I met told me that she was colorblind. In return, I told her, “If you are colorblind then you don't see me. I'm a wonderfully, blessed, amazing Black woman and I want you to see me.” And so, I just call it out whenever I see it. I face a lot of those issues head on.

When you get to the secondary level, it really seems like it's a man's world. How they get us sometimes is through some of those microaggressions. Even when I go out to a lot of the state conferences and principal conferences, you see a lot of males... white males and former coaches. Yet, I've had to tell people, even in my little bitty body, I'll never forget, as an assistant principal, I would have some of my male teachers come and get me to break up fights. And I'm thinking, listen, you know, back in the good old days, I'm 125 pounds, 5'2 or 5'3. Like, what am I gonna do? But they would still come and get me to break up fights. A lot of it had to do with the respect and the relationships that I had built with kids to where I could just come in and say break it up, stop it, and they would stop. Or I would have kids that I would have to kick out of school that would help me break up a fight when the

teachers wouldn't do it. Because they respected me that much and knew that I cared about them, even though they had to be suspended for doing whatever they did. So yeah, I think that as a woman, we have to fight to be seen. We have to fight for that seat at the table. Even in education, there's that hierarchy. Like I said before, there's this belief that white male leadership, that dominant leadership, is oftentimes preferred when people talk about it, but it's not what they want when they necessarily get it.

Dr. Sasha advocates:

I think it is important for us as Black women to speak up for ourselves because if we don't, who will? We have to leverage the power of using our voice to create better experiences for ourselves, our teachers of color, and our students of color. It is imperative for our well-being. I had to create the culture that was going to be most conducive for my success based upon my race and what I believed my students needed. And so, I think that's why it's important for us to speak up in order for change to occur.

Currently, there are four middle school principals, and I am the only African American and the only female. Within our middle school principal group, I've had questions about my hair choices because sometimes I wear my natural hair styles. And so, there have been times when I have tried to talk to human resources about those inappropriate comments that have been made. I have had to talk to other leaders about their suspension practices that I do not agree with. Even to how they handle their special education students, to how they track their kids, or how they say that they're multicultural or culturally responsive and then you go into their building, and you see that they are not. You have to speak up, especially when none of their actions are tied to their words. And so, you know, I am constantly trying to be an advocate for the students in their buildings when I'm not even in their building, or just constantly rectifying what they think that I should be or not be. I shouldn't have to fight against these microaggressions, but I have to do so on a daily basis. This is why it is so important for us to speak up as Black women leaders. You have black women, and you have black teachers, and it's your job as the leader to be the voice for all of them. It's your job to be the voice of your children and for your students. You never know who's watching, listening, and learning. If you don't speak up and say something, you will simply get pushed over or taken advantage of. I realized that I have to be the voice for that. Oftentimes, I will be the only person of color sitting at the table, and so I have to be the voice for all African American people. Really understanding the implications of that, understanding curriculum choices, making sure that students of color are being represented in the text and they can see themselves. These are the things that matter. So whenever there are focus groups created, I always want to be a part of that focus group so that there is always representation. So, just making sure that I'm always a part of things so that there is always a person of color and that our voice is heard.

Dr. Sasha recall:

One of the challenges that I experienced had to do with my age, my size, and coming into an all White male field as a principal at 28. I was very small, kind of smaller in stature and I was working in a building on the southside of the city, which is a predominantly white area known to be rather racist. And so, I took over a building that had no staff of color. I was actually the only one. And so just having to work with those mindsets, those very much fixed mindsets, which had their own ideas and biases about what I was or who I was. I was always having to prove myself and having to affirm to myself that I am qualified for this. I recall letting them know that both of my parents are highly educated and constantly, you know, reminding them I am the best for the job. I was always on my P's and Q's and putting in a lot of work. I just remembered never, ever dressing down or only wearing jeans on Fridays with a blazer and heels. I could never not have my hair, nails, or makeup done. I always had to be on. It was just exhausting. And parents, I remember this one, you know, just calling you out your name. Calling you, you know, just so many niggers, and you black bitch in heels. It was just a lot. The first couple years that I was at that school, they would always say, "Let me speak to the person in charge". I started to let them know, "Well, that is me". And there were a lot of calls downtown with people tiptoeing around me.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Five: Need/Desire to Stand up for Oneself/Prove Others Wrong.

Most of the principals placed great emphasis on the intentionality of using their voice to resist the experiences of racial and gendered oppression they were experiencing. Whether people were implying something negative about their ability, stealing their ideas and taking credit, or being disrespectful with microaggressions, these four Black, female participants rejected the negative treatment by commanding respect. Although these negative experiences could have served as inhibitors to their leadership journey and ultimately their success, these women speak to how they made the decision to use the verbal assaults as motivators to speak up for their race and gender. All four participants came to a unanimous decision that it was their duty and their job to push back against the negative stereotypes and treatment experienced, using their voice to push back. By pushing back, these women decided to take the opportunity to combat questions about their worth, their value, or even their usefulness within these white spaces. This seemed to be a

common denominator amongst all participants in hopes of making space for themselves, their students, teachers, and other leaders of color. To establish credibility and the ability to be seen as equals to their White male and female peers, participants' have learned to speak up for themselves and to prove others wrong during their pursuit of, to, and through leadership.

Category Six- Sisterhood

A significant category that arose throughout the analyzes of the data were the thoughts shared around sisterhood. Sisterhood was described as a common bond and connection that Black women shared based upon like/shared experiences as being Black women. The importance of this relationship of sisterhood: of relating to other women, of identifying with self, of bonding through the sharing of stories, of being there to help and support, was used as a survival strategy to combat the oppression Black women experience on a personal and professional level while serving in predominantly white organizations. In order to continue to resist oppression, another strategy shared by all four participants was a symbolically important group referred to as their sister squad, sister group, or sister friends. This dynamic network of other Black women served as another form of resistance to the ideas, controlling images, and stereotypes placed upon Black women. The thoughts and actions displayed by this group of women not only demonstrated their resistance to these negative images and the social forces behind them, but they also produced positive images and counter-narratives that assist in maintaining their reality of themselves.

Ms. Bella

There is this automatic connection that exists for Black women in predominantly white spaces. It is definitely like a sisterly connection. Although we come from various backgrounds, most of the time, that doesn't matter. It's just an automatic connection. I'm not saying that all black women get along. We have our issues as black women; however, when we are usually a small minority in a space or place, we tend to gravitate to each other. We talk to each other and it's like this automatic

bond. You may be in a different position. You may be in a different area. You may get everything that you need, but there will still be similarities that we can talk about amongst each other about things that have happened to us.

We have the same struggles, and we deal with some of the same things as black women. So, if I have some success in my life, I believe that I should be sharing that with another sister. As Black women, we have to be strong, but our weak moments will come. When they do, we need someone to lean on. You need that sisterly support. I give it but I also believe it will come back to me. It's just in me. We are a group. Yes, we're all individuals but still, we make up a group that have the same struggles. It doesn't matter what class you're in or what you're going through mentally. What we have to deal with as black women is rather similar. That's why it is easier to relate to a Black, female principal versus a White, female principal, and I love my female principals. I've had male assistant principals; however, the connections were different with my female assistant principals. We just operate differently. I feel that we're more caretakers, more detailed, more open to conversations, and more open to being asked questions. I can connect with other women, but it was just different when I had a Black assistant principal. It's a different level of trust. We talked professionally and personally not just like business partners or friends. I didn't have to question or keep looking over my back. She was going to try to have my back and she wasn't going to try to take credit for my ideas. We were in it together. So, I think it is important to know that we do have this relationship. I'm not speaking for everyone. It's not always that connection. Sometimes there can be jealousy and acts of trying to overpower each other. Realize that I'm just speaking for the most part for the majority of the black administrators. The Black, female elementary principals in my district. We are never our own separate group. It's just easier for me to reach out to one of them about something.

I've had a lot of support. It was other women who pushed me into leadership, both black and white. So I just feel it's important to do for other women what has been done for me. Somebody else lent their hand to me, so I just think it is just as important for me to do the same thing. I feel like we can be that bridge. I feel like we have been that bridge for each other in order to get over the turbulence that the outside brings to us. Whether that's in our career or in society, we're trying to get over troubled waters. Sometimes you just need to hear you can do it. Don't give up. You will still go to college. Those were the things that were spoken to me. And so, I just believe in sowing positive seeds as it comes back to you when you do. Because of the way that I grew up, I was always lending a hand to support others. It's just kind of my ministry, a part of my calling to help other women and to be in a sisterhood.

Dr. Darla:

I want people to know that sisterhood is huge for Black women, especially those serving in a leadership position. It's not necessarily people that I just know. I can meet these people in a setting anywhere around the world and be able to form a

sisterhood. For me, that sisterhood is that connection or that feeling that y'all have something that y'all can bond over. I call these ladies my sister squad. They are other Black women who give you strength when you need strength. In return, you provide them with strength.... Sisterhood involves listening and telling each other when you are wrong... all in love. Sisterhood involves people that are diverse in their thought process. Even with this diversity in thought, we all have the same common goal of trying to lift each other up. We all bring something different to the table as we provide opportunities for growth with people that are going to help me get to the next level both professionally and personally. We just connect on that level. We strengthen each other and feed each other's soul whether it's through prayer, scripture, meditation, or quiet still moments.

Because Black women leaders experience life in a very particular way, we connect and bond over the shared experiences that we seem to all have. Now, this doesn't mean I cannot go out to a restaurant or hang out with you as a white colleague. It just means that I need my sister because she can relate to what I'm going through. Even if a white person believes they have had an experience similar to one I may be describing, it is not the same. There's a different nuance that goes along with ours that they don't have to experience. This is why I need my sisters' support. I need that time just to talk and reconnect with them. It's important for me. It's important for my livelihood. It's important so that I don't bring all this mess home every day. They're there for me. They are literally there for me. They've cried with me. They've celebrated with me. They've been there to cheer me on. It's been a beautiful thing. My squad feeds my soul. They have my back no matter what and are usually just a phone call, a text away, or an email away. What I also love about them is that if I do need to be checked, they're going to listen with love first, and then they're going to ask deeper questions. That's what I'm talking about when it comes to my squad. I'm free to just be me. I'm in my safe haven with my people who I can count on to listen to me cry and still support. I can be me. I can be Darla. I can talk a certain way. I can be however I want to be. I can be my true authentic self. But when I'm with y'all, I have to monitor everything I say. I have to carry the whole conversation. I have to make sure everybody's happy. I don't have time for that. It's exhausting. That's why when I go home, I need my peace. It has such a tremendous impact on us.

Dr. Darla shares:

I feel like there are these innate traits for Black women... innate traits that are passed on from our ancestors. I believe these traits have been instilled in us and passed down from generation to generation. I don't want this to sound cliché, but like, we have this innate sense of strength in the sense of, we make things do what needs to be done. We understand there will be obstacles along the way. But there is a way when they say God will make a way out of no way. Like there is a way. I might not be able to see it, but there is a light. This strength is something that I think I have seen passed on from our ancestors. I've seen it with other Black female leaders also. We're going to get the workload completed. It might not look the way somebody else wants it to look; but, we get it done. And, at the end of the

day, whatever is thrown our way, you're not going to see us bowed in front of you. It doesn't mean I don't cry. It doesn't mean I'm not hurt. It's just that you're not going to see me have my weakest moment in front of people who I know could give two craps about me. I hate to use that word, but y'all don't care about me. Y'all want my tears to be the topic of conversation. No, I'm not doing it.

I think another thing that we get from our ancestors is, this might sound so sarcastic but, I think we get good common sense. Like, is everything really an emergency? There are ways to solve every problem. We don't run to fires. We are poised and we take our time. It doesn't mean we are not burning up on the inside or freaking out. We just understand there's common sense and there's a way to handle every situation. Another trait that I can't necessarily say is always good, but we know how to take care of ourselves and the people around us. This means, you're not going to see me walking around school looking crazy. I'm going to be on my game when it comes to my outward appearance. Now, I might be a mess on the inside... Don't get me wrong, but you're not going to know just by looking at me. So that sense of poise and confidence. If I don't know, don't worry... I'm going to find out and I know where to call to get some help. I think as black women that has served us very well. People will look at it the wrong way sometimes and interrupt it as anger and aggression, not poise, competence, strength and common sense.

When it comes to the ability to go forth and get the job done, I believe these are things that have been passed on from our ancestors due to what we went through with slavery and having to do what we had to do for our families. We lived through Jim Crow and all of this mess. So, there are certain traits that have been instilled in us. And I believe we just pass those traits down from generation to generation. But when you get into this place, there are people who seem to want you to understand that you are not worth much, you are not enough, and that you shouldn't be at this table. Not just as a woman, but also because you are black. You know, white women can be some of our worst enemies. At the end of the day, the solution for the entire school setting is to sit back, reflect, pray, and use our good common sense... the very traits that have been passed down to us from our ancestors and our families.

Dr. Carmen

So, I've got a couple of sisterhood groups, one with being in a sorority and the other is my group of women in education. Both of them kind of go back to just really being there for each other... being happy for each other. So, I'll talk about my sisterhood. When I was an assistant principal in my former district, there were probably four or five of us that were Black women administrators in an entire district of mostly white men leaders. We would go to these meetings, initially we really didn't know each other, so we were kind of spread out. And at some point, I don't even know who decided to do it, but we decided that we wanted to get together and just talk about our shared experiences. And we did it. It was so much fun. What we found out was that a lot of us were experiencing some of the same things just dealing with our White, male bosses. I think we all had a White male boss and

were dealing with “man” issues within the district. It was nice to talk about some of our problems and to understand that none of us were going through anything alone. It gave us the opportunity to talk about how we could combat some of those things that we were tackling. We even talked about some of the gossip we’ve heard about other administrators in the school district. It was such a release for us to get together and that was, gosh, 20 years ago, if not longer. Yet, there is still a core of us that still get together to this day. When something good has happened to one, it has happened to all of us. Just the kudos, the accolades, the added, GIRL YOU GO! I think along the way, we have pulled up some other young ladies who are aspiring administrators and added them to the group because we understand there’s strength in numbers. Sometimes as a black woman, it can be lonely in your role. Not just as a principal, but sometimes as an assistant principal. And just to have somebody else that looks like you and that experienced some of the things that you’ve had to experience, it’s nice to be able to call them up and say, “Girl, you will not believe what this dude said today”. And just, you know, go back to that code switch and have that natural conversation with someone who understands exactly what you’re going through. Plus, they can possibly provide, you know, an answer to your problem. And if not, at the very least, a listening ear to just listen while you vent about the issues that you’re going through.

I would say just having a collective group of like minded women, typically with the same goals in the same area, helps to keep you focused. That’s why it is so important to have sister friends because we have those shared experiences. We have been through it. We’re still going through it. Yet, we can help each other learn how to navigate it and learn how to stay the course. We encourage each other to keep pushing when it feels like so many odds are stacked against you.

Dr. Carmen shares:

It’s actually really interesting. Because I’ve had a core group of other Black women educators along the way, it’s just been fun to be able to have those conversations and to talk and release that information. Just to have the opportunity to release your feelings, your emotions, what you’re going through, it’s been a life saver. It just really makes you feel like you’re not alone. It actually gives me life.

It’s the breath that it gives you when you know that you’re making a difference for other young women that are coming after you. But it also gives you support when you know that you need somebody’s shoulder to cry on. It also keeps you grounded when you know you start to get the big head and think that you know everything. So, I would not have made it through my educational journey if I did not have good friends that I could call on and just run things by. I have one particular sister friend that I will call and be like, “Am I crazy? Listen to this... Am I crazy?” She is hilarious and able to take a rough situation and make me laugh about it. She’ll say, “You know, you just need me... I need to be your translator”. Then she’ll give me the ghetto version of what I should say which always makes me laugh. So it’s stuff like that that just kind of helps me see the bright side, the bigger picture, not taking things too seriously although they do hurt. They just help in making it through

because it's not easy. Leadership is not easy, but being a black woman in leadership... It's even more difficult. But again, I'm here. It's possible... we can do it... our sisters are pertinent to making it a little easier.

I want to let God's light shine through me and help encourage other black women to know that we can do this. We were born to do this. So even being able to speak to you... That's one of the reasons why I haven't been so quick to get into other positions just yet. I'm still trying to figure out okay, God, what's my purpose? Because I really do want to help this younger generation who are trying to move forward.

Dr. Sasha

I think understanding the relationship between black women would help them better understand black women in general. It could help to inform them so that they know we're not all the same. If they see us in a group, they'll see how we interact and understand that we're not all acting exactly the same. They'll also understand that maybe the mannerisms that we display towards each other is not us being angry, we're just these full of life people... they'll see the positive things like that. I think it would just give them a better understanding of just black people and like black women in general...maybe.

Having sisterly relationships and that support network has allowed me to see that I can help somebody and to know that what I went through was similar to what other Black women have gone through. And so, just to share stories and to hear that we have these commonalities and these shared experiences, whether that be cultural experiences or education wise, there are similarities. I just think there's a connection and support that comes along with that. Being able to help someone along the way and to know that I have a purpose, it's helped me. I don't want them to have to go through what I've gone through. I want to be able to maybe make it a little bit easier for them, or maybe make it seem like they're not by themselves. I feel like I've not necessarily been in education for a long time but for principals coming in, especially for my age, I think that I've been able to give some insight.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Six: Sisterhood

For Black women in leadership positions, sisterhood is a gift of cultural understanding, support, and responsibility to help another sister along the way. Black women have long realized the need and the necessity of forming a network of other like-minded Black women. The need to find support in numbers provided tangible solutions to many of the problems they were experiencing as the minority. Because Black women in predominantly white spaces often find themselves in a fight for their survival, whether that fight is a mental, physical, or emotional fight,

sister friends, sister squads, or sister groups have become an essential part of their survival tactic. It is a much needed component in their arsenal of strategies that can be used to provide them with the tools and knowledge to survive and thrive within their oppressive environments. Whether through a sorority, a ministry, or in education, the forming of these relationships with other Black women who have “been there and done that” has been influential in providing strategies and techniques that were tried and proven. Because Black, female school leaders often have many of the same experiences, through the sharing of their stories and the opportunities to vent and release, Black women have learned that they can be the solution to each other's problems. With the support of other Black, female school leaders who are competent, confident, courageous, and capable, what once seemed an insurmountable task of leading while Black, is now one of attainability.

Category Seven- Authenticity

Another category that quickly emerged from data analysis was authenticity. Authenticity surfaced as participants shared their own personal development while serving in leadership roles in predominantly white organizations. All four participants expressed the growth they’ve experienced and the need and desire to stay true to themselves along their journey. This awareness served as a constant motivator to reject the negative ideologies of the dominant culture and any other language that did not agree with their narrative of who they were. Refusing to give anyone the power to define them, these women used various strategies to shape their own consciousness of self. The refusal to accept the identity placed on them by others and the act of challenging the narrative of the dominant culture by defining one’s own identity as a Black, female school leader, served as their form of resistance. After all, ideas matter. Black women’s refusal to be manipulated into accepting the negative stereotypes applied to them is a form of resistance that allows them to reclaim their power and their mind.

Ms. Bella:

I understand my family's stories and that according to statistics, I should not be sitting in this seat. I meet all of the statistics for someone who should be a failure. I had a teenage pregnancy. I'm a black woman in the field of education. I was married, now divorced. I was raised by a single mother. And I'm female... Yet, I am blessed and highly favored. So, that's why I don't take for granted my opportunities. Because of this and my background and how I had to grow up, I am always lending a helping hand. It has become my ministry. I understand the struggles of my families because I've been through them. I can connect with my students because of my former school environment. I tell them just like I used to tell my kids, "You have to be careful. The pressure is real". I understand that just because you didn't grow up in the right environment doesn't mean that you can't do great things. This is why I feel better when I'm serving and helping black and brown students. We just have a different way of relating with all stakeholders. We can identify better with them. Black women know how to adjust to different things easier than our colleagues because we have had to work harder to prove ourselves all of our lives. Because of that, I allow everyone within this space to bring their most authentic self to work. I accept them for who they are. But I do have expectations for their work.

I lead by example. I model what I'm expecting and follow through on any directives that I give. I am the type of leader who tries their best to figure out what I can take away from my teachers to lighten their load. I try to figure out how I can make their job easier. For me, it's not just hard work but it is also heart work. I am a relationship builder. I work to establish positive, trusting relationships. I have those courageous conversations, being transparent, being visible, being open, and being strong. I let them know that you are capable of doing the job. And when all the BS comes my way just for being black, I remind myself that I belong here and that you got this. I've learned that you have to have thick skin and that you can't take everything so personally. This is not just an institutional issue, it's societal, global even. There are systemic things put in place and people don't even understand. We don't always understand ourselves. So I've learned you have to be strong and that the work really is rewarding.

I love what I do. And I love continuing to learn. I'm proud of the fact that I have overcome barriers from being a teenage mother, even though I am still judged. I am proud to say I overcame it. How? I did it through prayer and really great support. We support each other. Yes, I have overall support from our institution and my supervisors. But I have comforted support, trusted support, needed support within my sister group, within my affinity group. Even when I'm by myself and standing alone, it's been a collaborative effort. And Jesus, when you think about what you're doing and the purposeful work you've had with children, it keeps me going.

Dr. Darla:

Like, that's who I am. When I think about myself, I think about being female, being black, being a wife, a mother, a daughter, I think about all those things. I am a

teacher and an educator. It's who I am. When I became an administrator, I never really got away from that teaching piece, if that makes sense. Like, that's who I am. When I was five years old, I knew what I wanted to do. So, I made instructional leadership a very important part of the work that I've done. I would say it was important to me because I saw that not every child was getting the best learning opportunity available with those expectations, the different expectations, the soft bigotry of low expectations. There were too many excuses that I saw, where for me as a leader, if it is not good enough for my children, then it's not okay. It's not good enough for anybody's children. When I made those decisions, I always thought about my own kids. What does that look like for them? What experiences are they being given? How are they being treated? This was something that was kept at the forefront of all my decisions. When you do that, you can't fail. I feel like when you've seen the things that I saw in classrooms as a student, and those that I saw in the classroom as an adult, you want better. I know that all that from the world comes into this little setting because our school is just a reflection of the greater world. And everything that comes in, the biases, the racism, the poverty, all these things come into play inside of a school building as well... and children respond to that. When I looked at myself, I asked myself a question. I asked, "Is this school a place where I can thrive?.... Thrive with all my multiple identities"? Whether or not I could thrive within that space is what really kept me going. Even with all of the instructional practices, how is the environment itself? We can have all of these research based best practices in the classroom, but if our kids don't feel safe mentally and emotionally, all that stuff is for not. So, I think about the times I may have been ridiculed as a young student, or accused of something that I didn't do, or felt like I didn't have a voice. That's the part that used to get to me the most, feeling like I didn't have a voice. If I don't have a voice, then why am I here? I'm just here because I have to be here?... Luckily, as a student, I loved to learn. You could give me worksheets all day long and that's exactly what they would do. They'd let me read books and I was happy. But for me, with my identity, to be my most authentic self, I have to make sure I'm not wearing a mask when I come into work. That's what I want. I want that for every single kid, every single family, and every single staff member that walks into our building. I want them to be their best self when they walk in because that's what I bring each and every day.

I am authentic and so I want my staff to be authentic. If I can't be myself when I go to these meetings, then I am going to just be quiet. I'm not dealing with the sidebar, passive aggressiveness. I'm going to ask you about it and I will call you out. I'm over being tired. I would say for me, my personal identity no longer hinders me. I've stayed firm to who I am. I've used my faith. I've used my sisterhood group, you know, people I can call. Without those things, I wouldn't have been able to do that. So, it's not a struggle for me anymore. Because I've been in this space for 14 years, I'm just unapologetic. I don't hurt people nor do I seek to destroy. I know where my heart is and I understand the power of apologizing. And if I screw up, an apology goes a long way when you mean it sincerely. And people know when you do. I check myself on a regular basis. Like I'm very aware of who I am as an individual. I have very deep self-awareness. I know when I can be too high or when I can be too low. I monitor myself but it's not a mental exercise. That's just

becoming a better person. So, at this stage in the game for me, that's why I asked people, "Are you okay? Is everything good? I was just wondering because you keep staring at me. You gotta say hello or something". That's just what I do. It's for me but it's also for them to make them more self-aware. But if I screw up with the person, I apologize. Apologizing is not a mark of a weak leader but that of a strong one. And so, I think when I'm unapologetically myself and I build those relationships. I want you to be yourself too. I welcome that. I try to develop trust and build those relationships so, you know, you can be real with me too. You can be real with somebody and still be professional. It's not like you're being unprofessional. You're just being yourself. I want my staff to be relaxed with me. There are expectations and there are things that have to get done. My staff knows I don't play about that but we are still ourselves in doing so.

Dr. Carmen:

I have come across many African American leaders who present themselves in a way that makes white people feel comfortable. It could be the way that they speak, the way they behave, or the way they distance themselves from other people of color. That has always bothered me. I just feel like I'm not going to do that dance for somebody to accept me and to promote me to my next level of leadership. And so, when I talk about being authentic, that's what I mean. Even though I speak the King's English, I don't always speak the King's English. Sometimes I kind of slip up and say some other things. And, again, it is what it is. I don't feel like I have to be an actress and be on all the time. That's what it means to be authentic and to accept me for who I am. And I'm going to do likewise. I think when you're that way, people feel comfortable around you. People trust you. They believe in you. And so, I think that's been one of the strengths that I've had as a leader. I am who I am, and I can joke with my teachers. I don't hang out with them. I don't go to staff parties. But I do have an open-door policy where they can come in and be themselves. Even when I'm trying to get work done, I've had former staff members who would come back and talk for hours. Sometimes I sit and let them talk and other times I explain that I have to get my work done. Yeah, that's kinda the blessing and the curse.

My very first principal position was with two other outstanding black women. A black woman was who gave me my first opportunity. I learned a lot from her, especially in terms of how to relate to people. Especially those people who don't like you because of the color of your skin. I also learned the strength and value of being a black woman in leadership and how kids really need to see you show up in that position every day. Because I used to live in a particular area across town, I had a lot of street cred with the students and so I was able to talk to them and meet them at their level. I like hip hop, they like hip hop, we like hip hop. I've had kids come to my office and sing or rap and I might even rap a little bit with them. I might dance that way as well. But again, that all goes back to building relationships. I just think that it's very important. For me, I always, always try to treat people with dignity and respect, even when I don't necessarily like them. That has afforded me opportunities that I never thought that I would. You never know who is watching

you. That's why you have to be very careful. I remember that there are black kids that need me here, so, it's about making those connections and leaving my mark. When you do, what ends up happening is that you may not have to look too far for jobs because people will start looking for you. And so even with that, I've had other opportunities to go to central office spaces before because somebody told somebody who told somebody who then called me up. But again, it's all in the relationship and how you treat people...not always about what you know. And just always presenting your best self whenever you can. When people see me, my hope is that they say, "Yeah, she's confident, she's competent, she's friendly, she's cool, she's nice, she's down to earth, and she's handling her business".

I am who I am, I am unapologetically black at all times. I walk in my truth, and I tell people all the time that I am an unapologetic black woman. Even though I know how to code switch, I know who I am. I am very comfortable in the skin that I am in. I have a goal of making the people around me better and to shine.

Dr. Sasha:

I am going into my fourth year in this building and so I think that time has made a huge difference. I feel like it's made me a stronger person. I feel like everything is now a cakewalk. In the early days of my career, it was very, very hard. Now, I'm not very fazed by the insults. Not at all. I feel as if they kind of just roll off my back at this point. I've reached the point where I realize that I can actually do something about it. If it's a teacher saying something, since I have a little bit of control, I have a conversation with them and roll out training for my staff related to race relations. This is the movement that we are making, becoming less racist and more conscious of our own biases. It has made room for some things to be put in place that are going to be for the overall success of our students. Now I feel more comfortable and have learned to be authentically me. I'm putting myself first and really, you know, doing some soul searching and self-care. I'm taking care of my mental health and really focusing on my faith. This has really allowed me to be okay with being me. I've made changes where my building is now half and half... Well actually, now I think African Americans are more than the White population in terms of staffing. And so we're not the minority in the building anymore. I think those things have made a drastic difference in terms of who I'm able to be at work every day.

I like being visible. I keep my door open. I'm walking in the hallways and on lunch supervision. I'm right there for morning arrivals greeting the kids and there for afternoon dismissal. I see the kids when they arrive and when they go. I do what I actually say that I'm going to do. If someone needs to make teacher improvements, I'm right there with them coaching. If it's a PLC meeting, I'm not standing there taking notes, I'm doing the work with them. I work alongside my teachers, not working over them. So, it just comes along with being a part of the school culture and not letting a title go to your head. And, you know, just being honest. Being honest and letting them know that you're human and that you make mistakes. When you do, you apologize and do better the next time. I think that just comes along with being a humble, servant leader and making sure that whatever you ask

someone else to do, you would be willing to do it yourself. I now understand when I need to take a step back and just reevaluate my priorities and understand my why... This helps me to really get back to my purpose and my why, helping me to realign myself. I'm a firm believer in a strong work life balance. So, when you are constantly working, working, working, remember you can and will be replaced tomorrow. Actually, you will be replaced tomorrow. Regardless of how hard you're working, if you work yourself to death, they'll have somebody to take your place tomorrow. So again, begin to work your muscles and stand your ground. Use your voice. Create that work life balance that you need so that you don't get to that point. And so, exercising, using your therapy, having a strong support network who will understand who you are and what you need is imperative.

I've learned that you can teach skill, but you cannot teach will. I cannot. I can teach you how to be a better teacher. I can improve your skills, but if your heart and your mindset is not in the right set, and in the right place, I can't teach that. And I don't know if I have the energy to change that either. And so that's probably been the biggest thing to learn in this role, but with it I've learned to become more authentically me. If they don't like that, that's fine, but this is it... This is it. It's too exhausting to try to be someone else. Those are the lessons that I have learned kicking and screaming along the way.

Synthesis of Recurring Themes from Category Seven: Authenticity

The Black, female school principals within this study revealed that embracing their authenticity was where their true power resided. Their newfound strategy of becoming authentically themselves and “unapologetically black” has been the unexpected survival technique that each Black, female school leader credits to her sanity and peace of mind. This was only accomplished by “doing something that was not expected” (Collins, 2000, p. 98). Instead of confirming, Black women rejected the stereotypes and used their experiences as motivation to achieve their greatest potential. It is within their self-defined consciousness that these women were able to survive and prevail despite racial and gender-based oppressions. This self-defined consciousness appeared to support the participants’ resistance, serving as motivators to keep fighting the good fight. Not only did they feel an innate sense of being true to themselves and their ancestors, but they also felt more connected to their sister friends when they did so. After all, there is an inner strength and self-confidence that comes along with knowing who you are and what you

stand for. There is a cultural responsibility that comes along with being true to yourself and understanding of your connection to the past and the present as you intentionally build bridges to the future. By strategically finding ways to remain authentically black as forms of rejecting the dominant culture, Black women can provide stepping stones for the next generation of Black, female school leaders seeking to find strength in the face of adversities.

Chapter Summary

Collins (2009) advocated for the merging of experience and consciousness in order to produce Black women's collective wisdom as foundational for naming their experience as a criterion for meaning and as a legacy of struggle, resistance, and activism. This qualitative study gathered information on the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white organizations using the interview responses of four Black, female school principals located in the Midwest. The interview data were coded and analyzed to allow categories to emerge which highlighted the lived experiences of each principal. In all, there were seven categories that emerged from an in-depth analysis of the data: (1) Systemic racism within predominantly white districts/organizations & institutions, (2) Treatment through stereotypes and microaggressions, (3) Internal struggles, (4) Health concerns, (5) Need/Desire to prove others wrong and to stand up for oneself, (6) Sisterhood, and (7) Authenticity. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the assertions, an explanation of the findings, and a detailed list of recommendations for predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions. In addition, a list of recommendations for future studies is included.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter contains a review of the study, including the purpose, the research questions, and the study design. A discussion of the findings and an explanation of the assertions follow, in addition to recommendations for predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions. Additionally, recommendations are given to Black women with aspirations of journeying into leadership within predominantly white spaces as well as recommendations for future research related to Black women in leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white school districts served as the focal point of this study. The purpose of the study was to document and detail the factors that affect Black women's journey through leadership in these spaces.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts?
2. How do Black, female principals use sisterhood as a strategy for survival?

Study Design

To gain a better perspective on the factors affecting Black women in leadership, a qualitative approach to research was selected, specifically, the phenomenological approach. The phenomenon for this research study was the lived experiences around sisterhood and the sense of

obligation felt by most Black female leaders towards helping each other succeed. This research study employed multiple methods of recruitment as the participant selection process occurred in two phases. The initial phase of the participant selection process utilized purposive sampling as the researcher was able to secure participants through her own connections. To secure even more participants for the study, the researcher utilized snowball sampling as her second recruitment phase. Through the utilization of both recruitment methods, four Black, female school principals from the Midwestern Region of the United States were selected to participate in the interview phase of this study based on meeting the criteria of: 1) identifying as Black or African American; 2) working or have worked (within the past 10 years) as a school principal within a predominately white school district or organization; 3) have participated in the shared ideology of sisterhood or have felt a sense of obligation to form a relationship with another Black woman seeking support.

During the interview process, open-ended questions were asked that allowed the participants to share their lived experiences as Black, female school leaders, the strategies they used to achieve their success, and the obstacles they have had to overcome along the way. Additionally, the interviews sought to discover the influence that sisterhood has on the leadership experiences of Black, female school principals. Three interview sessions were conducted with each participant to allow for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of Black women school principals while also serving as the topics for the next round of interview prompts. All interview sessions were audio and video recorded and transcribed. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were analyzed and coded to allow categories to emerge and themes to be identified. Additionally, member checking was used as a validity check, as participants were allowed to review their statements and descriptions of their experiences, noting any thoughts about how their contributions were categorized.

Discussion of the Findings

The emergent categories identified in this study were consistent with the research related to the dynamics of the Black woman. More specifically, the Black, female school leader's experiences inside and outside of the workplace, with internal and external struggles, and with her sisters, all factors that contribute to the Black woman's journey found in Chapter Two. The seven categories were: (1) Systemic racism within predominantly white districts/organizations & institutions, (2) Treatment through stereotypes and microaggressions, (3) Internal struggles, (4) Health concerns, (5) Need/Desire to prove others wrong and to stand up for oneself, (6) Sisterhood, and (7) Authenticity. Three assertions were gleaned from the categories and themes and should be used as a catalyst for further inquiry. These assertions are:

1. Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions have an underlying current of systemic racism and sexism that makes it challenging for Black, female school principals to thrive and survive within their system.
2. Black women often view their roles as leaders in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions as a form of activism and social justice, hoping to break down walls and barriers within the system.
3. Black women often develop sisterly relationships or sisterhoods as a survival technique to acknowledge, address, and receive support for the treatment they experience while serving in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions.

The above three assertions emphasize the most important factors for school districts, organizations, and/or institutions to consider if they decide to support Black, female school leaders in their predominantly white spaces. These assertions are supported by principal narratives as well as additional research and serve as the foundation to providing specific strategies for

predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions in their attempt to support Black, female school leaders. Additionally, specific strategies and advice is given for Black women with aspirations of journeying into leadership within predominantly white spaces.

Assertions

Assertion # 1 - Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions have an underlying current of systemic racism and sexism that makes it challenging for Black, female school principals to thrive and survive within their system.

The data gathered for this study has allowed for a deeper exploration into the lived experiences of Black, female school principals. Not only has it revealed racist treatments of using stereotypes and microaggressions towards Black women leading in predominantly white school districts, but it has also provided insight into the barriers and obstacles that Black women face due to their race and gender as they work to make their schools successful for their students. By sharing real stories about their professional and personal experiences, the interview responses of each principal helped to illustrate categories and themes surrounding the unique challenges and struggles Black women experience working in predominantly white spaces. Whether the struggles were internal or external, health related, personal desires to stand up for themselves or others, or desires to prove others wrong, Black, female school principals provided in-depth examples as to how predominantly white school districts can and often do have a climate and culture of racism and sexism that still exists. Hence, the categories of systemic racism and the treatment that Black women receive while serving in these spaces.

Critical Race Theory requires that today, the role played by race must be acknowledged for progress to be made (McCray et al., 2007). Critical race theorists maintain ideas such as color blindness and meritocracy systemically disadvantaged people of color and further advantage

whites. As participants revealed, the oppressive treatments and behaviors exhibited brought about certain disadvantages for Black women serving in these spaces. Each participant had a story of how she experienced a certain type of racist and/or oppressive behavior that impacted her journey.

Dr. Sasha shared:

I think the mindset of some predominantly white districts or organizations towards Black women is that we can't, we're not able, and we're not capable. They have a fixed mindset that they're in power and that they're the authority. A lot of the white people that I ran into would ask to see the principal or the person in leadership and I would come out. They would refuse to speak to me. Instead, they would go above me, you know, to speak to my boss. But then my boss would give the same directive that I would have given, or my boss tells him to go back to the school to talk to me because that's a school issue, not a district level issue. And so, it was a lot of those power struggles. That happened a lot. I would also say that a lot of that fixed mindset was that they could talk to you any kind of way. I think that they still believe that they have more power than you. Especially in regards to how they would talk to you and how they train their children to speak to you. So often, the children would be just as disrespectful as their parents. It was because the parents had taught them that you don't have to respect that individual. Kids would get suspended and the parent would still send their kid the very next day. It was confusing, like, just completely disregarding what I said or what was done. Some of the teachers would do some of the same kinds of things. You'd go through a professional development, give them some ideas about classroom management. Give them strategies for discipline and all of those kinds of things. And they would still have the same classroom management issues and wouldn't use any of the strategies. They didn't believe that they would work for them because they're white. To them, those strategies would only work for a black person, not understanding that the strategies were universal and actually research-based strategies not based on any kind of race. So just a lot of power struggles, in regard to just respect.

Dr. Darla explained:

These organizations were not created with our needs in mind. We were kind of like placeholders at the table to show diversity is here. They needed to show the world, Oh, we do have people of color in our administration. But when it comes to the needs of race, power, racism, nobody wants to look at that because that couldn't possibly be their organization. So, I feel as though we look good for people in white organizations but they don't want to do that real work. So, when we begin to push and demand for that work to take place, then all of a sudden, we cause an issue. They start to say there was nothing wrong before you got here...until so and so got here and yada, yada, yada. I know within these last couple of years, there has been more pushback. As a person who has been in administration for 18 years, I've heard and seen so much. I knew that it was for the look. I realized they thought that I looked a certain way... the way that they thought I should look. And because of that, they thought I was gonna play this game. But then they found out they got

something totally different than what they expected to get... an actual black woman. They thought I was gonna play the game with them and toe the line, but when there is injustice being done, I just can't. I just can't sit there and watch it. I've gotten to the point where I tell them. I shared with them at one point, if this is who you are, I'm probably not the right person for this spot.

As evidenced throughout many of the stories, Dovidio et al. (2002) calls attention to the fact that modern racism is more likely to be expressed as covert, indirect, and more ambiguous, thus creating challenges in identifying and acknowledging its occurrence. Within their research, Wong et al. (2014) explains the concept of racial microaggression, describing how these subtle insults towards minorities are hidden in everyday interactions leading to undetectable tendencies which help to widen the gap of racial realities. Throughout the interview process, each participant took time to stop at certain points within her life that left a lasting impression. Whether it was highlighted as significant enough to change her career path or significant enough to motivate her to become the woman she is today, it played a role in how she came to view her working environment. Dr. Carmen suggested:

... So, this leads to a fear in general of black women in leadership and all the stereotypes that come along with it. Especially being in a white school district in a white community. When you're steeped in whiteness, I just think that there's a fear anytime someone of a different color tries to enter. For example, I think it was very interesting that several more people, once they found out that a Black woman was going to be the principal, decided that they wanted to leave. When they had the chance before, you know, before knowing who the principal would be, they waited... but once they found out I was black, they were gone. So, there's already this fear and add to that a fear of having a new principal, it's a lot. I think it's just that fear of the unknown. Who is she? How's it going to be to work for her? And we all get that when we have a new boss, right? But I think with a black woman, it's magnified based upon implicit biases. Ms. Bella reports:

They really do make every effort to make sure that you understand that you are still just a black woman. Through the use of subtle, disrespectful comments that are obviously towards you or treatment as if you are invisible, they let you know that you may be smart, but you're not going to be the smartest person in the room. Whether you are or are not, they are going to make sure that you understand you are not going to be the smartest person in the room. They make it clear that you may be in charge of your school, but if I want to exert my energy, I will and you will quickly know your place... Know your place by knowing that you are inferior.

It's hurtful knowing that you can be giving your all and still be treated unfairly for no apparent reason.

This is one reason why Monts (2012) advocates Critical Race Theory can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience as persons in power designed these laws and policies that were supposed to be race-neutral but still perpetuate racial and ethnic oppression. As Monts advocates, the concept of CRT considers how issues of racism are still a prevalent form of discrimination and that these issues should be considered in policies and programs.

Another view that was held by all four participants was the belief that being Black and female made the journey even more challenging. Even the need for clarification on the Black woman's journey through leadership in predominantly white spaces speaks not only to the power of the dominant group to hide the truth of the subordinate groups, but also illustrates how, once again, being in "outside-within" locations and spaces can foster new angles for visions of oppressive actions and behaviors. For this reason, Collins (2000) advocates the need for Black Feminist Thought and its' practices as a response to the fundamental contradiction of U.S. society, highlighting the fact that democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens; yet the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status still persists. This differential group treatment was expressed by Dr. Carmen when she stated:

I recall having to have a conversation about a black woman's tone. I've had some people who would try to say that because of the Black woman's tone and how she speaks, it makes people afraid. I've had to have several conversations with people where they didn't necessarily like what I was saying; however, if what I was saying was coming from someone of a different skin tone, it probably would have been taken better. Because of the tone, they felt like I was angry at them. I've had to explain a couple of times when I didn't like the behavior that I'm seeing exhibited, my tone is not going to be singgy or songy. But that doesn't mean that I am angry right now. And so I think there's this issue for some people that when they have to take feedback from us, and it's negative feedback, it's misconstrued as something

other than what it is. I've noticed that my assistant principal can say some of the same things that I've said and it's taken better because of how he says it. So that's where the whole angry Black woman thing kind of comes into play. I'm not one who usually backs down from a challenge nor am I going to sit here and smile all the time. I have a right to be angry, when I am in fact angry or when I feel like being angry. I know how I feel. And so it's unfortunate when people are intimidated because they start to feel inferior and then they try to destroy your credibility as a Black woman. It's really sad. They want us to ultimately know that as white people, typically they yield the power.

Dr. Darla explains:

...We get it extra hard because we have to deal with the intersectionality of not only race, but also gender. Yet, we are expected to do so much more than the average bear while still taking care of our own family. We're expected to do everything and to do it with a smile and with no complaining. Don't say too much, do your job, keep your head down, keep your mouth shut, but still pull a rabbit out of your hat every single time. I feel like our wins are forgotten very quickly, yet our losses are put in our face continuously. I feel that for black women, our spirits are always murdered when this happens. Our spirits are just as murdered as someone who has been shot and our treatment should be similar to a shot victim. Instead, now you're dealing with 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 year old women in the workplace who have had to continuously deal with this mess from childhood, all the way through college, and to that of the workplace. When you think about the toll that takes on us, I can't even imagine what our hearts look like. It reminds me of Dr. King's heart. You know when the doctors did an autopsy on his heart, although he was only 40, the doctors said he had a heart of a 60 year old. I would definitely say Black women's hearts would be very similar to that because we have to do everything. It's different for white women. I feel like we struggle a lot in that area because we are expected to be able to handle the load with no complaints. That's why we feel like we have to put a mask on every day....

Dr. Sasha said it this way:

Historically, we've always been the lowest rung of all social ladders. You have women, who are already considered lesser than and didn't even have the ability to vote. At the same time, we've always been at home, supposedly cooking and cleaning, child rearing and all of that. Then you put on top of that, being black and the most disenfranchised population of people that can be. And so, we are constantly having to fight against stereotypes, actual social justice, and the systemic issues that are in our society. Every single day, you gotta put on your combat boots as if you're going to war. You're not necessarily always going to war against white people, but you're also going to work in what could seem like a war-like environment. We talk so much about the racism that exists in their spaces, but there's also issues that we have within our own race. Issues with black men and the lack of respect that they have for the Black woman. When you compile all of that

with my age, it's just always a hard, hard battle. And sometimes you feel like you're always losing.

While I expected to see differences in the responses of those with less years of experience in education compared to those with more years of experience in education, this was not what was found. The experiences for these Black, female school principals, regardless of age and/or years of experience, did not differ. This leads me to believe that regardless of years of experience or age, Black women still experience the patterns of ongoing, systemic issues that exist within white spaces. For these issues of racism and sexism to be resolved for the next generation of aspiring Black female leaders, a drastic change in mindset and practices will need to happen if true change and transformation is going to take place.

Assertion # 2- Black women often view their roles as leaders in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions as a form of activism and social justice, hoping to break down walls and barriers within the system.

As this study reveals, all four participants viewed themselves as activists for either their race, their teachers, their students, their gender, or themselves. In their efforts to remain authentic to who they were as Black women, they had to deal with injustices encountered within their buildings as well as within the system. Each participant described situations in which they confronted situations head on, seemingly standing in the gap for themselves and/or other leaders, teachers, and students of color. The Black, female school leaders in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to activism and social justice by not only aligning their actions as leaders with their true authentic selves, but also with their educational philosophies and beliefs around educating children of color. Because of their determination to bring with them the essence of who they are as Black women into their leadership roles, they were able to align their mission of remaining authentic alongside their leadership practices and the educational environments within

their buildings. This desire to bring awareness to themselves and to others, served to benefit not only their professional world, but also better the worlds of their students, teachers, and fellow leaders. While these Black, female school leaders did not say activism nor social justice by name, their beliefs about Black women, schooling, and educational leadership expanded to what they saw as equity and inclusion. The experiences of these women consistently provide a foundation for what could be considered activism and social justice in school leadership, serving as the personification of resilience and protest against racism and sexism.

Because of this need, Black women continue to see each other as valuable assets. If taken seriously as leaders, Black women could also serve as valuable assets to the predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions for which they serve, assisting in rectifying or resolving the underlying issue of systemic racism and sexism within these entities. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) reports, avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to “redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone notices and condemns” (p.22). Once the role of race is truly acknowledged within systems, Black women and other people of color will be allowed to convey the experiences, the lessons, and the knowledge they possess in ways that are empowering and meaningful to them. This is the essence of providing minorities with a voice or a counter-story to challenge the dominant story as well as to acknowledge the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). After all, Black women do not want to be viewed as the victims; instead, they would like to be seen as the experts with many of the solutions to solving the oppressive patterns of the district, organization, and/or institution with which they serve. Because CRT insists on recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color, Black women could effectively be used

to provide the evidence and the solutions needed to gauge the competency of the district as well as to assist with making transformational changes.

Dr. Carmen reported:

I think it's our duty and our job to push back and to speak up on some of those stereotypes and microaggressions. For example, I know I've had colleagues that would interview black people and they'd say things like, "Oh, my gosh, I hope they're not lazy". And I would have to speak up and say things like, "Well, what would give you that impression? Why would you think, you know, they're lazy?" There was another time when I was in a meeting with my white Director of Curriculum. Within this meeting, the director begins to talk about how articulate our new Director of Communication was, who happens to be a Black woman. I remember going to her saying, "Wait a minute, she's educated... She's the Director of Communications, she should be articulate. You know that's racist, right?" I speak up when I see these microaggressions because it's the right thing to do. Because of this, I have had certain people come back and say there's a perception that you're angry. And I'm like, again, "You know that's racist, right?" I am allowed to have my opinion. I am allowed to have my feelings. Why is it that you guys want to regulate how I feel? You don't do that to anyone else. I will never forget, one of the first teachers that I met told me that she was colorblind. In return, I told her, "If you are colorblind then you don't see me. I'm a wonderfully, blessed, amazing Black woman and I want you to see me." And so I just call it out whenever I see it. I face a lot of those issues head on.

Dr. Sasha stated it this way:

I think it is important for us as Black women to speak up for ourselves because if we don't, who will? We have to leverage the power of using our voice to create better experiences for ourselves, our teachers of color, and our students of color. It is imperative for our well being. I had to create the culture that was going to be most conducive for my success based upon my race and what I believed my students needed. And so I think that's why it's important for us to speak up in order for change to occur...

... And so, there have been times when I have tried to talk to human resources about those inappropriate comments that have been made. I have had to talk to other leaders about their suspension practices that I do not agree with. Even to how they handle their special education students, to how they track their kids, or how they say that they're multicultural or culturally responsive and then you go into their building, and you see that they are not. You have to speak up, especially when none of their actions are tied to their words. And so, you know, I am constantly trying to be an advocate for the students in their buildings when I'm not even in their building, or just constantly rectifying what they think that I should be or not be. I shouldn't have to fight against these microaggressions, but I have to do so on a daily basis. This is why it is so important for us to speak up as Black women leaders.

You have black women and you have black teachers, and it's your job as the leader to be the voice for all of them. It's your job to be the voice of your children and for your students. You never know who's watching, listening, and learning. If you don't speak up and say something, you will simply get pushed over or taken advantage of. I realized that I have to be the voice for that. Oftentimes, I will be the only person of color sitting at the table, and so I have to be the voice for all African American people. Really understanding the implications of that, understanding curriculum choices, making sure that students of color are being represented in the text and they can see themselves. These are the things that matter. So whenever there are focus groups created, I always want to be a part of that focus group so that there is always representation. So, just making sure that I'm always a part of things so that there is always a person of color and that our voice is heard.

As individuals and as a group, these Black, female school principals revealed stories of the oppression they have experienced in the forms of biases and stereotypes related to their race and their gender. Because many situations were directly related to both their racial and gender identities, Black Feminist Thought supports giving voice to Black women who have been silenced. The claiming of their ideas and their perceptions help to clarify and reveal the Black woman's true experiences as told from her perspective. This reclaiming of a more specialized knowledge that has been dissected and analyzed from the subjects of the oppression is critical to giving Black women back their voice. As Collins (2000) advocates, "on some level, people who are oppressed usually know it" (p.8). The participants in this study appeared to demonstrate consciousness of their racial and gendered identities and the oppression related to their identities. "As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed" (Collins, 2000, p. 22). Likewise, Critical Race Theory can be used to scrutinize the ways in which race and racism directly and indirectly affected the Black women within this study. Not only can we examine the racism experienced throughout their journey to and through leadership as an individual concern but also one of a group phenomena which identifies racism as an institutional and systemic issue.

None of the Black women within this study wanted to be placed inside of a mold. You see, Black women are not all monolithic. Black women cannot all be placed inside of a box. Instead, Black women want to be able to be authentic to who they are and to what their culture and ancestors created them to be. With each participant, there was a well-articulated sense of knowing who she was, her leadership abilities, and how outside factors impacted her as a school leader and as a Black woman. Knowing this about herself, each participant formed a philosophy of how she would interact with her organization, with her colleagues, with her teachers, and with her students. Part of knowing who you are stems from knowing where you have been. The fact that each participant had a strong family foundation rooted in the church cannot be left out of their understanding of what shapes them, what wires them, and what gives them strength to lead as Black women. Additionally, their experiences as Black girls growing up in racist environments must be considered when discussing their activist role and the common goal. None of the participants stated this directly, but it became clear through the course of the interviews as the experiences continued to emerge.

Assertion # 3- Black women often develop sisterly relationships or sisterhoods as a survival technique to acknowledge, address, and receive support for the treatment they experience while serving in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions.

As activists in their roles, Black women have learned to create survival strategies that allow them to continue to fight the good fight. As discovered in the literature, sisterhood is a unique strategy that has always been in the toolbox for Black women. As this study's data revealed, all four participants have used this strategy throughout their career; however, three of the four communicated the belief that they could not have made their journey without the relationships they have formed with certain sisters or sister groups along the way. Ms. Bella explains it this way:

I've had a lot of support. It was other women who pushed me into leadership, both black and white. So I just feel it's important to do for other women what has been done for me. Somebody else lent their hand to me, so I just think it is just as important for me to do the same thing. I feel like we can be that bridge. I feel like we have been that bridge for each other in order to get over the turbulence that the outside brings to us. Whether that's in our career or in society, we're trying to get over troubled waters. Sometimes you just need to hear you can do it. Don't give up. You will still go to college. Those were the things that were spoken to me. And so, I just believe in sowing positive seeds as it comes back to you when you do. Because of the way that I grew up, I was always lending a hand to support others. It's just kind of my ministry, a part of my calling to help other women and to be in a sisterhood.

Dr. Darla shared:

Because Black women leaders experience life in a very particular way, we connect and bond over the shared experiences that we seem to all have. Now, this doesn't mean I cannot go out to a restaurant or hang out with you as a white colleague. It just means that I need my sister because she can relate to what I'm going through. Even if a white person believes they have had an experience similar to one I may be describing, it is not the same. There's a different nuance that goes along with ours that they don't have to experience. This is why I need my sisters' support. I need that time just to talk and reconnect with them. It's important for me. It's important for my livelihood. It's important so that I don't bring all this mess home every day. They're there for me. They are literally there for me. They've cried with me. They've celebrated with me. They've been there to cheer me on. It's been a beautiful thing. My squad feeds my soul. They have my back no matter what and are usually just a phone call, a text away, or an email away. What I also love about them is that if I do need to be checked, they're going to listen with love first, and then they're going to ask deeper questions. That's what I'm talking about when it comes to my squad. I'm free to just be me. I'm in my safe haven with my people who I can count on to listen to me cry and still support. I can be me, I can be Darla. I can talk a certain way. I can be however I want to be. I can be my true authentic self. But when I'm with y'all, I have to monitor everything I say. I have to carry the whole conversation. I have to make sure everybody's happy. I don't have time for that. It's exhausting. That's why when I go home, I need my peace. It has such a tremendous impact on us.

Dr. Carmen reveals:

It's the breath that it gives you when you know that you're making a difference for other young women that are coming after you. But it also gives you support when you know that you need somebody's shoulder to cry on. It also keeps you grounded when you know you start to get the big head and think that you know everything. So, I would not have made it through my educational journey if I did not have good friends that I could call on and just run things by. I have one particular sister friend that I will call and be like, "Am I crazy? Listen to this... Am I crazy?" She is hilarious and able to take a rough situation and make me laugh about it. She'll say,

“You know, you just need me... I need to be your translator”. Then she’ll give me the ghetto version of what I should say which always makes me laugh. So it’s stuff like that that just kind of helps me see the bright side, the bigger picture, not taking things too seriously although they do hurt. They just help in making it through because it’s not easy. Leadership is not easy, but being a black woman in leadership... It’s even more difficult. But again, I’m here. It’s possible... we can do it... our sisters are pertinent to making it a little easier.

McNeil (2001) found that the challenges and opportunities shared by women who have endured injustices helps develop a special bond that is defined as *sisterhood* (as cited in Muhammad, 2012, p.5). Likewise, these four Black, female school leaders unveiled their opinions that they could not have made their journey without the relationships formed with other Black women, their sisters. It was through these relationships that the women found faith to continue believing in themselves when the journey got rough. It was through these relationships that they felt free to be their true authentic selves. It was through these sisterly relationships that they gained the techniques and strategies to continue to fight the good fight within their oppressive environments. In doing so, these Black women were able to use this unique concept of blending old traditions of survival for the Black race and the Black family with the new direction of serving and surviving within predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions. This blending of the old with the new allowed for Black women to create safe, affirming, and empowering networks and circles of sister friends who served somewhat as the survival mechanism much like the Black family and the Black community.

As the literature reveals, there was a deep understanding that connections and caregiving were the survival mechanisms of the Black community. If the family was going to advance, each generation had to be stronger and go further than the generation before them. For that reason, many within the Black community felt a sense of responsibility to provide support and guidance based on the consciousness and the experience tied into the teachings of the Black women in their family. Likewise, all four participants seemed to understand that if the Black woman was going to advance,

each generation had to be stronger and go further than the generation before them. All four Black, female school principals felt the sense of responsibility mentioned throughout literature of providing support and guidance based on the consciousness and experiences tied to being Black. Cooperation rather than competition proved to be an important factor in the Black struggle as Black women often drew together in support networks within their own communities. Part of helping, supporting, and uplifting the spirit of each other included the sharing of experiences. Peterson (1992) believes the sharing of these experiences has been essential to the survival of the Black community (p.82). Blacks who succeeded were very conscious that a victory for one person was a victory for all. Ms. Bella communicates it this way:

We have the same struggles and we deal with some of the same things as black women. So, if I have some success in my life, I believe that I should be sharing that with another sister....

Dr. Darla advocates:

I feel like there are these innate traits for Black women... innate traits that are passed on from our ancestors. I believe these traits have been instilled in us and passed down from generation to generation. I don't want this to sound cliché, but like, we have this innate sense of strength in the sense of, we make things do what needs to be done. We understand there will be obstacles along the way. But there is a way when they say God will make a way out of no way. Like there is a way. I might not be able to see it, but there is a light. This strength is something that I think I have seen passed on from our ancestors. I've seen it with other Black female leaders also. We're going to get the workload completed...

Dr. Carmen shares:

I would say just having a collective group of like-minded women, typically with the same goals in the same area, helps to keep you focused. That's why it is so important to have sister friends because we have those shared experiences. We have been through it. We're still going through it. Yet, we can help each other learn how to navigate it and learn how to stay the course. We encourage each other to keep pushing when it feels like so many odds are stacked against you.

I want to let God's light shine through me and help encourage other black women to know that we can do this. We were born to do this. So even being able to speak to you... That's one of the reasons why I haven't been so quick to get into other

positions just yet. I'm still trying to figure out okay, God, what's my purpose? Because I really do want to help this younger generation who are trying to move forward.

Dr. Sasha reports:

Having sisterly relationships and that support network has allowed me to see that I can help somebody and to know that what I went through was similar to what other Black women have gone through. And so, just to share stories and to hear that we have these commonalities and these shared experiences, whether that be cultural experiences or education wise, there are similarities. I just think there's a connection and support that comes along with that. Being able to help someone along the way and to know that I have a purpose, it's helped me. I don't want them to have to go through what I've gone through. I want to be able to maybe make it a little bit easier for them, or maybe make it seem like they're not by themselves. I feel like I've not necessarily been in education for a long time but for principals coming in, especially for my age, I think that I've been able to give some insight.

In this nature, Black women can be seen as bridges over troubled water as they provide advice, guidance, and support to those who choose to follow behind them. If our past is to have meaning for paving the path forward for future generations of women of color, not only must Black women continue to be the bridge, but they must also continue to build the bridge while also maintaining the present foundation in which others have constructed. My journey with these four Black, female principals reminded me of the strength and power of our history in this country. Black women in this country come from a history that has brought them through bondage and slavery to certain aspects of privilege and freedom. This history has provided the strength and courage that has told us how to live, how to survive, and how to always support one another. The strength that resides in sisterhood, where Black women met regularly with each other for the purposes of communication and mutual support, can be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century. This concept of sisterhood as a means of survival throughout the journey of Black women in positions of leadership within predominantly white organizations can draw from a long history that exists within the Black community of Black women supporting each other. As I reflect on this study, I can hear, feel, and see the common threads that have sustained Black women for centuries. The

relationships we weave give us the strength and the power to create opportunities for more and more of us.

Essentially, the survival of Black women in this country, whether physical, emotional, psychological, or in a career such as education, has been due to the support that they have either given or received from each other. The necessity of forming these relationships have been passed down through generations, intentionally or unintentionally encompassing all levels of life for Black women. The need to support, to encourage, and to protect each other can be seen throughout the professional lives, personal lives, or even spiritual lives of these Black women. Although sisterhood is not a new phenomenon experienced by Black women, it is a unique concept that can be used to explain how Black, female school principals in predominantly white school districts describe their ability to not just survive, but to also thrive in their oppressive environments. This act of finding one's own sister squad or groups of sisters could be a result of the lack of available mentors of color on a higher level. Additionally, it could also be due to the continual, on-going role sister friends are able to provide along with their long-term investment of support and guidance.

For some Black women, the forming of this type of relationship could be viewed as more beneficial than the basic educational mentorship that is recommended in some leadership theories. These data opened my eyes to the importance of these relationships, especially when so-called mentors are not available. It is for these discussed reasons that sisterhood should serve to influence future research exploring the leadership journeys of Black women. Additionally, this relationship should be viewed as a relationship of significant importance for a Black female leaders' growth and development due to the struggles that most Black women face in leadership. Because of these struggles, Black women are often left to create their own network of sister friends as their safe

haven, sharing stories of survival and strategies as each one gleans wisdom and guidance along the way.

Perhaps most surprising in this research was the lack of data collected on the impact of mentoring relationships. Since the theme of mentoring relationships runs through many aspects of the literature on the female journey to principalship and the superintendency, one would anticipate that these participants would have experienced significant mentoring relationships as well. However, the four Black, female school principals interviewed within this study instead spoke to the sisterly relationships with other Black women who they have learned from or who they were able to share advice with. According to participants, these sisterly relationships served as integral parts of how they arrived or survived in their position. Although there were mentoring relationships involved at some point on their leadership journey, mentoring was not a significant nor on-going portion of their stories. Rather, three of the four participants pointed to other Black women they considered part of their sister squad, sisterhood, or a sister friend who made a significant impact on their lives and their survival in these spaces. This collaborative approach built a sense of collective power within their group. Not only did it allow them as Black women to brainstorm and think together, but it also allowed them to strategize and design creative solutions to often challenging and difficult problems impacting all areas of their lives on their leadership journey.

Recommendations for Predominantly White School Districts, Organizations, and Institutions

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to lessen the gap in the research on Black women in leadership by investigating the lived experiences of Black, female school principals. While many organizations profess to be committed to change and progress, many Black women continue to experience difficulty securing and/or remaining in leadership

positions, especially in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions. For that reason, the goal of this research was twofold. First, to provide a blueprint for the next generation of Black, female leaders who aspire towards school leadership. Secondly, to give voice to the stories of Black, female school leaders, documenting the good, the bad, and the ugly of Black women's journey to and through leadership. By sharing their experiences in school leadership, the researcher sought to provide a guide for organizational strategies that will allow predominately white school districts, organizations, and/or institutions the ability to promote and to support the advancement of Black, female school leaders within their organizations. Implementation of the following recommendations might improve the degree to which Black women find success and the ability to thrive while serving in predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions:

1. Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must find ways of forming positive, supportive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their Black, female school principals. This can be accomplished by:
 - a. Treating Black women with honesty and respect.
 - b. Having a willingness to help.
 - c. Replacing racist and sexist patterns of behavior and treatment with culturally competent and inclusive practices.
 - d. Requiring every school district to receive a cultural competency and/or an equity & inclusion rating each school year.
2. Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must begin to see Black women as valuable assets both as individuals and as members within their organizations. This can be accomplished by:

- a. Recognizing and understanding the value of Black women in roles of leadership.
 - b. Recognizing and understanding the value of Black women in identifying and providing solutions to patterns of injustices and racist and sexist behaviors within the organization.
- 3. Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must provide professional development and ongoing training with a focus on cultural competency, equity, and inclusion, assessing, teaching, and training employees on ways to break the cycles of oppression, systemic racism, and sexism that still exists within their organizations. This can be accomplished by:
 - a. Comprehending how race and gender impacts the lives of the Black women who serve within their organization.
 - b. Examining the organization's racist and sexist behaviors, beliefs, and practices, creating a plan of action.
 - c. Having a willingness to solve or resolve issues for employees of color.

Recommendation #1- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must find ways of forming positive, supportive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their Black, female school principals.

All four participants communicated a desire to have a more positive, supportive, trusting, and respectful relationship with their organizations and those within it. One way of doing so is by replacing the current treatments of stereotyping and microaggressions towards Black women with respect, honesty, and a willingness to help. Being open and honest when the district does not understand the impact of race and gender on various issues is also vital in forming positive relationships with their Black, female leaders of color. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) advocate,

avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to “redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone notices and condemns” (p.22). Once the role of race is truly acknowledged, Black women and other people of color will be allowed to convey the experiences, the lessons, and the knowledge they've gained from the racist and sexist treatment they've endured along their journey. This ability to be open and honest about their experiences allows Black women to be able to process their experiences in ways that are empowering and meaningful to them. Therefore, it is essential to provide Black women with a voice or a counter-story to challenge the dominant story.

Learning to treat Black women with sincere curiosity, honesty, and support in regard to things that may not be understood by the dominant culture will be key in building and maintaining this type of relationship. This includes a willingness to listen to what the Black woman has to say while reframing from placing personal judgement due to differences in opinions or perceptions. Additionally, this must also include taking personal consideration of Black women's perspectives of the problem, of the surrounding circumstances, and of the need for the development of a plan of action. It is important that Black women understand that the organization is there to help and while the opinions and perspectives may differ, they will not be judged based on perceived stereotypes and biases. Furthermore, the entity and those who work within it, must be willing to refrain from the use of microaggressions and passive aggressiveness to communicate when expressing any concern.

As an accountability measure, I recommend a movement in which the rating of the cultural competency of each school district, organization, and institution be made public knowledge by the state and/or an activist group. In my opinion, this accountability factor will encourage more school districts, organizations, and institutions to understand the need, the necessity, and the urgency of improving the practices, treatment, and working environments of its black employees. With a laser

focus on the treatment, promotion rates, and support or lack of support received by their Black, female school principals and other leaders of color, leaders, teachers, and students of color will have a better gauge of the type of working and/or learning environment he/she may be walking into. This overall score or rating would be a representation of the cultural competency, equity, and inclusiveness of each school district, serving as a warning or an invitation to leaders of color. Additionally, school leaders of color will have the knowledge and information necessary to develop their survival tactics before even hitting the battlefield in their new or current school district.

To resolve the issues discussed above, critical race theorists insist on recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society. For that reason, predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must seek assistance and receive feedback on ways in which they can continue to develop more positive, supportive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their Black female stakeholders. By speaking to Black women on the various issues surrounding their needs, their treatment within the organization, and the internal and external struggles they experience, the display of interest and concern on the part of the school district will help to remove the hesitation of Black women to seek help when needed. Moreover, this receptiveness to giving a voice to their Black, female school leaders will also create a more positive, trusting relationship with their stakeholders of color.

Recommendation #2- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must begin to see Black women as valuable assets both as individuals and as members within their organizations.

Despite the challenges and barriers Black women continue to face within their working environments, Black, female school leaders continue to show up, to do the work, and to build bridges. For this reason, it is extremely important that we not simply know about Black women

who have achieved their goals of becoming school principals, but that we also learn from their journey and their experiences. By studying their journey as well as their experiences, we can take a closer look at how they have survived, how they persevered, and how they continue to excel as school leaders. To continue to make improvements and to pave the way moving forward, Black women must be seen as valuable assets as individuals and as members of their white school districts, organizations, and institutions. They cannot simply be seen as victims. Instead, they must also be seen as the experts containing many of the solutions to solving the oppressive patterns of predominantly white entities. Not only do Black women have both the experiential knowledge and the evidence needed to gauge the competency of the district, but they also have the capacity and the ability to help transform its' practices.

Throughout history, and even in their everyday lives, Black women have been challenged on every level; yet, they have still managed to sustain the Black family, the Black community, and more importantly, other Black women. An examination of the lives of these Black women shows this to be the rule rather than the exception. They are mothers and wives, sisters and daughters who all engage in kitchen table dialogues with their sister squads, sister friends, and sisters, constantly lifting each other up as they climb. They are actively involved in their schools, in their community, and in their churches. Today, Black women are still faced with the adversities of racism and sexism; yet, they still manage to be overachievers, serving as role models and leaders for others to follow. Not only do they dare, but they also dream, and they do! A lot could be learned from their struggles, but even more could be learned from their growth. By allowing Black women to speak and to be the experiential knowledge and experts in this area, they could serve as priceless sources of wisdom and expertise on the steps necessary to see true systemic change.

Recommendation #3- Predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions must provide professional development and ongoing training with a focus on cultural competency, equity, and inclusion, assessing, teaching, and training employees on ways to break the cycles of oppression, systemic racism, and sexism that still exists within their organizations.

First, intentional, and strategic professional development and ongoing training must be provided in order to assess, teach, and train school districts, organizations and institutions on how to break the cycles of oppression, systemic racism, and sexism that still exists within their organization. Whether formal or informal, training programs should be implemented for those in the field of education to assist districts better understand the needs of Black women and the issues that may stand in the way of them receiving the support, acknowledgement, recognition, and/or promotion that they deserve. Topics that assist employers and employees in becoming more aware of what factors facilitate the development of a strong employee/employer relationship, what factors act as a barrier, and what specific strategies are most likely to work in the employer/employee relationship with Black women, and other leaders of color, is essential for not just fair treatment, but also for the success of them both. Professional development sessions with a focus on cultural competency, equity, and inclusion could allow organizations to examine the racist and sexist behaviors, beliefs, practices, and possible stereotypes that still exist within their organization. Taking the time, effort, and the steps necessary to access these areas within the organization will show not only a willingness to solve or resolve issues for employees of color, but also the seriousness of the organization in providing people of color a safe working space where they can thrive. These types of training, programs, and professional practices show a preparedness to discuss issues of oppression and how it impacts the lives of their employees of color. Incorporating these forms of best practices into the rotation for school districts, organizations, and institutions will bring about true, lasting change that will lead to transformational improvements within these entities for Black women and other employees of color.

Recommendations for Black, Female School Leaders

I may not know every African American I past on the street, but I know them. You know there's a connectiveness that we can't explain, but we feel it and we make that connection when our eyes connect, when our souls.. .it's just there. When I went to Africa it was there. It was real strong.. .when I was in Ghana, at a conference they brought a whole group of queen mothers, and I just happened to be coming down the hall and all these "sisters" were standing there. And many of them did not speak English and I just walked up to them and they turned.. .and they were all grandmamma and great-grand mamas and I smiled.. .I didn't know at first that they were queen mothers, but I knew there was something real powerful going on with me and the connections and I was in Africa. ..that's the thing.. .that no matter how many centuries removed we are, no matter how we're divided up, by neighborhoods, by states, by countries.. .there's a connection.. .no matter what our historical experiences have been that have tried to divide and disconnect us, it's still there. It is still there and.. .I recognize it and understand its power, we're able to rise from it.

Joyce (as cited in Bell, 2006, p. 93)

The primary purpose of this research was to conduct a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Black, female school leaders in predominantly white educational organizations and the influence of sisterhood on their leadership experience. In doing so, this research aimed to identify tools, techniques, and strategies needed by the next generation of Black, female school leaders seeking to find a bridge over troubled water. Additionally, the research aimed to provide recommendations to predominantly white school districts, organizations, and institutions on how to meet the needs of Black, female school leaders within their organization. The Black female voices presented in this study gave illumination and voice to the lived experiences of Black, female school principals and the role that sisterhood has played on their journey of defining themselves, validating themselves, and assigning their own worth.

Within this study, the racist and sexist treatment experienced by these Black, female school leaders, were intended to be inhibitors; yet, due to various strategies and techniques employed, these oppressions served as motivation for their resistance. Using this resistance as a powerful tool to develop their sense of personal identity, these Black leaders learned to use their relationships

through sisterhood to sustain them through the good and the difficult times. They continually looked for ways to support their sisters and have shared that these relationships were the glue that held everything together, especially when dealing with the isolation that comes as a result of resisting. For the women in this study, sisterhood seemed to offer a safe haven to discuss any, and all matters related to life, especially those issues related to work, family, spirit and heart.

My recommendation for Black women in education, particularly those in leadership positions, is to build your own network of like-minded sister friends who can and will support you along your journey to and through leadership. Black women who champion the concept of sisterhood feel an innate sense of obligation to support other Black women striving to achieve personal and professional success. Because of this sisterly support, many Black women find it easier to persist. This desire and willingness to support other Black women on their journey to achieve specific goals is crucial to the continual development of future Black female leaders. Collins (2000) advocates that Black women are self-defined, self-reliant individuals who confront race, gender, and class oppression as forms of resistance. She also advances that the political purpose of Black feminist thought is located within the struggle for, and the continuation of, self-definition, self-validation, and self-worth, all of which I found to be the central purpose of the resistance for the women within this study.

As a Black woman, I also recommend that Black women continue to use their voice to champion change for women of color. Continue to fight the good fight that leads to transformational change for the Black race and the Black community. Continue to be the activist that you are, listening to the voices of your ancestors and the innate sense of strength that has been passed down from generation to generation. Remember, you are the bridge for the woman who follows behind you. Continue to lift as you climb. Where there is no ladder, build one. When there

is no chair at the table, bring one. Continue to share your courageous stories of overcoming obstacles. For as Black women we understand, a win for one is also a win for us all. Keep winning my sisters.

Recommendations for Future Research

Black women for centuries have had to depend on other Black women to keep ourselves, our homes, our institutions and our communities together. With conditions that loom before us as a people and the awesome challenges we face, it would be genocidal to break the bond of sisterhood. This is why I make a conscious effort to say to my sister friends that I love and cherish them, that my life is diminished without their presence and participation in it. I thank them for being in my corner. We try to find wonderful things to say to each other that we really mean - I love seeing you. You look great. You're important to my eyes and ears. We give each other little gifts, or send cards, or call just to say hello. In short, my sisterfriends and I have resolved to hold on to and be there for each other, all the way. I have absolute faith that I could lean on any one of them and she wouldn't buckle, their expectations of me are exactly the same. Shoring each other up, Black women do that as a rule. My sincerest wish is that we hold fast to it, and do it with love. We show what we believe by our own loving actions. Through love we teach. Through love we instruct. Through love we build up.

Maya Angelou (in *Essence*, 1995 p. 17)

I recommend that future research and published discourse continue to address and include actual Black women's lived experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of educational leadership. In doing so, Black women can continue to share the tools, techniques, and strategies that they have used to navigate the turbulent waters to and through leadership, especially while serving in predominantly white institutions. By allowing space for Black women to continue to share their stories and ways in which they have built bridges over troubled waters, other current and aspiring Black, female school leaders may be able to walk across these bridges without fear or hesitation.

During the research as well as the data analysis process, several themes emerged that could be of interest and worth a more thorough investigation. As the participants knew the topic of this study, there were times when I wondered if the topic of sisterhood would have naturally bubbled

to the surface in a conversation about their journey to leadership if they had not known this study was also looking at sisterhood. While three of the four participants seemed to have portions of their journey significantly impacted by their sister squad, sisterhood, or sisterly relationships, the other participant seemed to toss in sisterhood, possibly feeling they were helping me in the study. Nevertheless, all four participants did have evidence of sisterhood in their journeys to leadership. While one might hypothesize that age may play a more prominent role in the more seasoned principals' journeys with sisterhood, more research would need to be conducted before drawing this conclusion in this area. For that reason, it would also be interesting to consider whether there is some sort of generational gap that impacts the degree to which sisterhood is utilized and how the importance of this social network is viewed in terms of outcomes. The goal of this study was to find commonalities among participants; however, in future research, one might consider looking for differences among participants, noting what variables contribute to the difference in responses. The idea of comparing mentorship to sisterhood and the advantages and disadvantages of both from the perspectives of Black women could be of interest to many women, especially when trying to find the right path forward. Additionally, the richness of the stories shared by the participants of this study also suggests the need for further studies into cultural perspectives of leadership.

Conclusion

Black women have been on a continual mission to make a difference for over 300 years. Wherever they are, they serve and aspire to bring about fundamental changes that will have lasting impact not only for themselves, but also for future generations of Black and Brown women, men, and children who may follow them. Throughout the history of this country, they have faced adversities; yet they continue to embrace life with hope, with expectancy, and with excellence. As they walked fearlessly toward the challenges, they dared to be different. They dared to be pioneers.

They dared to be change agents, sustaining a leadership style that lifts others up, that promotes human dignity, social justice, activism, and the freedom to be authentic to oneself. While many organizations profess to be committed to change and progress, many Black women continue to experience difficulty securing and/or remaining in leadership positions as both their race and gender are beyond the norm in leadership positions, especially those within predominantly white space. For Black women in leadership positions in predominantly white spaces seeking to find bridges over troubled water, the journey to safety can often seem turbulent and unstable. Access barriers are often inevitable realities for many Black women, including blocked opportunities based on the color of their skin. However, for Black women who champion the concept of sisterhood, the path to achieving personal and professional success can and does become a little easier.

This study explored the lived experiences of Black, female school principals and the role that sisterhood played on their journey. The lived experiences shared, as well as those not shared, have made these participants who they are as school leaders. The good, the bad, and the ugly experiences have all played a role in their development both professionally and personally. When considering how these findings relate to the questions of this study, it can be said that the journey to and through leadership is filled with stories. These stories shaped their character, directed their paths, and influenced who each person became as a leader. Historically, the dominant culture has created the discourse and presented the narratives about Black female leaders. Many of these narratives and images have been a less than accurate depiction of the true feelings and experiences of Black women in leadership, in addition to being scarce. Using their own voice to share their experiences regarding the impact of their race and gender on their leadership journey, the participants in this study loved to share their stories and to talk about their awareness. Afterall,

leading while Black is not always an easy task. Yet, with the reality that Black women often depend on informal networks such as “sisters” for support and guidance, it is vital that school districts, organizations, and institutions understand this relationship to improve the professional outcomes of their leaders of color.

As this study shows, a commitment to dismantling the continued injustices, inequalities, and patterns of oppression that exists in school districts, organizations, and institutions for Black, female school leaders is still needed. It is my hope, by learning to create systems of empowerment and accountability within our educational systems, not only will we be able to create opportunities for expansion and growth for Black, female school principals, but we will also rekindle a common spirit of human connectedness, responsibility, and safe havens for all, regardless of race or gender.

REFERENCES

- Alston, J. A. (1996). *Black female school superintendents and success: A study of perceptions regarding constraints and facilitators encountered enroute to the superintendency* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Pennsylvania State University.
- Alston, J. A. (2000). Missing from action: Where are the black female school superintendents? *Urban Education*, 35(5), 525-531. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085900355003>
- Alston, J. A. (2005). Tempered radicals and servant leaders: Black females persevering in the superintendency. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(4), 675-688. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0013161X04274275>
- Amott, T. & Matthei, J. (1996). *Race, gender, and work: A multicultural economic history of women in the United States*. Boston, MA: South End.
- Andrews, A. R. (1993). Balancing the personal and professional. In J. James & R. Farmer (Eds.), *Spirit, space, & survival: African American women in (white) academe* (pp. 179-195). New York: Routledge.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2009). *Behind the mask of the strong black woman: Voice and the embodiment of a costly performance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs78r>
- Bell, D. V. S. (2006). *In the spirit of sisterhood: The meaning for black women leaders* (Publication No. 3237890) [Doctoral dissertation, Seattle University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Bernal, D. D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4). <https://doi.org/10.17763/HAER.68.4.5WV1034973G22Q48>
- Brunner, C. C. & Peyton-Caire, L. (2000). Seeking representation: Supporting black female graduate students who aspire to the superintendency. *Urban Education*, 31(5), 532-548. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085900355004>
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Press.
- Dixon, A. D., & Rousseau, C. K. (2005). And we are still not saved: Critical race theory in education ten years later. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8 (1), 7-27.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000340971>
- Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Kawakami, K., & Hodson, G. (2002). Why can't we just get along? Interpersonal biases and interracial distrust. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 8, 88–102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.8.2.88>
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), pp. 573–598.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
- Edwards, D. D. (2016). *An examination of black women leaders' educational and professional experiences on the path toward the superintendency* [Doctoral dissertation, Texas State University]. Texas State University
- Felix, A. (2018). *My truth, my telling: Experiences of black women principals in a poetry-themed workshop on race and gender* [Doctoral dissertation, Minnesota State University]. Minnesota State University All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects. <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/821>
- Gilkes, C. T. (1990). Liberated to work like dogs!: Black women and their work. In H. Y. Grossman & N. L. Chester (Eds.), *The experience and meaning of work in women's lives* (pp. 165-188). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203761670>
- Gilkes, C. T. (2001). *If it wasn't for the women: Black women's experience and womanist culture in church and community*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Gordon, J. A. (1997). Teachers of color speak to issues of respect and image. *The Urban Review*, 29, 44-66. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024697827048>
- Graham, L., Brown-Jeffy, S., Aronson, R., & Stephens, C. (2011). Critical race theory astheoretical framework and analysis tool for population health research. *Critical Public Health*, 21(1), 61-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2010.493173>
- Harris, C. 1993. Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106: 1701–1791.

- Henry, A. (2001). Looking two ways: Identity, research, and praxis in the caribbean community. In B. M. Merchant & A. I. Willis (Eds.), *Multiple and intersecting identities in qualitative ceilings* (pp. 90-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410600660>
- Holder, A. M. B., Jackson, M. A., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2015). Racial microaggression experiences and coping strategies of black women in corporate leadership. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2), 164-180. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/qup0000024>
- Howard- Hamilton, M. F., (Ed.). *Meeting the Needs of African American Women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (2003).
- Hudson, M. J. & Holmes, B. J. (1994). Missing teachers, impaired communities: The unanticipated consequences of brown v. board of education on the African American teaching force at the precollegiate level. *Journal of Negro Education*, 63 (3), 388-393.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2967189>
- Johnson, K. A. (2000). *Uplifting the women and the race: The lives, educational philosophies and social activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs*. Routledge Publishing, Inc.
- Johnson, R. B., & Christensen, L. (2020). *Educational Research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (7th ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Jones, J. (1985). *Labor of love, labor of sorrow: Black women, work, and the family from slavery to present*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Jones, E. H. & Montenegro, X. P. (1983). *Perspective on racial minority and women administrators*. VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Kent, T. W., Blair, C.A., Rudd, H. F., & Schuele, U. (2010). Gender differences and transformational leadership behavior: Do both German men and women lead in the same way? *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6(1), 52-66. School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, Regent University.
- King, S. H. (1993a). The limited presence of African-American teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 63 (2), 115-149. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F00346543063002115>
- King, S. H. (1993b). Why did we choose teaching careers and what will enable us to stay?: Insights from one cohort of the African American teaching pool. *Journal of Negro Education*, 62(4), 475- 492. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295518>
- Lanker, B. (1989). *I dream a world: Portraits of black women who changed America*. New York: Stewart, Tabori, Chang.
- Loder, T. L. (2005). On deferred dreams, callings, and revolving doors of opportunity: African-American women's reflections on becoming principals. *The Urban Review*, 37(3), 245-265. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/s11256-005-0010-6>

- Madden, M. E. (2005). 2004 Division 35 presidential address: Gender and leadership in higher education. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29(1), 3–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1471-6402.2005.00162.x>
- Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (1985). *The Helping Tradition in the Black Family and Community*. Washington D. C.: NASW.
- Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (2002). *Spirituality and the Black Helping Tradition in Social Work*. Washington D. C.: NASW Press.
- Mayo, K. (2009, August). Black women behaving badly. *Essence*, 40(4), 105-107.
- McBryde, L. D. (2010). *The unbroken bond: A qualitative study of sisterhood among African American women* (Publication No. 3409191) [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- McCray, C.R., Wright, J.V., & Beachum, F. D. (2007). Beyond brown: Examining the perplexing plight of african american principals. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 34(4). 247–255.
- McDonald, K.B. (2007). *Embracing sisterhood: class, identity, and contemporary black women*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- McGee-Banks, A. C. (1995). Gender and race as factors in educational leadership and administration. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee-Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 65–80). New York: Macmillan.
- McKinnon, J. D., & Bennett, C. E. (2005). *We the people: Blacks in the United States*. (Census 2000 Special Reports). U.S. Census 2000 Bureau.
<https://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-25.pdf>
- McNeal, C. (2017). Empowered intersectionality among black female k-12 leaders: A transcendental phenomenological study [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. Liberty University Digital Commons. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/1428/>
- McNeil, G. R. (2001). Law, feminism, and politics. In B. Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (Eds.), *Sisters in the struggle: African American women in the Civil Rights Black power movement* (pp. 257-275). New York University Press.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons. San Francisco, CA
- Mertz, N. T. (2003, October). *The promise of Title IX: Longitudinal study of women in administration 1972-2002* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association Annual conference, Knoxville, TN, United States.

- Monts (2012). An autoethnographic inquiry into the barriers that African American women face as secondary school principals: A guerilla warfare. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma]. University of Missouri Dissertations.
<https://irl.umsi.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1173&context=dissertation>
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morrison, A. M., White, R. P., Velsor, E. V. (1987). *Breaking the glass ceiling: Can women reach the top of America's largest corporations?* Basic Books.
- Muhammad, A. M. (2012). *Am I my sister's keeper? A phenomenological study exploring "sisterhood" and its influence in the mentoring experiences of black women* (Publication No. 3533482) [Doctoral dissertation, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology]. ProQuest Dissertation & Global Theses.
- Myers, L. W. (1991). *Black women: Do they cope better?* San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press.
- Nance, A. D. (2016). *Glass ceilings and bottomless floors: Black women's experiences in education reform leadership* [Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University]. Louisiana State University Digital Commons.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4241
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Number and percentage distribution of public school principals by gender, race, and selected principal characteristic: 2015-2016*.
https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/Principal_raceXgender_Percentage&Count_toNCES_091317.asp
- Patitu, C. L., & Hinton, K. G. (2003). The experiences of African American women faculty and administrators in higher Education: Has anything changed? *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003(104), 79-93. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.109>
- Peterson, E. A. (1992). *African American women: A study of will and success*. McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Pittman, C. T. (2012). Racial microaggressions: The narratives of African American faculty at a predominantly white university. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81(1), 82-92.
<https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.81.1.0082>
- Reed, L. C. (2012). The intersection of race and gender in school leadership for three black female principals. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(1), 39-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.647723>
- Rowe, M. P. (1990). Barriers to equality: The power of subtle discrimination to maintain unequal opportunity. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 3(2), 153-163.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01388340>

- Sanchez-Hucles, J. V., & Davis, D. D. (2010). Women and women of color in leadership: Complexity, identity, and intersectionality. *Journal of the American Psychological Association*, 65(3), 171-181.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*, (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1999). The struggle to create a more gender-inclusive profession. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration* (pp. 99-118). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shaw, S. (1996). *What a woman ought to be and to do: Black professional women workers during the Jim Crow era*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>
- The Executive Leadership Council and The Executive Leadership Foundation. (2008). *Black women executives research initiative findings*. Institute for Leadership Development & Research. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52f6d9d2e4b0b3416ffaef48/t/5835cf438419c2f3cb518510/1479921477119/Black+Women+Executives+Research+Initiative+Findings.pdf>
- Tillman, L. C. (2004). Chapter 4: African American principals and the legacy of brown. *Review of Research in Education*, 28, 101-146. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0091732X028001101>
- Thompson, C. E., & Neville, H. A. (1999). Racism, mental health, and mental health practice. *Counseling Psychologist*, 27, 155–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0011000099272001>
- Weatherspoon-Robinson, S. (2013). *African American female leaders: Resilience and success* [Doctoral dissertation, Pepperdine University]. Pepperdine Digital Commons Theses and Dissertations. <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/etd/377/>
- Wong, G., Derthick, A. O., David, E. J., R., Saw, A., & Okazaki, S. (2014). The what, the why, and the how: A review of racial microaggressions research in psychology. *Race and Social Problems*, 6(2), 181-200. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.mnsu.edu/10.1007/s12552-013-9107-9>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91, https://thrive.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/Whose%20culture%20has%20capital_A%20critical%20race%20theory%20discussion%20of%20community%20cultural%20wealth_1.pdf

APPENDIX A: INVITATION LETTER

May 24, 2021

Dear Prospective Interview Participant,

My name is LaWanda Mitchell and I am a doctoral candidate at Purdue University. My doctoral research study is entitled, “*Bridges Over Troubled Water: Examining the Lived Experiences of Black, Female, School Principals in Predominantly White School Districts.*” The reason for this correspondence is to ask for your assistance in conducting this trailblazing research. You have been selected as a potential participant in my study, IRB# 2021-761, because you meet the following criteria: 1) identify as Black or African American; 2) work or have worked (within the past 10 years) as a school principal within a predominately white school district or organization; 3) have participated in the shared ideology of sisterhood or have felt a sense of obligation to form a relationship with another Black woman seeking support. Based on the selection criteria, this e-mail serves as an invitation for you to participate in this research study.

Your participation will contribute to the current literature on the subject of the lived experiences of Black, female school principals, giving voice to the stories, journeys, and leadership experiences. Additionally, the ideology of sisterhood and how this phenomenon influences Black, female leaders’ leadership journey will be addressed.

If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to do two things:

- Participate in three, semi-structured interviews with me. All interviews will be conducted virtually at a convenient time for you. Each interview will last no longer than 45-60 minutes. All interviews will be recorded using either Zoom or Google Meet in order to gain your experiences, perceptions, knowledge, and opinions.
- Review a transcription document of our interviews for accuracy.

Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. No compensation will be

offered for your participation. You will be able to withdraw from participation at any time and all interview data will be deleted, including the informed consent agreement.

An informed consent agreement will be provided prior to the first scheduled interview. There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant.

If you would like to speak with me to further discuss your participation, please feel free to contact me via email at mitch310@purdue.edu or cell phone 251-227-1493 or my committee co-chairs, Dr. Marilyn Hirth (mahirth@purdue.edu) and/or Dr. LaMonica Williams (will2334@purdue.edu) by May 27, 2021.

If you agree to participate in this ground-breaking research, please complete the Google form https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScG8-vFuRcuokYRuoQhoHXGhn04_Hb-IJ0Z8LyBGpqr8z45A/viewform by May 28, 2021.

Thanks in advance for your consideration,

LaWanda Mitchell
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Studies
Purdue University
mitch310@purdue.edu

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. General family information (e.g., number of siblings, mother's occupation, father's occupation, etc.)
2. Information about educational attainment (e.g., degrees earned, institutions attended, etc.)
3. Give a description of what life was like growing up in your family.
4. Describe your schooling experience from primary through post secondary education.
5. Give detail of anyone who has had an influence on your education and subsequent education choices.
 - a. Did any significant societal forces impact your educational career?
6. Describe the factors that led you into education.
7. Describe how your positionality (e.g., personal values, views, and location in time and space, etc.) have impacted your choices as an educator.
8. Reflect on the defining moment when you decided to pursue an administrative position.
9. Describe how your personal identity surfaces/surfaced in your experiences as an administrator.
10. Detail the challenges/barriers you've experienced as an administrator.
11. Describe how your experiences as a Black woman influence the way in which you lead.
 - a. What lessons have you learned along the way about the best way to lead as a Black woman?
12. Explain what you believe an effective leader needs to have in their leadership toolbox.
 - a. How did you come to identify these?
 - b. How do you employ these in your work as a school principal?

13. What factors do you think have influenced and shaped who you are as an administrator today?
- a. How do you see your gender shaping how you approach your work as an educator?
 - b. How do you see your race and prior experiences in education as influencers in your practice and approach to leadership
14. Define the term “sisterhood”.
15. Discuss the beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors, if any, that you believe Black women share.
16. Describe how the relationships you have with other Black women are the same or different than with women of different races or cultures.
17. Express why it would be important for others to understand the relationship between Black women.