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The high school principalship today requires a complex skill set steeped in relationship building, strategic oversight, and systemic approaches. Female principals of color not only have to develop this skill set, but also deal with the societal structures that inherently contain professional and personal obstacles that inhibit their abilities to create learning environments that are equitable, inclusive, and designed to support the success of all students (Lomotey, 2019).

In this qualitative research study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of five Black women high school principals. I was especially interested in the impact that race and gender had on their roles. The research questions guiding this study were: "How do Black female high school principals describe and understand their work?" and "How do they perceive that race and gender influence their work as high school principals?" I investigated these questions by conducting two interviews with each participant.

During my study, I found that the participants described the role of the high school principal as tiring and multi-interactional, as well as requiring high visibility. In addition, participants shared images representing their perception of the high school principalship. I also found that faith and spirituality are a common component of the high school principalship for these African American women leaders. The participants also reported encountering challenges that resulted from or were exacerbated by their identities as Black women. However, most participants explained that their identity was sometimes an advantage in building relationships with stakeholders. Finally, the participants reported needing mentoring and trusted thought partners to function effectively.

In analyzing my findings, I considered the importance of the concept of intersectionality in helping us understand the experiences of Black women who serve as high school principals. I concluded my study by offering recommendations for research and practice.

Keywords: Black women, high school principal, leadership

BREAKING BARRIERS: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF

BLACK FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

by

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Approved by

_____
Dr. Craig Peck
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents – Walter Clemon Willis and Carrie Ellison Willis.

Mama, you inspire me every day with your faith and strength. I love you more than words can express. Daddy, I know you are smiling down on your "smart cookie." I love you and miss you every day.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Charlotte W. Holmes has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The United States has over 26,000 high schools, and there are approximately 1,000 in North Carolina alone. Leading those high schools is perhaps the most grueling role in educational leadership. According to Rousmaniere (2013), the school principal occupies the most complex and contradictory role in the pantheon of educational leadership. The school principal is the catalyst for creating an accountable, continuous improvement environment necessary to promote student achievement in today's schools. An effective high school principal has the potential to not only change the trajectory of the school but also impact the community that they serve. However, the pressures and the demands of the role present difficulties that create a daunting task for most school systems. Recruiting and retaining high-quality leaders is crucial to creating stronger schools in our communities (Bartanen et al., 2019; Jang & Alexander, 2022).

These general considerations regarding high school principals fail to account for how individual identity might affect those who occupy the position, for instance, regarding the experiences of Black women who serve as high school principals. Lomotey's (2019) review of the leadership of Black women principals revealed few published studies focused on Black women high school principals. For example, Reed (2012) describes the experiences of three Black female principals and the impact of race and gender on their leadership practices, while Bailes and Guthery (2020) denoted the systematic delays in principal promotion related to race and gender. Aaron (2020) shares the experiences of four Black women principals and the influence of race, age, and gender on their leadership experiences. I wish to add to existing research like these studies by learning more about the experiences of Black women high school principals.

As a Black woman who was a North Carolina high school principal for over ten years, I often wonder if anyone can truly understand the complicated and multifaceted position that consumed my reality for the latter portion of my educational career. I still remember the day I got my first principalship to lead a newly formed, innovative high school in the district. This new high school was situated on a local community college campus. It was designed to provide an innovative educational experience and the opportunity for students to acclimate themselves to the postsecondary environment. My name transitioned from Mrs. Holmes to Principal Holmes. The memory of that time still gives me unexplainable excitement about the opportunity to lead a school and create a learning environment where every student could excel. I had a powerful, compelling vision for the staff and students, and I was committed to forming an authentic learning organization where stakeholders would be eager to embody a growth mindset and become better versions of themselves because they participated in the school's educational program.

The honeymoon was short-lived as the student standardized test scores from the first year came out. Under North Carolina's accountability model's school report card, the state assigned our school the "low-performing" label based on the set of 27 students who took End of Course exams that semester. The state of North Carolina assigned leadership coaches to support principals of low-performing schools. As a result, I was assigned a leadership coach to support my growth as a school executive. The leadership coach met with me weekly, provided feedback on my goals, plans, and work activities, and brainstormed ways that I could support my staff and students. Within three years, our school went from less than thirty percent proficient in reading and math to almost seventy percent proficiency, with a 90% cohort graduation rate. I remember looking forward to my visits with my coach because I knew he would support me with feedback

on a course of action, provide validation for an issue I was facing, or refocus my attention on strategies that would influence student achievement and positive working relationships. His support was immeasurable as I grew into an effective administrator.

Then, the time came to move into my next principalship at a larger, traditional, comprehensive high school needing turnaround. As the first African American female to serve as a principal in a traditional high school in this district, I felt an intrinsic pressure to be successful, not only for me personally, but also for the community waiting to see what I would do in this role. Real or imagined, I felt that people did not expect me to be able to handle this turnaround because I was a Black woman. I took over, ready to use what I learned in my previous role, fully expecting to receive the support I was accustomed to when leading a "low-performing" school. To my dismay, there was no leadership coach to support me, just a supervisor whose role was centered on evaluation, not support. Often, during that principalship, it seemed as if no one was in my corner rooting for our success as a school and my effectiveness as a leader. I did not feel I could ask for help, as I did not want to appear that I could not handle the expectations of a comprehensive high school principalship—especially since I was the only one in my district who looked like me. This was the most isolating time in my educational career and eventually contributed to my decision to leave the principalship.

As a leader in each of these instances, my experiences were deeply impacted by my identity as a Black female and my family upbringing. My parents made sure I understood how smart and special I was, but also let me know that the world may not see me that way, so I had to be better than the average bear. Being a minority in a majority world has "colored" my educational experiences and my work as an educator. Growing up as an AIG, free and reduced lunch, band-playing student-athlete in a majority White, middle-class, rural school, I quickly

learned that I was unique and there were not going to be many instances where I was going to be like the people in my surroundings. I accepted this situation as normal and pursued my college degree at a predominantly White institution of higher learning. I became an educator in a rural school like the one I attended, making my unique situation work for me as I pursued my educational career. I consciously decided to work to be the best, not only to hinder anyone's belief that I did not belong but that I was so unique that I had to be included. I made it my mission to be a role model and pursue excellence so that anyone who thought I would be less than because of my gender or skin color would have to rethink their beliefs!

I was a dedicated building leader who worked tirelessly to serve the stakeholders of two high schools, yet I left both positions. How many high-quality leaders who are Black women like me are we losing each year?

Problem Statement

Research has found that effective principals' leadership and support of teachers are linked to gains in student achievement in as little as a single school year (Baker & Cooper, 2005; Bartanen et al., 2019; Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2013; Jang & Alexander, 2022). Federal programs, such as Race to the Top, have recognized the importance of principals by emphasizing the need for principal evaluations and support for strong principal leadership (Scott, 2013). School districts that wish to increase student achievement must identify and support school leaders to meet the common goal.

The number of school principals has steadily increased over the last 20 years. As the demands and stressors associated with the role of the principal continue to rise, more and more principals decide to leave the principalship. According to the Institute for Education Statistics, one in five principals working in schools in the 2011–2012 school year left their school by the

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2012–2013 school year (Goldring & Taie, 2018). If the statistic above holds true or continues to trend, states nationwide will face a shortage of competent secondary principals who can lead schools in the 21st century. This shortage is no surprise to anyone who has been a building principal. School districts must find a way to account for this shortage of principals to fill this vital need for schools.

According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data for the 2017–2018 academic year, most public high school principals in the United States are white and male. Here are some demographic breakdowns based on NCES data:

- Gender: 55% of public high school principals are male, while 45% are female.

- Race/Ethnicity: 79% of public high school principals are white, 10% are black or African American, 7% are Hispanic or Latino, 2% are Asian, and 2% are of other or two or more races.

- Age: The average age of public high school principals is 50, and 39% are 55 or older.

- Experience: The average years of experience for public high school principals is 13.9 years, and 34% have been a principal for 5 years or less.

From where will these principals come? How will districts fulfill this need? Fifty-four percent of public school principals were female in 2017–2018, compared to 44% in 1999–2000 (Irwin et al., 2022). African American female principals make up 13% of the total number of female principals and are twice the number of African American male principals (Lomotey, 2019). This number demonstrates the presence of African American female leaders willing to assume leadership roles in high schools. Black female high school principals represent a sector of educational leaders who can transform our nation's high schools into strong learning communities that provide opportunities for all students. "People of color are more likely than

their White peers to pursue school leadership positions relative to their proportion in the teacher workforce" (Bailes & Guthery, 2020, p. 3). Identifying and cultivating African American female leaders is one solution to reduce the shortage of high school principals required to serve our nation's diverse communities.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of African American female high school principals, including how they perceive their roles and the impact of race and gender on their experiences. Today's principalship requires a complex skill set steeped in relationship building, strategic oversight, and systemic approaches. Female principals of color must develop this skill set and deal with the societal structures that inherently contain professional and personal obstacles that inhibit their abilities to create learning environments that are equitable, inclusive, and designed to support the success of all students (Lomotey, 2019).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- How do Black female high school principals describe their work?
- How do they perceive that race and gender impact their work as high school principals?

Completing this study will provide information for the educational community and give an underrepresented group of leaders a voice.

Brief Description of Methods

I conducted a basic qualitative study to learn more about Black women who are high school principals. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define basic qualitative research as a design of inquiry in which the researcher interprets the lived experiences of individuals or a group. I

conducted two in-depth interviews with five African American women to learn about their experiences as high school principals and their perceptions of the role. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research involves understanding how someone makes meaning of or interprets their interactions with the world. I analyzed the participants' transcripts, looking for themes and illuminating the unique experiences of African American women who are high school leaders.

Background

Historically, the principal has always been expected to fill various roles. Over time, these roles have grown in number and complexity. The origins of the principal date back to the early 1800s, as the position of principal-teacher was created to carry out the school's administrative duties. The duties of this position included assigning classes, conducting discipline, maintaining the building, and communicating with the district superintendent (Kafka, 2009). One depiction of the history of the principalship demonstrates the complex yet mundane nature of the work (Kafka, 2009). The roles of the principal included taking attendance, working with the community, maintaining school grounds, and gaining authority over the teachers. Other roles included giving orders, classifying and disciplining pupils, supervising janitors, requisitioning supplies, and advising parents. This establishment of the principal teacher eventually evolved into a principal without teaching duties as the century progressed. This middle manager took over the managerial tasks of the school and established authority over the teachers in the school (Kafka, 2009).

The principal role continued to evolve with the introduction of accountability measures late in the twentieth century. State and federal mandates for student achievement added more instructional responsibilities for principals without removing the managerial and supervisory

duties associated with the position. Today, the high expectations for principals to perform this arduous work continue to increase. Principals serve a variety of roles in the execution of their duties, including but not limited to vision setting, strategic planning, instructional leadership, human resource supervision, and countless other managerial responsibilities (Waters et al., 2004).

As if the role of high school principals is not challenging enough, African American female principals must deal with another set of challenges due to their race and gender. African American females remain underrepresented in leadership programs and their appointments to administrative positions (Gates et al., 2003; Lomotey, 2019; Tillman, 2004). Being a member of not just one but two historically oppressed groups adds another layer to the issues and problems African American females face in their roles. Participating in this research provided an avenue for the participants, as well as myself as a researcher, to learn about the phenomenon of secondary principalship in a deep and meaningful way so that we can better understand ourselves as leaders of learning. Self-awareness is critical to the success of any learning opportunity, and spending time listening and learning from my participants provided me an opportunity to advocate for school leaders, to share useful information with the school community, and hopefully mobilize resources to support building leaders who are juggling and managing the large list of responsibilities associated with the high school principalship.

Conceptual Framework

My study is grounded in Black feminist thought, specifically the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1990), a law professor from Columbia Law School, is credited with bringing Black feminist thought to the forefront of law and social movements. Crenshaw's purpose was to change the course of the conversation of dealing with race and gender as separate

areas of discrimination. This metaphor of intersecting categories of discrimination illuminated the specific experiences of Black females and how aspects of their experiences are negated when viewed within the gender or race construct in isolation.

While there are other instances of the concept in academia, Crenshaw is credited with coining "intersectionality" as a form of critical inquiry into our societal structures. Intersectionality can be defined as "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity of the world, in people, and in human experiences" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). The concept of intersectionality was designed to describe the interactions among systems of oppression, most notably race and gender (Weldon, 2011). Due to Crenshaw's identification as an African American feminist, intersectionality is typically employed as a construct positioned at the intersection of race and gender. Though this framework has evolved to include the considerations of other social constructs in our society as well, for Black women, intersectionality is particularly relevant, as they may face discrimination and marginalization on multiple fronts. They may encounter sexism and gender-based discrimination in addition to racism and discrimination based on race. They may also experience classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression based on their intersecting identities.

Collins (2022) furthered the conversation regarding Black feminist thought and intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry. In a more recent work, Collins and Bilge (2016) shared six core ideas about using intersectionality as an analytical tool. These core ideas are *inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice*. A brief introduction of these terms follows to explore the concept of intersectionality further. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), these ideas neither always appear in the same way nor are they present in each

project. As the researcher for this study, I used these core ideas in helping design my study and examine the participants' perceptions:

Complexity—Collins and Bilge (2016) note that the core themes of inequality, power, relationality, social justice, and social context highlight the innate complexity of intersectionality. Examining the intertwined nature of the core themes will be complicated and multifaceted.

Inequality—Most people have experienced or been exposed to inequality regarding race, gender, or some other construct. Intersectionality allows for understanding inequality concerning the interactions among multiple arenas rather than from a single lens of inequity. For example, this study will explore the interaction of race and gender and its impact on the leadership experiences of women high school principals.

Power—Power in public schools is apparent in various structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal domains. Examining power relations via the intersections of race and gender, as well as across the previously named domains, will illuminate aspects of leadership that are unique to the experiences of Black women high school principals.

Relationality—This concept focuses on the relationships of entities and how they are connected rather than how they are different. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), relational thinking rejects "either/or" binary thinking and embraces a "both/and" frame (p. 27). For example, it allows for analyzing race and gender as similar forms of oppression that impact the leadership of Black women in conjunction with each other instead of highlighting one versus the other.

Social context—The social context provides a backdrop to the studied phenomena. To contextualize means to understand the circumstances surrounding a particular experience. Realizing the historical elements regarding women in education, as well as that of African Americans in education, gives rise to our varying perspectives on education.

Social justice—Social justice is the ongoing equitable distribution of opportunities and rights for all, regardless of the individual's identity. The quest for social justice involves a critique of the status quo, thereby aligning with the need to dismantle systems that oppress the Black female leader. (Collins & Bilge, 2016)

Intersectionality is gaining popularity in qualitative research as a tool for critical inquiry. Collins and Bilge (2016) denote two facets of "working at the intersections" for adopting intersectionality as an analytical tool: "(1) an approach to understanding human life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of disenfranchised people, [and] (2) a tool for linking theory and practice that can aid in the empowerment of communities and individuals" (p. 36). Using intersectionality as the conceptual framework helped me conceive this study as a means to gather insight into the unique contributions of and challenges faced by five Black women high school principals. Intersectionality informed my development of my interview questions and served as a lens for my analysis of my interview data, which allowed me to better understand the leadership perspectives and experiences of my Black female participants.

Significance of the Study

The secondary principal has been largely missing from the political history of school administration and the social history of schools (Rousmaniere, 2013), and the topic of African American women school leaders remains under-examined (Lomotey, 2019). My study helps

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illuminate a largely overlooked area of educational leadership by focusing on Black female high school principals. In addition, executing this study of Black women high school principals helped me amplify the voices of these leaders who do not always feel valued for their knowledge and skills. Like these women, there were times that I felt like my voice did not matter as a school building leader.

My completed study can provide superintendents and central office personnel with in-depth information about the daily grind of a high school administrator, specifically for women of color. Principal preparation programs will also receive an additional research study to provide insight for potential minority administrators as they pursue licensure. From my work, I hope that aspiring Black female secondary administrators can get a deeper insight into what to expect as a building leader before assuming the role.

Conclusion

The shortage of principals, the isolation of their roles, and the underrepresentation of leaders who represent people of color are all compelling reasons to understand the experiences and perceptions of Black female high school principals. Thirteen percent of North Carolina public school administrators identify as African American. While most of those administrators are women, only a small percentage of those women serve as high school principals. Most Black women who are principals wake up every day understanding that their gender and their race impact the way the world sees and interacts with them on their leadership journey. Examining the experiences of Black female high school principals is crucial to transforming schools into places that serve all learners, not just the students who can be successful in any setting.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the educational realm, there is a fair number of studies on White male principals and several studies concerning the principalship and support for educators. A review of the research over the last 25 years reveals that scholarship on African American women principals is limited, largely in dissertations, and not widely published (Lomotey, 2019). Proportionately speaking, the voices of African American women principals are not widely available in the literature, and there is much to be learned about the leadership of African American women principals. Minimal research studies have included African American female secondary principals and how they are vital to student success in our communities (Lomotey, 2019). Simply put, the voices of African American women principals are underrepresented in the research concerning educational leadership.

In this chapter, I share a brief history of the principalship and examine existing studies related to the principalship and scholarship concerning principals, race, and gender.

Principals and the Principalship

History

Various studies have addressed the history of the principalship in the United States. For instance, Rousmaniere (2013) offers a historical examination of the role of the school principal from its origins as a head teacher in the nineteenth century to the current complex form in the twenty-first century. Judith Kafka (2009) provides an overview of the existing historiography of the American school principal and reiterates the idea that the principalship has always been a complex and multifaceted role. Tillman (2009) provides insight into the African American

experience in education surrounding the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Brown (2005) introduces the history of African Americans in educational leadership. Reviewing the history of principals' roles, the influence of race and gender on the trajectory of the principalship, and studies focused specifically on African American females in educational leadership help provide the foundation and background for my study.

Historically, the principal has always been expected to fill various roles. Over time, these roles have grown in number and complexity. The early origins of the principal can be dated back to the early 1800s, as the position of principal-teacher was created to carry out the school's administrative duties. As the century progressed, this establishment of the principal-teacher eventually evolved into a principal without teaching duties. Eventually, this middle manager took over the organizational tasks of the school and established authority over the teachers in the school. Principals became increasingly necessary as superintendents began recognizing their leadership was paramount. In 1884, the Chicago district superintendent called the principal "the prime factor in the success of an individual school, and no amount of itinerant supervision can supply his place" (Kafka, 2009, p. 321). As schools and districts grew, so did the principal's power, authority, prestige, and independence. Superintendents relinquished more power and autonomy to principals as the bureaucracy expanded in urban districts. With more autonomy and independence for principals, the unintended result was less oversight of what principals were doing to run their schools effectively.

During the 1920s and 1930s, principals were considered spiritual and scientific leaders, according to Beck and Murphy (1993). Principals were viewed as managers and supervisors, and

that role continued in the 1940s after World War II. The 1950s brought more change to the nation and the principalship. The most impactful event was the landmark court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954. The landmark decision that racially separate schools were inherently unequal laid the foundation for widespread integration in the 1960s.

The onset of the 1980s brought about more challenges and complexity in the principal role (Beck & Murphy, 1993). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This publication announced to the world that America's schools were in crisis due to students' poor performance on standardized tests and provided the catalyst for waves of educational reforms for public schools (Rousmaniere, 2013). These educational reforms intended to raise student achievement by holding schools publicly accountable for student performance on school-wide assessments. With the onset of the accountability movement, principals were not only expected to be instructional leaders but also to handle their managerial duties and prepare students to perform on end-of-year assessments.

The principal role was also affected by the new state and federal programs of the 1980s and 1990s. Policy initiatives like school vouchers and charter schools created elements of free market competition in public education (Rousmaniere, 2013). The school choice movement allowed parents to choose where their children attended school. In short, public schools were not the only choice for families anymore. This competitive spirit in public schools added another layer to the principal role. Principals must serve as managers and instructional leaders and effectively market their schools as a high-quality learning environment focused on student

achievement (Rousmaniere, 2013). In addition, Rousmaniere explained, "Central to the promotion of school choice was a revised role of [the] principal as [an] entrepreneurial leader" (p. 141). Public high school principals must learn how to promote their schools to maintain enrollment and viability.

Roles and Experiences of Contemporary Principals

The role of the high school principal is complex and multifaceted, and it looks very different than it has in the past. As Megiveron (1992) noted, "The modern high school principal is no longer the favorite male coach … the principal of today is of either sex, and he/she heads one of the largest organizations in the town" (p. x). High schools are dynamic, organic organizations whose purpose has not changed much over the years; however, aspects of the high school principalship have evolved and become more complicated. Today's high school principal is expected to oversee a learning community that produces educated graduates within 4 years. The high school principal must possess a diverse skill set and be able to utilize those skills to lead effectively to meet this goal. High school principals must possess the skills and know when to employ each skill within the school and out in the community (Tirozzi, 2001).

The onset of the twenty-first century brought the federal government into schools with the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* in 2002. This act required statewide testing and mandated that schools achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state-established student proficiency targets (Lee & Lee, 2020). This act heightened public awareness of accountability for all student groups and, in the process, highlighted the principal's responsibility to increase student achievement. West et al. (2010) describe the enormous pressures that urban principals experience, including their district's hyper focus on standardized test scores as a measure of leadership effectiveness. North Carolina's adoption of reporting school performance grades in

2001 only intensified this pressure, providing communities with a public and visible assessment of school progress. Principals who cannot increase student achievement to proficient levels run the risk of removal from their positions.

The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) identified 21 leadership responsibilities that positively impact student achievement in the 21st century (Waters et al., 2004). These responsibilities come together in a framework that connects leadership with student achievement and outlines the numerous skills high school principals must employ daily. This framework identifies concrete practices, strategies, and knowledge for principals to be successful. The skills and responsibilities are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Marzano's 21 Responsibilities of a School Leader

Affirmation	Focus	Optimizer
Change Agent	Ideals/Beliefs	Order
Contingent Rewards	Input	Outreach
Communication	Intellectual Stimulation	Relationships
Culture	Involvement in CIA[*]	Resources
Discipline	Knowledge of CIA[*]	Situational Awareness
Flexibility	Monitoring/Evaluating	Visibility

Note. [*]CIA - Curriculum Instruction and Assessment

In North Carolina, the State Board of Education developed standards based on Marzano's research on principal responsibilities. The Department of Public Instruction has designated principals as school executives and has outlined eight leadership standards to guide the development of the school principal. The eight leadership standards on North Carolina's evaluation instrument are strategic leadership, managerial leadership, instructional leadership,

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human resource leadership, micropolitical leadership, cultural leadership, and external

development leadership. Each standard includes a summary that describes the standard, a

summary of the standard's content and rationale, a description of practices and competencies the

school executive would display while executing the standard, and possible artifacts that could

serve as evidence for demonstrating the standard. Each standard is important to the effectiveness

of the high school principal but also signifies the complexity of the principal role. Effective

principals establish the vision and direction of the school, communicate the expectations for

student achievement, and implement the structures and processes needed to make the work

happen. Creating conditions for the previously mentioned areas is arduous at any level but is

especially complicated at the high school level. The high school principalship is not a job for the

faint of heart; the principal must recognize the monumental commitment required to be effective

in the role (West et al., 2010).

High school principals work long hours and are always on call. Their daily schedules are

a series of meetings, interactions, and events that support a positive learning environment, as

documented famously by Harry F. Wolcott (2003). He characterized the time spent as a principal

as "an almost endless series of encounters from the moment he arrives at school until the

moment he leaves" (p. 88). Today's principals deal with a variety of stakeholders

interchangeably throughout the day, whether it's an upset parent, a teacher who didn't show up

for work, a student involved in a confrontation, the superintendent's secretary with an

information request, a community member looking to use the gymnasium for a recreation team,

the assistant principal from the elementary school next door that needs bus information, or the

exceptional children's teacher who needs a local educational representative for a complicated Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. All the while, the principal must ensure that high-quality instruction occurs in each classroom for every student, in addition to addressing whatever situations may be going on in their personal lives. It is this daily grind that makes the high school principalship so stressful. People who can sustain and maintain in this role must demonstrate the ability to handle the responsibility of making decisions that impact all types of stakeholders (sometimes at a moment's notice) all to create a learning community that meets the needs of the students, staff, and families within it (Sebastian et al., 2018; Tirozzi, 2001).

High school principals must navigate these multiple interactions while trying to focus on students and their learning community. Sebastian et al. (2018) completed a study to examine how school principals allocate their time. The data revealed that principals worked "many hours and on many different tasks in a single day" (Sebastian et al., 2018, p. 74). Principals in this study averaged 444 minutes of daily activity and averaged working 50 hours per week. In addition, 23% of principal work time was alone, which speaks to the isolating nature of the principalship. Sebastian et al. (2018) provides documentation of the contemporary principal's workday across time of day, day of week, and time of year. The study also documents the variation in principal practice across different leadership functions in the daily role of the contemporary principal. Reid and Creed (2021) investigated principal activities outside the traditional school day and how this work influences principal job satisfaction. Their findings reveal that contemporary principals also spend time in and out of their workday being physically visible at school and community events and conducting their work virtually via email and social media.

The contemporary principal must possess a specific skill set, be able to assess, prioritize, and handle various tasks, and communicate and implement a vision appropriately and effectively with a diverse set of stakeholders. As our nation's high schools become more diverse, districts must identify leaders of color to recruit and retain for the principalship (Perrone, 2022). The principalship is vital to the educational landscape and must be supported.

Principals, Race, and Gender

History of African American Principals

African Americans have long been a part of the fabric of schooling for African American children. Early schools opened after the Civil War, when African Americans could pursue schooling, and involved several African American principals. For example, one of the first all-African American schools in the South was established in 1865 and operated with an all-Black teaching and administrative staff (Anderson, 1988). African American principals were tasked with building and maintaining schools (Tillman, 2009). Teachers, principals, and parents were the most important educational influences on African American children in the pre-*Brown* era of schooling (Tillman, 2009). African American students attended segregated public schools led by African American administrators (Brown, 2005). Due to the segregated nature of education during this time, African American leaders fulfilled the leadership role in the school and the African American community. African American citizens in leadership roles during this time took responsibility for building and maintaining schools and functioned as heads of principals of common schools (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 1988; Franklin, 1990; Jones, 2002).

African American women also participated in leadership during these early times. Educated African American females opened schools in the North and South, serving dual roles as teachers and principals (Tillman, 2009). Notable Black women in leadership roles during this

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time include Sarah Smith, Mary Shadd Cary, Fannie Jackson Coppin Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen

Burroughs, and Mary McLeod Bethune from North Carolina (Tillman, 2009). The Anne T.

Jeanes Fund, a philanthropic group, put together this corps of experienced Black women

educators to supervise Black schools in the South. These women leaders, called Jeanes

Supervisors, provided strong leadership to support Black intellectual achievement (Perkins,

1987). Jeanes Supervisors performed duties such as holding interviews, bringing in new teaching

methods and curricula, organizing in-service teacher training workshops, fundraising, and

assisting county superintendents of schools (Kreisman, 2017). Essentially, these women served

as liaisons to the county leadership or district leadership, primarily White men. African American

female educators performed these roles even though they experienced many issues, including

hostility from males who did not believe they could provide leadership outside the home

(Washington, 1988). They were the primary decision-makers at the school site; they could hire

and fire teachers and act with major autonomy to influence the educational processes in their

segregated, all-Black schools. However, these principals had no real power outside the African

American community. African American principals could consult with the White community but

had little power to make final decisions over issues like school spending (Siddle-Walker, 2000).

The desegregation of schools that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* changed the

face of the principalship. Most African American principals of all-Black schools lost their

positions as schools of color were closed to integrate public schools. Thus, desegregation had a

devastating impact on African American education and, therefore, on the professional lives of

African American principals (Tillman, 2004). African American principals were reassigned as

assistant principals, and instead, White male principals, sometimes less experienced, were responsible for navigating the integration process. In the 3 years from 1967 to 1970, the number of African American principals in North Carolina declined from 670 to 170 (Brown, 2005). African American principals were the prime victims of the move from segregated to desegregated schools (Tillman, 2004).

Black Women Principals in Contemporary Schools

Lomotey (2019) thoroughly reviewed research regarding African American female principals covering the last 25 years. Lomotey's (2019) review includes information on *what* researchers study regarding African American female principals, *where* the research studies appear, and *what* frameworks and research methods researchers use to study African American female principals. He asserted that Black women leaders are key to increasing achievement for African American children. His findings reveal that most of the studies appear in unpublished dissertations, with only one fourth of the studies he reviewed appearing in journals or books. According to Lomotey (2019), the research findings in studies of African American female principals have typically fallen into two main groups: (a) researchers posing questions concerning the lived experiences of African American female principals, and (b) researchers addressing questions about the leadership style and context of the leadership of African American female principals. Only 10 studies have focused on African American women principals at the high school level, while others include principals from secondary and elementary schools. Most of the studies have been qualitative and intended to understand the leadership experiences of Black administrators more deeply. Central themes of these studies

include leading in urban settings, culturally relevant leadership, spirituality, othermothering, and other challenges and barriers connected to race and gender identity.

Qualitative studies that focus on the lived experiences of Black female principals reveal skills or leadership behaviors demonstrated by those participants. For example, Case (1997) published a case study examining the phenomenon of "othermothering," a common aspect of the female principal experience. Othermothering, a term originally coined by Collins (1991), is defined as "an African American woman's maternal assistance offered to children of blood mothers within the African American community" (Case, 1997, p. 25). Case (1997) portrays a young African American female principal in an urban elementary school setting. It illuminates the leadership practices that emphasize the psycho-emotional needs of the students, which is crucial in advancing student achievement for urban African American children (Case, 1997). Case's participant's experiences illuminate the responsibility and accountability that African American female leaders feel for the students in their charge as building leaders.

Similarly, Reitzug and Patterson's (1998) narrative study reveals that effective Black female principal leadership styles typically include caring in their demonstrated principal behaviors. Debbie Pressley, an African American urban middle school principal, used empowerment in her daily practice with students. Reitzug and Patterson (1998) shared five components of empowerment practice demonstrated by the findings. One component is establishing and developing a personal connection, which includes focusing on the positive and combating negative situations with positive beginnings. A second component is honoring voice by soliciting the perspectives of others and accepting others' problems and concerns as

significant. A third component of her practice of empowerment is showing concern for the individuals and communicating expectations for the well-being of students. A fourth component involves connecting individuals to communities by communicating standards and expectations. The fifth and most compelling component is seeing alternative possibilities—this principal's ability to help others "re-see" their situation and generate alternative courses of action. This study provides an in-depth view of the practices displayed or that are common to Black female school principals generally.

Dillard (1995) completed similar research, a case study of an African American female principal in an urban high school. Dillard intended her work to transform the mainstream conception of leadership and to gain a greater understanding of the principalship. Principal Natham, the case study subject, exhibits various behaviors in her practice that are aimed toward the "good of African American folks" specifically and all students more generally (Dillard, 1995, p. 549). Her experiences are shared as interpretations of leadership. Dillard's findings support the idea that effective school leaders who are African American women create nurturing, student-centered, and culturally responsive environments. This research also supports the notion that African American females are uniquely situated to provide effective leadership for diverse high schools.

While the studies mentioned above address leadership behaviors displayed by Black women principals, other studies addressed the impact of race and gender on the career pathways of Black women principals. For example, Bloom and Erlandson's (2003) landmark study focused on three African American female urban secondary principals. This study used a naturalistic advocacy approach to analyze in-depth interviews of the three participants to reveal varied

portraits of career pathways to the urban school principalship. In their narrative study, Bloom and Erlandson (2003) sought to learn about the experiences of these leaders and how race and gender impacted pathways and their leadership practices in urban schools. They relied upon Collins's (2000) work in Black feminist thought, including the four assumptions of Black feminist epistemology. Those assumptions are as follows:

- Assumption one states that the historical experience and the lived experience of Black women cannot be separated.

- Assumption two states that Black women have common lived experiences.

- Assumption three states that other identities, such as religion, age, and sexual orientation, can affect the intersection of race and gender.

- Assumption four is that all Black women do not identify with the shared experiences of oppression.

Bloom and Erlandson's (2003) findings confirmed that Black women deal with challenges associated with race and gender but continued to persevere, working to make quiet, steady advancements on behalf of the school communities they serve. The reality is that these urban school leaders possessed a clear connection to the communities they served, and their collective cultural histories enabled each participant to navigate the challenges of their leadership pathways. These women resolved to define the world in their own terms. Their resolutions came from adopting a "no apologies" mindset regarding their accomplishments, successes, and failures.

Building on Bloom and Erlandson (2003), Reed (2012) conducted a multi-case study of three principals. Reed presented her findings using the four assumptions of Black feminism and a

full description of each participant's career, background, and school context. This study revealed similar findings of Black women leaders dealing with challenges while working to advance education for their students. Similarly, Peters' (2016) qualitative study examined the leadership of two black female principals who implemented small school reform in an urban district. This case study used existing data from a larger setting involving a high school in a large urban district. Participants engaged in semi-structured, open-ended interviews based on four areas: participant background, district support, mentoring, and reform. The participants served as principals of the same high school but at different periods. Both participants acknowledged the need to change the culture of their schools for the better.

Peters (2016) describes the participants as "clean-up women." As clean-up women, they were brought in to create a culture of success and "clean up" the school's image physically and academically. Both participants discuss how they address these barriers to lead. In addition, each participant discusses the importance of addressing resistance and providing care for the stakeholders in the school. The most compelling finding of this study was the acknowledgment of both participants concerning their personal identities (of race, age, and gender) and their perceived impact on their ability to lead others. Peters (2016) concludes that it is not enough to put capable leaders in place but that they must be supported.

While earlier studies concerning Black women principals focus on leadership practices in urban settings and the deficit impact of race and gender via intersectionality, more recent studies share findings that reveal a particular type of leadership displayed by Black women. Flores, for example, (2018) employed the counternarrative to illuminate the voices of people of color, a

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central tenet of critical race theory. The three participants worked in urban and suburban school districts at varying levels, including elementary and middle schools. They had just completed their first year as principals. Four main themes emerged from the analysis, which included (a) a mindset toward the opportunity gap; (b) recognition of issues of race, racism, and interest convergence; (c) holistic approaches toward students; and (d) the real opportunity of loss.

Ultimately, Flores (2018) presents three black female principals whose leadership styles contain a reconstructed mindset from the deficit thinking terminology of the achievement gap towards an asset-based paradigm or the opportunity gap. In addition, the leadership of these participants not only recognized institutional issues regarding racism and interest convergence but also worked to interrupt those systemic structures to educate all students. These women openly discussed the excessive use of student suspensions, fellow teacher expectations, the deficit mindset of White privilege, and other racist practices. Finally, the study showed how the participants used holistic approaches such as community walks, community partnerships, diverse staff hiring, culturally relevant responsive practices, equity training, courageous conversations, including international nights, and celebrations of differences. This study's findings highlight the equity-minded, student-focused leadership that Black women principals can provide.

This type of leadership was also a finding in Moorosi et al.'s (2018) study involving Black women principals within three different contexts using intersectionality as the conceptual framework. Moorosi et al. (2018) used a life history approach to interview Black women leaders regarding their experiences with race and gender in their leadership practices. The authors acknowledged that using intersectionality as a theoretical framework is not widely accepted in

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academia; however, they also acknowledged that studying the lives of the participants within their own backgrounds and the context of the lived experience of Black women provides us with a deeper understanding of both structural and political intersectionality. Moorosi et al. (2018) define what successful leadership meant for the Black women participants, which included a pupil-centered approach to leadership, the importance of developing the holistic child, and the display of positive role modeling throughout their leadership practices. Moorosi et al. (2018) noted that the commonality regarding the intersection of gender, race, and class was that the participants hailed from working-class families, which impacted their cultural, financial, and social capital. Ultimately, their backgrounds influenced their career choice and the type of leaders they became.

Aaron's (2020) interview-based study of four Black women principals' leadership and how they perceived their experiences with racism and sexism influenced it found that the participants encouraged student-centered leadership and focused on deconstructing others' perceptions of Black women. Participants' attention to student-centered leadership included focusing on student growth, caretaking, making decisions in context, and holding students to high expectations. Aaron also provided examples where participants employed specific behaviors to disassociate themselves from stereotypes held by their stakeholders. For instance, participants purposely included stakeholders in the decision-making process to dismantle the stereotype that black women principals are aggressive. These leaders felt a pressing need to remain aware of others' stereotypical perceptions of them and understand the importance of developing strategies to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of incompetence, intimidation, and racial partiality.

While studies reveal that Black women can display a leadership style that is conducive to creating substantial and subtle change for the good of students and the school community (Aaron, 2020; Flores, 2018; Moorosi et al., 2018), other studies reveal barriers to leadership positions such as delays or denials for Black women. Jean-Marie's (2013) case study investigated the experiences of two early career African American female principals in a large urban school district. The primary research question focused on how the intersection of age, race, and gender affected their professional experiences. "The experiences of African American females…shed insight on how they make meaning of struggles and triumphs on their journey and how race and gender in the professional realm manifest" (p. 617). Participants engaged in group and individual interviews that focused on their experiences pursuing the principalship in this mid-western school district. Findings revealed in this study included (a) the multiple ways that participants confronted the age barrier on their journeys to the principalship; (b) how participants faced barriers of subtle sexism and racism; and (c) participants' ability to transcend the race, gender, and age barriers to persevere in the principalship. Jean-Marie (2013) shares the need for younger African American administrators to seek out leadership opportunities early on to prepare for the challenges associated with race and gender that they may face in the principalship.

While Black women may seek leadership opportunities to assist with leadership challenges, they may not always have the chance. A recent study in Texas of over four thousand assistant principals from 2001 to 2017 used survival analysis to determine that Black principals are overwhelmingly delayed and denied entry into principalships at a higher rate than White assistant principals. Women are less likely to be promoted to high school principalships even

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with more experience (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Another study of Black female principals found that gendered racism operated throughout a school district's hiring and recruitment practices (Weiner et al., 2022). These findings do not bode well for the Black women who wish to serve as high school principals.

Summary

Recent studies reveal that Black female principals encounter various barriers connected to their race and gender in leadership. From delayed entry to leadership, postponed career advancement, and negotiating stakeholder expectations, Black female leaders experience myriad challenges to serve as building leaders. Many Black female principals serve in urban settings and display leadership practices associated with caring, nurturing, student-centered, equity-driven leadership styles. From obtaining leadership positions themselves to how others respond to them, Black women principals negotiate and deal with stereotypes and prejudicial situations daily in their schools. Jones (2002) notes that "the inferior perception of leaders of color has been prevalent in school systems throughout the United States" (p. 8). Given such findings in existing scholarship, exploring the experiences of Black female high school principals is vital.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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In this literature review, I shared the progression of the principalship over time as well as the work of contemporary principals. I also examined studies involving Black female principals. As Bloom and Erlandson (2003) so eloquently state, "Listening to the voices of African American women's lives in leadership may begin to change minds and social constructs about the 'Others' in America's public-school districts" (p. 352). Providing additional information for the educational community about the needs of contemporary school leaders, particularly those of

color, will help address the growing need for effective building leaders in diverse settings. In addition, this information will help districts learn more about the challenges facing this growing group of potential building leaders to address and/or remove barriers to effective leadership. African American female principals are needed today to better serve the diverse populations of students that are in our schools.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

In this study, I aimed to investigate the experiences of African American female high school principals, including how they perceive their roles and the impact of race and gender on their experiences. Today's principalship requires a complex skill set steeped in relationship building, strategic oversight, and systemic approaches. In my experience, female principals of color not only have to develop this skill set but also deal with the societal structures that inherently contain professional and personal obstacles that inhibit their abilities to create learning environments that are equitable, inclusive, and designed to support the success of all students. Learning more about how African American female high school principals perceive their roles as building leaders may provide critical information to the educational community concerning the recruitment, retention, and performance of minority building leaders in school settings.

Methodology

To learn more about participants' perceptions of the high school principalship, I chose a methodology that provided an in-depth look at the role of the high school principalship through the eyes of the participants. A basic qualitative study is designed to understand the participant's interpretation of their lived experiences. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research involves understanding how someone makes meaning of or interprets their lived experiences and interactions with the world. Engaging in a basic qualitative study with African American female high school principals provided insight for practitioners pursuing high school principalship. Taking an interpretive approach to this qualitative research study required me to spend extended time with participants, allowing them to explore their thoughts and feelings regarding their role as high school principals. As a practicing principal, finding time for reflection to renew and improve is often difficult. Sharing the findings of this study fostered a

deeper understanding of the high school principalship for the participants and the district leaders that employ and support building leaders. Learning more about the specific behaviors of Black female high school principals will also help the educational profession address the ongoing shortage of effective leaders in our schools.

Research Questions

My two primary research questions were "How do Black female high school principals describe their work?" and "How do they perceive that race and gender influence their work as high school principals?" These research questions allowed me to gain rich, descriptive information about the high school principalship and the challenges African American female high school principals face, specifically regarding race and gender.

Sample Population

I interviewed five African American female high school principals in North Carolina. Non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used purposeful sampling, the most common form of non-probabilistic sampling, to maximize the opportunity for learning about the high school principalship and the leadership of African American females. Soliciting the voices of practicing principals was crucial to the study's intent; therefore, participants were high school principals in North Carolina who had been in that role for at least 2 years. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss convenience sampling as a particular type of purposeful sampling to select participants. I accessed my administrative network to locate practicing high school principals who identified as Black females as potential candidates for my study.

Once I received IRB approval in late summer, I used my recruitment script to email 15 current female high school principals who possibly identified as African American. Only three

practicing principals responded to the request. Two participants had just accepted new positions at the district level but were still willing to participate. I was fortunate enough to get five women initially to agree to participate in the study.

I conducted virtual interview protocols with five participants who have served as high school principals. Participants served as high school principals in five different school districts in North Carolina and ranged in experience from 2 to 11 years in the high school principalship. One participant completed her initial interview and could not complete the process. A different participant in the study shared my information with her colleague, and I got my final participant. Each participant completed two interview sessions and provided insightful descriptions of their experiences as high school principals.

Data Collection

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) share that in most forms of qualitative research, data is typically collected through interviews that provide insight into a participant's views and perceptions. The main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method allowed me to create a relaxed atmosphere for the participants, especially since I am a former high school principal. This increased the opportunity for deep reflection and robust data collection, as rich, descriptive findings are a hallmark of basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I sent those women a copy of the IRB approval along with an overview of the study and asked them to choose a convenient time for our first interview. Each participant seemed genuinely surprised that I gave no restrictions on the schedule, letting them know that they could schedule as early or as late as they wanted. Most of the interviews were scheduled in the evenings and on the weekends.

I engaged in one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews to get insight into the perceptions of African American secondary principals. Semi-structured interviews include more and less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview protocols contained open-ended questions from multiple angles to help participants reflect on their experiences (see Appendix A). This allowed participants to share their perceptions in a more fluid, organic way that respects their experiences. It also allowed me to respond to new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Each participant participated in two 60-minute online interviews to allow for my desired pursuit of rich data. The initial interview included demographic questions at the beginning to get participants talking and comfortable with the interview format. I included open-ended questions to allow participants to reflect on their perceptions and experiences. The follow-up interview included more specific and probing questions to allow respondents to respond to the specific research questions and further explore topics that arose in earlier interviews. The interview protocols associated with this study contained various questions to allow participants to engage in discourse about their experiences.

I held interviews via Google Meet to alleviate concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting interviews through video conferencing allowed me to simulate in-person interviews while allowing me and the participants to remain safe. Another advantage of virtual interviews was the availability of a technical setting in Google Meet that transcribed the interview. While the transcripts were only about 60–70% accurate, it afforded me a jumpstart in the coding process. In addition, it increased my ability to schedule interviews at the most accommodating time for the participant's schedules. Some participants scheduled their interviews within a few

days, while others scheduled them a few weeks apart. Black female high school principals have busy lives; I did not want time to deter participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) provide several suggestions for conducting preliminary data analysis during data collection. One suggestion is to write memos about what is learned during data collection. After each interview, I reflected in writing what I learned from each participant.

Once I completed the interviews, I commenced with formal data analysis of the transcriptions. I planned to code the transcripts using open coding to allow concepts to emerge. As I reviewed the transcripts, ideas and themes emerged from existing research. For instance, Lomotey (2019) shares common themes from previously published studies of African American females, including othermothering, spirituality, and servant leadership. I used themes from the existing research and emerging ideas from the interview transcripts as the codes I applied to my transcripts. I then grouped the codes into categories. After coding and categorization, I identified several themes that best represented the participants' perceptions and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) share several strategies for promoting trustworthiness in qualitative research studies. One strategy I used to achieve this end included member checks, also known as respondent validation. This involved sharing my transcripts of interviews with the participants. Maxwell, as cited in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), states that member checks are

> the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do, and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own bias and misunderstanding of what is observed. (p. 246)

Circling back to my participants to ensure that I had correctly displayed their feelings and perceptions was vital to the credibility of my findings. Another strategy I employed to promote trustworthiness was spending ample time on data collection and analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest engaging in data collection until the data and emerging findings feel "saturated, meaning that you start to hear the same things over and over again" (p. 248).

One of the reasons that I chose to study African American female leaders is because of my own experience as an African American female high school principal. Addressing my positionality was critical to the success of my study. As I expected, I was able to form trusting relationships with the participants so that they felt safe sharing their perceptions and experiences in deep, meaningful ways. Since I have been a building leader, we shared similar experiences. We developed a common language to articulate the feelings and perceptions associated with the situations we encountered as Black women leaders. We shared a common understanding of what it means to be a minority leader in a majority world. This kinship was important to me and guided my ethical considerations throughout the research process. The use of a reflective journal allowed me to situate myself within the research protocol as a Black female high school principal and reflect on my lived experiences. This process helped me make meaning of my thoughts and informed how I approached the findings of my study. It was important for me to own my lived experiences and actively listen to my participants' perceptions, as their views sometimes differed from mine.

I fully recognized the participants' reluctance to share their true thoughts and feelings and the vulnerability factor concerning sharing their perceptions about their leadership. I reiterated my desire to hear their unfiltered perceptions of the role of the high school principalship throughout the data collection process. I informed the participants that I would use fictional

names and locations. Using pseudonyms and fictional names for their locations helped participants share their innermost thoughts. In addition, I engaged in member checking, allowing the participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. Each participant also had the opportunity to provide feedback on themes that emerged from the data.

It was vital to me that this study reflect the lived experiences of the participants of this study. Illuminating the voice of Black female high school principals is crucial to developing a stronger understanding of leaders who are growing in number in our state and nation. This was the primary reason for pursuing this study because I plan to use the information gained to support my future work as a coach of secondary principals.

Limitations

A limitation of my qualitative study was the small sample size, so I could not generalize globally about my study's findings. However, the small sample size was a necessary trade-off to get the rich, descriptive, and detailed information the semi-structured in-person interviews provided. Another limitation of my study was that I only used participants who were currently serving or had served as high school principals in North Carolina.

Engaging in qualitative research met the goal of my study, which was to illuminate the voices of African American female educational leaders. Our voices are almost nonexistent in the research, and we comprise a substantial proportion of education leaders locally and nationally. While only thirteen percent of administrators in North Carolina are African American, over fifty percent of those African American leaders are female (Irwin et al., 2022). The benefits of this study certainly outweigh any limitations.

Summary

In Chapter III, I provided an overview of the research methodology chosen for this study, the research questions that guide the study, the criteria for participants, and how data were collected and analyzed. Ethical considerations of the study were discussed, including the need for trustworthiness and possible limitations of the study. In Chapter IV, I describe the findings from my study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study aimed to examine the experiences of Black female high school principals in North Carolina. Black females comprise over 50% of new minority administrators entering the profession in 2021 (Irwin et al., 2022). Black female administrators are growing in number at the secondary level and can be the answer to the ongoing need for effective leadership in our high schools. As school districts seek to diversify their leadership pipelines, learning more about how this group of leaders perceives the high school principalship will inform leadership curricula and practicum components. Understanding the perceptions of the Black female administrator can provide vital information for institutions of higher learning as they educate new administrators and school districts as they seek to recruit and retain diverse leadership for their schools. The research questions that guided this study were as follows: "How do Black female high school principals describe their work?" and "How do race and gender influence their work?"

In this chapter, I provide brief profiles of each study participant I interviewed. Next, I present six themes that emerged from my analysis of the interview transcripts.

Participant Profiles

I conducted virtual interview protocols with five participants who have served as high school principals. Participants served as high school principals in five different school districts in North Carolina and ranged in experience from 2 to 11 years in the high school principalship. Each participant completed two interview sessions and had the opportunity to review their data. These women allowed me to learn about their lives and vividly described their experiences as high school principals. Table 2 provides demographic information of my participants. Note that, to preserve participants' anonymity, I ensured that all principal, school, and place names are pseudonyms.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Name	Years in education	Years in administration	Years as an assistant principal	Years as HS principal	School type
Holly Hill	14	7	5	2	suburban
Jenny Jones	25	12	4	5	rural
Kelly King	25	18	2	4	urban
Tina Turner	20	15	2	4	urban
Laura Long	30	15	2	11	urban

In this section, I share a brief participant profile that outlines each woman's career in education, their path to the high school principalship, and the school(s) they served.

Holly Hill

Holly is the youngest educator in this study and is currently the principal at Woodson High School, a 3A high school in central North Carolina. Woodson High School has a diverse population of approximately 1,100 students—33% African American, 30% Caucasian, and 25% Latino. This is her second year there. Her school is steeped in community leadership tradition; her position as principal departs from that tradition as she is the first person of color to serve as principal.

Holly comes from a family of educators and has been around education her entire life. Her father is a pastor, and her mother and aunts were all teachers. She had a variety of educational experiences including tutoring her classmates and participating in the Teacher Cadet course in high school. Teacher Cadets is a course designed to expose high school students to teaching as a career and is funded by the North Carolina Foundation of Public School Children. Holly applied for the prestigious North Carolina Teaching Fellows scholarship and attended a UNC system university to pursue her undergraduate degree in education. The North Carolina

Teaching Fellows program is a scholarship program designed to attract the best and the brightest students to public school teaching in North Carolina.

Holly's early experiences led her to question her commitment to education. She recalls being "burnt out" on teaching before she even started. Her penchant for leadership was real, so she pursued and obtained a graduate degree in higher education administration. She eventually returned to the idea of teaching in the classroom. Holly taught for 7 years in two different middle schools, teaching math and social studies. She interviewed for administrative positions and decided to take an assistant principal position in an urban district in Georgia, where she worked until deciding to pursue a high school principalship.

The COVID pandemic was partly responsible for Holly's ascension to the high school principalship. She was working as assistant principal in an urban district and learning a ton about administration.

> I was in my seventh year of teaching, and I was ready for something else … I was
> applying for all kinds of stuff, curriculum specialists … I got two assistant principal
> offers in North Carolina before I went to Atlanta Public Schools. That position was
> INTENSE. It prepared me for anything. Then COVID hit and I needed to be closer to my
> family back here in North Carolina. So, this opportunity to be principal at Woodson High
> School happened at the right time.

Jenny Jones

Jenny is a passionate educator in her late 40s. She is married and the mother of adolescent twin boys. Jenny began her career as a high school history teacher in South Carolina; she served as a curriculum facilitator and assistant principal before moving into the high school principalship. She obtained her master's degree in curriculum and instruction before pursuing her

add-on licensure in administration. Most of her career has been at the secondary level; Jenny's principalships were only at the high school level.

Jenny served as principal of two rural comprehensive high schools before moving into her current district position as student services director. Her last principalship was at Eastside High School, a 2A comprehensive rural high school of 700 students in south-central North Carolina. The Eastside student population was 55% Latino, 29% Caucasian, and 13% African American. Her prior principalship was at a similarly sized rural high school in Virginia with very different student demographics. Ridgetop High School has a student body of approximately 1,000 students, where 51% of the students identified as Caucasian, with 28% identifying as African American and 14% identifying as Latino.

Jenny's road to the principalship took a little longer. It took a little longer, and Jenny felt she did not get a transparent transition into either of her high school principalships.

> I had applied and applied for principal positions in my district with no luck. I served as a curriculum facilitator and an assistant principal during that time. I prayed and prayed to get the chance to lead a school (eventually) I had to go outside my district to get an opportunity to be a high school principal.

Jenny's purpose as a high school principal comes from having a path for every student before they leave high school.

> Enrollment, employment, enlistment. Whatever your path is, that is our goal to ensure that you can do what you want in life and have some options. My job is to make sure that every student that walks out our door upon graduation can walk into something meaningful for them and enhance their lives. That does not look the same for all my babies, so we have to make sure that they figure out what they want to do and make sure

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that they know how to make that life plan happen because it may not look like what you and I might envision for them.

Kelly King

Kelly is an animated, energetic educator with various experiences under her belt. Kelly currently serves as a principal of an early college high school in an urban district in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Early/Middle College High School is located on the campus of a university in the triad and serves approximately 200 students. Over 80% of the students are classified as African American. EMCHS is a relatively new school with a focused health and human science curriculum.

Kelly has worked in five different school districts in North Carolina, beginning her career as an elementary teacher teaching third grade. After teaching a few years in a rural district, she served as a reading teacher and a curriculum facilitator at the elementary and middle school level in a suburban district before obtaining her master's degree in administration. Kelly became an assistant principal at the high school level in a suburban district in central North Carolina. Kelly also served as a principal at elementary school and middle school for twelve years prior to her principalship at Early/Middle College High School.

Kelly's path was relatively linear in that she went from elementary principal to middle school principal to high school principal.

So, for me, I'm always trying to reach for what's next. I was tapped to become an elementary principal; then was brought up to the middle school principal and it was something we (my principal supervisor) talked about, you know, 'Why not? Why not finish the K-12 journey? Hey, that sounds interesting. High school sounds like the next

thing to do.' So, I prayed about it and the next thing you know, my superintendent is calling me to discuss my move to the Early/Middle High School.

Kelly's purpose as a high school principal is rooted in student support. For Kelly, her purpose is driven by the simple fact that she wants students to graduate.

For me, it is making sure students graduate. And not just graduate but are ready for post-graduation, whatever that may be, whether it's military, college, 2-year, 4-year, trade, whatever. So, college career and life ready is our mission … it's my mission, so whatever that thing is for that child. My job is to make sure that they are ready for it … to make sure that students have experienced a holistic approach to closing out their four years with us. So, meaning socially, academically, intellectually, they've been exposed to everything because this is their last time in school before the real world. So, I think the high school principal's job is to get them ready for the real world. We model, expose, create as many opportunities as possible that's going to get them better life outcomes. So, if that means a gap opportunity with an apprenticeship. Whether that means, oh, you're good at this. Have you thought about this? So really identifying each child's "thing" or at least showing them all the "things" that are available and matching their skill with some options.

Tina Turner

Tina is a dynamic, equity-focused leader who feels that being a high school principal was the best time in her professional career. She is married, and her husband is also a high school principal. Tina always knew she wanted to be a principal. As a middle and high school student, she spent time with the adults in the school building. Those adults nurtured her love of teaching and inspired her to pursue teaching as a career.

Tina's educational career began in college, teaching preschool part-time to provide for her new baby. Upon graduation, Tina taught middle school language arts and social studies for three years before beginning graduate school to obtain her master's in school administration. She served as a middle school assistant principal for 2 years before taking on an elementary school principalship at 30. Tina progressed to a middle school principalship after 4 years at the elementary level. Tina served as a principal at all three levels, and she currently serves as a high school area superintendent for a district in central North Carolina.

Tina's pursuit of a principalship came from an internal desire influenced by her childhood experiences. Tina alludes to her innate desire to be a principal and her not-so-great experiences with teachers growing up.

> Let me just say I have always wanted to be a principal … and I also just had horrible teachers. I mean, horrible teachers. I used to even try to tell them how to teach people when I was in high school. Didn't always go well for me. But I could only imagine. I've always known. Like I want to tell teachers what to do because kids deserve a better experience. And so, for me, it wasn't just being a teacher (being a principal), it was like having more of a widespread influence like over more teachers.

Her high school principalship was at Mountainview High School, a comprehensive high school located in the Triangle area of North Carolina. Mountainview HS is a relatively new 4A high school serving a diverse student body of 1,600 students, almost 40% Latino, 30% African American, and 25% Caucasian. Tina spent 4 years at Mountainview as principal.

Laura Long

Laura is a seasoned, veteran educator of Jamaican descent who began her educational career as a school counselor in Alabama. Laura moved to North Carolina after obtaining her

degree in school administration and began work as an assistant principal in a small rural district before coming to her current district as a high school principal. She has worked in her current school district for most of her administrative educational career.

Laura has been a high school principal for over 10 years, leading an early college high school and another comprehensive high school in the same district. She describes each of her high school principalships very differently, referring to that time as foundational and learning years.

> The first principalship was really difficult; it was a great school, but it was hard. I would call them the learning years. Like, I learned to become the principal that I am now because of that foundation. When I went to my next school, I took the baggage that I learned there and changed some things. And one of the things that I remember from my first faculty meeting at Bull City Academy, I said, "What can I do for you all? What is it that you need me to hear or you need from me?" And I had them do the "start/stop/continue" activity and I listened. I didn't do a whole lot of talking. I listened. So, from that baby principal, I learned a lot about listening before making any decisions.

Laura is currently in her second year as the principal at Denim High School, a large magnet high school located in the Triangle area of North Carolina with approximately 1,100 high school students. Denim HS is a lottery-based arts magnet in Weston County Public Schools, where the student population is about 35% Caucasian, 30% Latino, and about 28% African American.

Summary

Each participant was eager to discuss their experiences with me, especially once they realized that I had once been in their shoes. I was in awe of these ladies as I listened to their stories, mostly because I recognized their personal sacrifice and commitment to serving their

students and school communities. It renewed my faith that there is hope for our state's high schools and solidified my belief that Black female high school leaders can transform high schools into high functioning learning communities that support all students.

Main Themes

The role of the high school principal is complex and multifaceted with many dimensions and aspects to the work. It is a hard job, a lonely job, and the participants in this study truly believe that only someone who has been in this role can truly understand its intricacies to supervise and support the work. The participants are all passionate educators driven to do the work of the high school principal; and they are determined to create learning opportunities for their staff and students. They are also Black women whose identities generated challenges but also helped them establish relationships.

In this section, I share the findings I gleaned from the data.

Theme #1: Participants Described the Role of High School Principal as Tiring and Multi-Interactional as Well as Requiring High Visibility

Each participant shared their experiences executing the role of the high school principal, and they all recounted the long hours and the need to be at the various activities at the high school level, including extracurricular and co-curricular activities. When describing their daily workday schedules, each participant shared early starts, late evenings, and many intentional activities in between. Tina stated, "As a middle school principal. I thought I worked. I thought I had seen tired, but I didn't know I was tired until my first month at Mountainview. And it was an exhaustion to the bones." Jenny said, "I was always on call, carrying two phones and never having a moment to myself. I went to bed tired and got up tired." The tiredness that each participant referred to can be partly attributed to the "always-on" nature of the principalship.

Being a high school principal is a role that can be all-encompassing; participants felt like they were always expected to be the principal, even when they were out of the building or on vacation. Jenny states, "You never have time off; even when you are off, you are on call. Because when something happens, you are expected to respond accordingly. I never had the chance to just be off."

Each participant shared the activities and behaviors that they engaged in daily as they worked as a high school principal. While each of them had a different approach to their daily work, their priorities were all tied to students. They spent time visiting classrooms, supervising staff and students, attending extracurricular events and athletic contests, and making appearances in the school and community all to ensure that the school is functioning well. Each participant shared or acknowledged the importance of visibility and its connection to creating a strong culture and learning community.

Kelly's belief concerning the criticality of being present and visible is apparent in her description of her daily schedule. Kelly shared her calendar for the day and revealed that day was one of those twelve-hour days that happens too frequently.

> So, my day starts with the car rider line, and I'm there because I have another person on the buses and all the bus riders have to come by the car rider line. So, I'm there for several reasons—I can see all the students, everybody that rode buses, and everybody that rode in the car. I stand there in the middle. I see everybody in one shot, and everybody can see me and get to me if necessary.

Kelly's time during the school day is spent in classrooms and with students handling discipline, observing, or attending required meetings with college officials. Any necessary administrative matters are handled in her office after student dismissal.

Tina shared Kelly's belief in the importance of visibility to cultivate a community focused on learning. Tina explained,

> Visibility is key because when you are not visible, that's when negative behaviors begin to happen. I have to model expectations in my role, so if I expected teachers to be in the hallway, then I needed to be out there as well. When I'm in classrooms and on duty, I am having conversations, learning my students and my teachers, and making sure that instruction is happening.

Though the participants reported rarely having a typical day, they the importance of having a plan to address the important aspects of the principalship. Holly is committed to a backwards design approach to hold herself accountable for her priorities and necessary work. "I want my days to be about being in classrooms, being visible, and supporting instructional leadership." Holly calendars out her observations, her one-on-one meetings with her AP's, her SST meetings, and anything else she needs to accomplish to hold herself accountable to get things done. She also reported that even a properly calendared day can change when situations occur. Holly explained that she learned how to manage interruptions as they come up to keep the focus on students.

> I have my calendar with the things that are necessary for managing instruction; but when something comes up, I have trained myself to ask, 'Is this something I need to do?' Whenever possible I will delegate to my assistant principals so that I can be in classrooms and attend to teacher and student needs.

Jenny reported being "on the move" which included minimal time in her actual office and working with different people throughout the building. She talked about meeting with students outside their classrooms, huddling with her administrative team after hallway sweeps, popping in

on planning period meetings, meeting with parents for scheduled and unscheduled appointments, and dealing with any central office mandates or requests via her cell phone. When asked if or when she stopped to eat, she laughed and said, "sometimes I can get a quick bite in after the student lunches." It was important to Jenny that students had access to her, so she was there in the mornings in the main entrance of the building as well as walking through the café during each of the lunches.

Laura's description of her day involved visibility with her staff and students, along with instructional support. She believes in the adage of "inspect what you expect" and calendars her day with her daily and weekly priorities. She explained,

> Let me use Friday as an example. I had my agenda of things I was going to do, I needed to get to classrooms, I needed to go visit some PLCs, I needed to do all that well, that got disrupted because I had to deal with some student issues. So, on a typical day, I would come in. I usually try to get emails, all of that out the way first. And then, I try to do the rounds of classroom visits. At Denim, we have a set time when we have PLCs; I try to visit PLCs if I can. And then typically, at the end of the day, I am with the assistant principals, helping them with supervisory duty. Of course, cafeteria duty in the middle of there, too. I follow my agenda. I am intentional about my weekly agenda so that I can be visible and attend to the important things—students and instruction.

Laura's calendar involved a multitude of afterschool activities from athletic events to art performances. Because Denim is an arts magnet school, it offers a robust slate of co-curricular activities and events, all of which require supervision and monitoring. This adds time to the high school principal's regularly scheduled day, which starts with a seven am arrival and could end as late as nine or nine thirty at night.

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So, I always have something after school. You've got sports, and you've got arts. So, one

of them is occurring late at night, and nine o'clock/nine thirty might be a typical time.

I'm coming home if we have games. It varies, it depends on the day and time, they kind

of blend in together because you're not going home in a timely fashion at a high school.

Laura's approach to the high school principalship has evolved over her three stints as a

high school principal. She acknowledges the time commitment it takes to serve as a high school

principal, but she also recognizes that her approach to the work has adjusted as she has gained

more experience.

In this principalship, I'm adjusting to managing my day-to-day time better. [In my

previous principalship] I felt like I was inundated with being in the office, and in the back

of my mind, I thought, 'Ding, Ding, Ding, Ding, Ding.' I'm smart enough to know that

this week to say to myself, 'You better get out of the office because you spent too much

time in it last week.' I literally wrote myself an agenda note: Monday, first thing, go to

first period walkthroughs because I spent too much time in the office last week.

When I first started, I felt like I worked every waking moment. Now I recognize the need

for self-care. I try to keep Saturdays for me unless there's a high school event that I

cannot miss.

While she acknowledged that she still works long hours (one of our interviews took place on a

Sunday while she was working), Laura tries to attempt a work-life balance to make time for

herself and her family.

You never have enough time. And you know when they say it's a lonely job, it really is a

lonely job. I kind of waited till like my kids were grown before I went full out into being

a principal and even then, I felt like my family missed out on things. So as a woman,

particularly you always have that parental guilt because you've given so much of your

time to your school. Time is a big thing because school is your baby, and it takes up a

huge part of your life.

Each participant subscribed to the belief that visibility throughout their schools and

classrooms was a managerial necessity and helped them to build a positive learning environment.

That visibility, coupled with the multitude of stakeholder interactions and the "always on"

feelings validate the feelings of tiredness reported by the participants.

Theme #2: Participants Shared Images Representing Their Perception of the High School
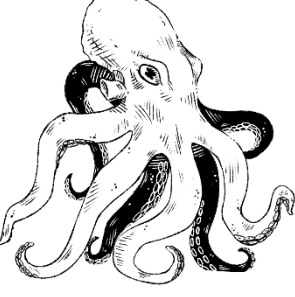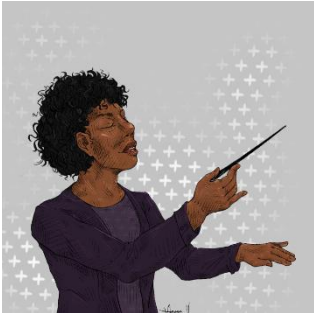
Principalship

Three participants described an image they believed represented their perception of the

principalship role. Figure 1 shows the images as described by the participants and interpreted by

the researcher.

Laura described the high school principal as a circus ringmaster. Laura mentioned the

ringmaster must know how the show will go and organize all the pieces to make the performance

come off as planned.

I mean, (school) it's—it's like a circus show, and you're the Grand Master of the Circus,

you know. It's important to attend to all the different parts of the show. If you don't pay

attention to parts of it, you know, balls are gonna drop someplace, like the trapeze artists

are gonna fall off, you know. Someone has to organize the show. And without that (the

principals), well, things are gonna drop now. They can fall off. Even when there are

experts that are not gonna let it fall, your hands have to be touching everything. You can't

do everything because sometimes you can extend your hand and say, "Hey, you handle

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that clown. You take care of that." Um, so it is that, but it's also a balance of power, you know. I think a good high school principal also knows how to give away power.

Figure 1. Participant Images Representative of the Principalship Role

The Ringmaster	
The Octopus	
The Orchestra Conductor	
The Mayor	

As Laura described the image of the circus ringmaster, I was able to visualize the high school principal as the coordinator and organizer of the school processes and procedures.

Holly described the high school principalship as an octopus. She shared the following:

I would say it's like being an octopus, probably because the arms are always going in so many different directions with all the responsibilities of the principal, but they are all attached to the head, which is where it all comes back to … when you think of it, all the legs are like all the areas of the evaluation instrument—eight legs and eight areas.

Holly also compared the role of the high school principal to that of a mayor, describing her various stakeholders as constituents that she had to learn about and serve. Because Woodson High School has typically served a particular group of students, she has learned that the school demographics have evolved greatly over the last few years to include many different types of families. Her diverse school population now comprises families from low-income housing to wealthy, upper-middle-class neighborhoods. While she is new to the school and embraces diversity, Holly believes that the more traditional families are not as aware of the changes in the school population.

Sometimes I feel like the mayor, talking to the different groups of our school. It is like some people in my community do not understand how the town has changed over the years. It is not just the same middle to upper-class families that used to attend here. We are very diverse, and we must attend to the needs of all the different families we serve, from the wealthy ones to the low-income ones.

Yet another participant used the image of a symphony conductor. Jenny used this image to describe what must happen at a turnaround school. Jenny characterizes herself as a turnaround principal and feels that this is also how district leaders and community stakeholders see her.

Jenny has made a name for herself as a turnaround principal, earning district Principal of the Year honors at the high school she led through the accreditation process. She reflected on that experience and created the image of a band director or orchestra conductor.

> I guess I would describe it as a band director or maybe an orchestra conductor. You know, the conductor studies all the parts, creates the vision for the performance, and then guides each section through the piece for their best performance. High school principals do the same thing—create the vision for the school, work with each department, and guide the team through the school year.

> Each image appeared to relate to that participant's perceptions of the role. As the researcher, I appreciated the images as representations of the complex role of the high school principal. Depending on the day, any images shared could accurately depict what behaviors a high school principal must engage in to perform their duties.

Theme #3: Faith and Spirituality are a Common Component of the High School Principalship for These Participants

During each of the interviews, each woman referenced their spiritual beliefs as they discussed their high school principalships and their journeys to the role. Jenny, for instance, emphasized divine placement by explaining "God is in me to be there" while Tina noted, "Being a high school principal is like mission work." Each participant's spiritual foundation emerged as they described their arrival and placement to the principalship. In addition, their spiritual center is a part of the reason that they were able to persevere through the daily grind of the challenges associated with the work.

Tina did not pursue her high school principalship at Mountainview High School; her superintendent tapped her after a successful stint at the middle school level. Even though her position happened this way, Tina believed God directed it. She explained,

I didn't have a choice … They called me into the office and l thought we were discussing another open position. My assistant superintendent said, 'we have an opportunity for you.' She named another high school in the district, and I said, 'well where's Don (the current principal) going?' She only responded with, 'His last day will be this and your first day is such and such.' And it was literally within one week; she had a calculated timeline. Only three of us knew the decisions: the superintendent, the deputy superintendent and me. Jewell, my supervisor, didn't even know who was coming there. You calculated for me to tell my staff at this time and then the connect-ed to come out at 7 pm, to tell everybody where everyone was going and a week later, I started … that was the Lord directing my path. I had to follow.

Tina later defined the work of a high school principal as mission work. She strongly believed that God placed her there to serve the students, staff, and community of Mountainview. Tina shared,

I always felt this spiritual connection. It was the best two years of my life. I was doing God's work every single day, so I never went to work. I went to serve. It was truly the most rewarding time of my educational career.

Jenny concurred with the idea of the role of the high school principal as mission work. She noted,

Mission work is sharing the word of the gospel with other cultures. Well, let me tell you. A high school has a culture of its own. I crossed that threshold every day, determined to

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advocate for my students and let them know about the opportunities the world had for them … But to be clear, it was a sacrifice. I sacrificed my personal life, my family life because I was always working for my students.

Jenny also credited her spiritual center for the strength to endure challenges associated with the principalship. Jenny recalled a meeting with her superintendent where she found out that her school that she had been hired for was not accredited and how she had to look to a higher power to give her the strength to handle the challenge.

And I was like, okay. So, I remember going to my office, and I cried like a baby. I cried and cried and prayed and cried, thinking, 'Lord, what have I gotten myself into?' And I remember that I called my brother (who is a pastor) to come "pray with me" because I do not know how I am going to get this done.

Holly's pursuit of the principalship tied back to her experiences as a preacher's kid and the foundation of faith in her life. "Early on, you learn to seek out His purpose for your life and to do His will." Holly not only felt that she was walking in her purpose as a high school principal, but that her faith was the primary reason that she was able to persevere through year two of her principalship. "We just keep on keeping on because that is just what we do." She believes that she is doing the right work, even during the difficulties of the role. "You know that you are serving a higher purpose and it's the reason why you are where you are. You trust in His plan even when you don't always understand it."

Laura did not explicitly mention a spiritual context; however, she described one of the joys of the high school principalship as being mission-driven, in that she was able to influence the lives of students and teachers.

I went into education and administration to make a difference in the lives of students. I feel like I have been able to do that as a high school principal. My other mission is to create a better school climate by helping teachers to grow and become better.

Each of these Black women are dedicated servant leaders who know and understand that the work of the high school principal is hard, and most of them explained that they rely heavily and openly on their spiritual center for the perseverance necessary to do this tiring work.

Theme #4: Participants Expressed a Need for Mentoring and Trusted Thought Partners to Function Effectively

As participants discussed their roles and what they do each day in their execution of the role, the idea of support was referenced in several ways. Training, coaching, and mentorship were discussed by participants when discussing the execution of their role as high school principals. Also, lack of training or proper mentorship was a common thread.

As the final decision-maker on school site issues and concerns, the high school principal faces many decisions that impact the school community. Having a mentor, coach, or thought partner to discuss plans, thought processes, and impacts of decisions is needed and desired by each participant in this study. Each participant shared the need for a mentor or coach for the high school principal. While some experiences were not as helpful for some, each participant acknowledged the importance of mentorship for Black female high school principals, even if the mentor did not "look" like them.

According to Laura, every HS principal should have a mentor, someone trustworthy that they can rely on. She has served as high school principal in three different schools in an urban area, and her first principalship was the most difficult for that reason.

The first principalship was hard. It was difficult. And I don't feel like I had the reserves to draw on or people to help me or ask what to do or nobody volunteered. So, you learned a whole lot on your own, you learn the good, the bad, the indifferent, and being in Gate City is a lot to navigate.

Laura needed support when she started, but she also sees the need for mentorship or someone to talk to throughout the principalship experience.

You should have a mentor when you start, and not a mentor that is a mentor that's just somebody that's paid to come but somebody trustworthy, somebody who's been in the field, and somebody who you create a trusting relationship with. Someone that, you know, you can pick up the phone and you can call them, and you can say, I'm really frustrated, and I just need to cry, or I just need you to tell me what you would do in this situation. I've been blessed to have good friends that we all develop that amongst ourselves one or a couple of the ladies who you'll probably interview are my mentor group, we mentor each other. I have other friends that are principals that I throw things in front of and I'm like, Okay tell me what you do for this. So, you need that group of trusted people that you can bring it to.

Participants also discussed the need for a thought partner to discuss ideas and approaches when facing complex situations. Kelly shares,

Mentorship is crucial. My mentors, people who have been in the principal role to pull my coattail and say, "Hey, you need to think about this. Hey, have you thought about this?" So, I think that in the beginning was very important in my development. If I wouldn't have that in the beginning, I don't know what I would have done, but then I thought I knew it all, too. And then when I went to a new setting. I really needed it again. Even

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though I didn't really get one here. I've had some good mentors, even though none of them have looked like me.

Kelly elaborated more on the mentor coaching aspect of the principalship, noting that principal coaching is not only needed for novice high school principals, but also for all practicing high school principals.

Principal coaching is needed. I don't think that you get it after the beginning. I think that should always be a thing. Like it shouldn't stop just because you have sixteen years in because, you know, just like teachers, I mean, you get stuck in the rut, you think you know it all and you're going along and nobody's challenging you're thinking because they believe you got this, and you might have it in certain areas. But if you don't have a coach, or somebody constantly in your ear challenging your thinking you don't grow. So, I think principal coaching at every level is necessary. Because I don't have anybody to call or anybody to talk to if I don't know something and there are days that I don't know. So, I must rely on a colleague that may not know either. Principal coaching and not just for the day in and day out tasks, but also to help you think through things. Problem solves, be think partners, you might know, but you just want to have a thought partner. Like this is what I'm thinking, I'm not crazy, like help me think through this.

Having someone to talk to who was also new to the high school principalship has been a calming force for Holly. She has a friend in the trenches that she can call on when needed to validate her thoughts and feelings.

We became high school principals at the same exact time, and so I think what I needed to hear from her or what I heard from her was what I was sort of going through, that it was normal. So I think being able to talk to someone who was experiencing sort of the same

challenges as I was, talking with her about things, venting in some cases, I think that was

helpful for me because I think sometimes you can think it is all in your head but when

you have somebody who is going through it with you at the same time, and you can be

like "Oh you're dealing that too; Oh that happened to you, too" … Because you feel

alone sometimes … I think it was just nice to hear that somebody was going through the

same thing and having the same challenges was helpful to me.

Jenny missed the kinship of other African Americans in her high school leadership

experience, reflecting on the inherent loneliness of the role coupled with the lack of diversity in

the district where she served as high school principal.

Having some diversity would have been a little bit more helpful. When you are, one of

two in the district (in leadership), that says a lot. When you're when you're limited with

the diversity of your colleagues. The island that you are on is even more lonely, and

you're already alone. You do have colleagues that you can collaborate with to a certain

extent. But when you don't have colleagues that look like you and have similar

experiences as you have. The island becomes a greater island than I was used to dealing

with, (At my previous district), we had more diverse colleagues so we can have those

conversations, and really express ourselves without the worry of where those words were

going to go, whereas at Eastside, I didn't have that.

While each participant had a different experience with their mentors, they shared the importance

of having another person who understood the job of the high school principal to support them in

their execution of the role, whether that person was a mentor, leadership coach, colleague, or

some other type of thought partner. In addition, each woman stressed the importance of that

person being a trusted confidante who empathized with the inherent struggles of Black women in leadership.

Theme #5: Participants Reported Encountering Challenges That Resulted from or Were Exacerbated by Their Identities as Black Women

Being a Black female high school principal comes with unique challenges. Participants could recount several experiences where they felt their identities were a factor in the interaction, whether it was an instance of microaggression, or the stereotypes associated with Black women. As participants shared their stories, I could relate, and on one or more occasions, the participant stories brought up feelings from my own experiences that were not always positive. Each woman was visibly frustrated when recounting situations where their abilities or positional authority was questioned just because they were Black and female. Participants discussed situations where they were asked to explain decisions or do things a certain way when their White male colleagues did not have to meet the same standard. Amid these situations, participants wanted to act or behave in a certain way that was genuine to them in the given situation but would adjust their behaviors to combat perceived stereotypes held by stakeholder groups. In any given situation, Black women have to "weigh" the cost versus the benefits when engaging in discourse within their roles as high school principals. I found they encountered identity-fueled challenges regarding credibility and capability, politics, stereotypes, and White male privilege.

Credibility and Capability

Laura shared her feelings about the impact of her identity on her role as a high school principal. She explained,

It sounds cliche, but we do have to work harder to get our credibility. It's like I think I'm past the point where I must prove myself like I did initially when you're young and new,

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you must prove yourself, you must prove that you're not an idiot or anything like that. I have the trail of excellence, I have everything behind me that tells you, I know what I'm doing, but you continue to question what I'm doing? Why is that? So, it's subtle things like that, that we always have to explain ourselves when other folks do not have to.

Laura also gets frustrated when stakeholders question her managerial leadership abilities based on race and gender. She recounts a discipline situation where the parent questioned her competency as the principal.

I was meeting with a parent and telling them that I was suspending their child, and it was clear that the dad was attempting to speak down to me. I don't think he would have done that if somebody else was in the seat, but he was trying to tell me what to do as I'm not capable. And I think in the middle of the meeting, I had to stop and just kind of look at him and say I've been in this business a long time, I know exactly what I'm doing, and I understand that you're angry about your son, but I know exactly how this is supposed to work and the consequences that must be delivered. I do it [deliver consequences] to everybody, and I stay the same and stay consistent, but I must stop and say that because he literally was trying to tell me what to do, and I did—I had to contain my eye roll.

Holly shared a similar situation where her skills as a managerial leader were questioned.

I had a math department head try to tell me how I should run a department meeting. Instead of trusting the process as your leader, you try to project how you think it should be done on me, and I'm like, "Wow." So, I said, "What if I just want to get to know the math department well this year, and that's my goal?" I'm not saying it's the best goal, but I'm just saying that could be my goal. I think people feel too comfortable, and I don't know where it comes from, thinking that they can tell me how to do my job. And I have

worked with incompetent principals (who do not look like me), and I've never seen

people question them or question why they make the choices they do, but something that

people feel comfortable sort of questioning me because I'm Black or a woman or both. I

think when you project yourself as someone who is sort of confident in your abilities,

confident in what you do. It's almost like they want to see you be flustered. Like you

don't know what to do, as if someone wants to see you appear incompetent for some

reason. It's strange. I don't know. I think there's a level of perfection that's expected but

not realistic, and it's harmful and detrimental for Black female principals.

Jenny's authority was greatly questioned when she went to her first high school

principalship. She had taken over an unaccredited school and was met with resistance when she

implemented some strategies that differed from the status quo. She explained,

I really needed autonomy to truly be who I am and lead my staff. The way I needed to be

without the questions because all it took was one person to go complain. And then it was

a bunch of questions. It could have been because I was new, but the other principals who

were leading the other unaccredited schools had a lot more leeway to make decisions and

implement their plans, and they were both White men.

Politics

Dealing with politics was reported as a major frustration for participants. They

acknowledged the political nature of the high school principalship, from its inclusion on the

North Carolina evaluation instrument to the issues it has generated throughout their duties. As

the researcher, there was a noticeable shift in the interview with each participant when this topic

surfaced. I felt the anxiety and emotion emitting from the participants as they discussed their

experiences concerning politics during the interviews.

Laura described the politics of the high school principalship as the most frustrating thing about the role.

Politics is the worst. I mean, there's some days when I am frustrated about the fact that I must jump through these hoops. Why can't I just curse out this entitled parent? Or just make board members understand that it's not as easy as you think it is. And that we're not in here playing around. Like we really got up this morning and decided that we're going to make your life hell, something like that. And sometimes you feel that way, like, people just don't understand that. I didn't get up this morning to make things bad, or to have the water main break at the school, or to have the alarms go off as they did earlier this week. The bells were ringing. I didn't get up to make the bells NOT ring, things happen. And, you know, give us a little grace. I hate politics, that's the worst.

Jenny found politics difficult to navigate due to the community-based nature of her schools. In her first principalship, the political situations centered on following a well-connected community member in the principalship, even though she was returning to the community where she was raised. In Jenny's second principalship, she was seen as an outsider, as she was new to the rural community she served. Both positions were politically charged, leaving Jenny feeling like she could not break into the political circle in the Eastside community. She noted,

I think the politics of it all is really difficult because they're there are so many different dynamics of politics that you have to understand, and dealing with the politics is actually to me more draining than any other piece of principalship, and I think It's political in all of the levels, whether you're elementary middle and high. However, when you hit high school, it's especially difficult if you are a principal of a community-driven high school. Politics are ridiculous when having to understand who's connected to whom, to having to

understand whose kin to who, you know, to the one who has the most money to who's in the leadership's ear, and it really becomes a cutthroat situation or scenario. That piece is really, really draining.

While Jenny recognized her own admitted growth regarding her political prowess, she also attributes other principals' acumen in this area of politics to their longevity in the principal role.

I commend when you have principals that are really at a high school beyond 4 to 5 years, are still successful because it really is a draining process. But what I have found is a lot of times, when you have principals that are in a community-based high school for 5 years or longer. They are a true integral part of the political scene. There is some connection that they have that, a lot of times, that minority principals do not have or do not have an opportunity to get.

Even though Holly is a relatively new principal, the serious nature of politics is not lost on her. "I'm not gonna talk about how political my job is because I want to stay in my job." She shares with a laugh. "I'm still learning how to navigate it as well because it's like our actions (as Black women) are just perceived so differently, and we just can't get away with certain things like our White counterparts." Kelly refused to discuss politics during her interviews, citing that she could not afford some of the situations she has had to deal with to come out unintentionally.

The political nature of the high school principalship was a source of contention for the participants. While they acknowledged that politics are difficult to navigate for any high school principal, each participant indicated that it was even more difficult for Black women due to their "outsider within" status. Black women principals do not always have the power connections necessary to be included in the political scene. As participants discussed this topic, there was a

general undertone of resignation concerning politics and how difficult it was for Black female high school principals to navigate. Each woman recognized the challenge and did their best to deal with political issues surrounding their roles. In addition, each participant had to learn to navigate the political arena and understand its importance for their survival as a high school principal.

Stereotypes

Black women high school principals often fall prey to the stereotypes associated with Black women. A common generalization concerning Black women is that we are loud and aggressive. Each participant recounted at least one situation when someone perceived them as angry, confrontational, or aggressive when that was not an accurate description of how they felt. This was particularly frustrating for Laura, who believes she must control her voice level and passion for students because others will label her "angry" or difficult to work with.

> I feel like we must control ourselves more than anybody else. Um, because the minute you get excited, or "overly passionate" is the word I like to use now, people begin to look at you like there is a problem or, you know, you can't be as loud as you want to be like there's something wrong with being loud, but then we have to watch "them" get loud with no negative consequence or recourse.

Jenny shared her experience with this stereotype and how it affects her communication with others.

> Early in my administrative career, I didn't know how to separate the conversation from the tone. That's something that I think is key, particularly with me as an African American woman, the perception of that tone really outshines the message that's attached to it. I had to learn that people had this preconceived notion of intimidation, even when I

was just trying to convey my message about the work. I mean, I can say the same thing as another principal, particularly White females, and they can say the same thing verbatim, and it will be received better than [it] is from a Black principal. Because to the majority, we (Black females) are already mean and hateful. Constantly battling, the stereotypical perception of a Black principal is draining.

Each woman described more than one instance of the dealing with the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype and admitted that it was always in the back of their minds when dealing with stakeholders. Navigating this stereotype led participants to check their tone, stifle their genuine emotions, and refrain from engagement in further discussions to alleviate or eliminate the notion that this stereotype was accurate.

White Male Privilege

Another phenomenon discussed by the participants was the notion of White male privilege. As high school principals, most of their colleagues are White males. Black women principals are often in situations where they are not treated the same as their White male counterparts, are not paid at the same level as their counterparts and must endure challenges to their authority that their White male counterparts do not experience.

Jenny strongly felt that some White male employees in her buildings did not want to be led by a Black woman principal.

I think sometimes the hardest people for us (Black women principals) to interact with are the White males in the school who don't want to take our leadership or don't want to listen to you even though we are the principal. They just were not gonna do what I said to do, or they were gonna pretend to do it and then do what they wanted to do. Because they did not want to be led by a Black woman.

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Jenny shared a particular story about one of her White male teachers who would not take directives from her. He always referred to her White male assistant principals as "boss" and only completed tasks that those assistant principals directed. Jenny attributed his passive-aggressive behavior to an aversion to her identity as a Black female leader.

Holly shared a similar sentiment regarding the reluctance of White males to submit to her authority.

> There are a couple of staff who challenge every decision that I make and refer to the past principals who "knew" what they were doing. It does not help that I am the first principal of color to lead at Woodson High School because, in their minds, my decisions are unnecessary changes that they should not have to make.

Laura shared a story about one of her White male colleagues to illustrate her point concerning White males.

> I have a really good friend of mine. He is a White male, and recently, he just quit his job. Now, there are some extenuating circumstances, but he just literally quit his job. He and I joked, and I said, "I bet you ten dollars you're gonna get a job in a month." And as I said, and he did. And I said I would have never gotten a job that quickly based on the circumstances that he came out of. Now, there was more to the story, but the idea that it would be much harder for me to find another role in his situation was not lost on him, and I was able to point that out to him because of our friendship.

In the end, each participant was keenly aware of the inequalities and differences that marked their existences in the high school principalship. Jenny perceived that the white male colleagues she worked with had no clue about her struggles as the only Black female principal in the district.

Theme #6: Most Participants Reported That Their Identity Was Sometimes an Advantage in Building Relationships with Stakeholders, a Critical Skill in the High School Principalship

Some participants characterized their ability to build and create strong relationships as a part of their successes and an advantage in their roles as high school principals. Throughout the interviews, participants referenced the importance of relationships with all stakeholders, particularly with students. Moreover, some participants saw their ability to relate to all kinds of people as a professional strength generated from their identity as a Black female. Tina referred to her student relationships in particular,

> You know, one advantage I would say is that the students think of me as a mom. And to me, that'll always be an advantage because (as a high school principal) I got very little disrespect from my students. And even when they did, they came back and apologized to Mama. They knew when they did it and they turned around, they would try to fix it. Yeah, so I think that's an advantage, right?

Jenny mentioned her race and gender as the reasons she was able to connect with Black families.

> I would say, culturally speaking, I was able to connect with a lot of the families, okay? You know, like I said, about 40% of our population was Black. So, I was able to identify easily with them. Even with other students of color, I was able to connect because of our similar backgrounds.

Laura attributed her ability to connect with her stakeholders to her identity as a Black woman in conjunction with the identities she holds for herself.

So, I have that identity (Black Female). So, for me, there's another identity other than my race and gender, and so I bring a lot of diversity to the table, so that has worked to my advantage in that I see things through several different lenses. Um, like lots because I have more than one lens, I have being a woman. I happen to be Black. I have being Jamaican, and I have being multicultural. So, I bring a lot of things to the table that I look at through different lenses. So those things are all to my advantage, and I think as a woman particularly, you do and can look at things differently from men. Therefore, I think Black women run schools differently.

Holly made a similar reference to the double minority status of Black females and how it helps her relate to people.

I think the advantage is that we are low on society's totem pole. And I think being low on the totem pole, it gives you a level of empathy. And that lens that I think is helpful for all kids, not just one kid, not just Black kids, not Hispanic kids, but all kids because we are able to understand what it is like to be at the bottom, and so no matter what kid or what background we can understand or have some feeling of what it's like and so that lens and that experience, I think benefits all kids.

Each participant was noticeably humble while discussing their roles and possible advantages associated with their identities as Black women. As the researcher, I was in awe about how each woman could identify positive aspects in their principalships while simultaneously downplaying their roles in creating the necessary relationships to make those successes happen. There was an unspoken pride in what they could accomplish and an unwavering understanding that their actions and behaviors were imperative. As Tina stated, "We see what needs to be done, and we make it happen … It's just what we do." It was clear that each

woman not only understood the importance of relationships in the execution of their roles as high

school principals but also prioritized nurturing stakeholder relationships.

Summary

This qualitative research study illuminated the voices of five Black women who are

serving or have served as high school principals in North Carolina. In this chapter, I presented

the findings from the data I collected via the interviews with participants, where they described

the role of the high school principal and how their identity as Black females impacted their roles.

I shared major themes that arose from the data. In Chapter V, I answer my research questions

with my thematic findings, discuss their relation to the literature, and make recommendations.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of five Black female high school principals in North Carolina. My goal was to find out more about high school principalship through the eyes of people like me. The research questions that guided the study were "How do Black women high school principals describe their work?" and "How do they perceive that race and gender influence their work as high school principals?

I interviewed five Black women who have served as high school principals to explore these questions. It was easy to talk with each of them, as they all exuded a willingness to share stories and their perceptions of the role of the high school principalship. I wished I could visit their schools and see each participant in their element, as I assumed from their interviews that each woman commanded respect and maintained a strong focus on creating a positive, inclusive community for the students. The kinship and connection that I felt speaking with each participant made me almost giddy as we went through each interview, as I was reflecting on my own experiences and learning a different perspective from similar situations.

In this chapter, I answer each research question with the thematic findings I discussed in Chapter IV. In my analysis, I connect my findings to the existing research. Next, I discuss the implications of my study before sharing my recommendations for practice and research. Specifically, I share my ideas on how to support Black female high school principals in the field. I conclude the chapter with my final thoughts.

Analysis

In this section, I answer my two research questions with my findings and analyze how my findings relate to the existing research.

Research Question 1

In my first research question, I asked, "*How do Black female high school principals describe and understand their work?*" First, I found that **participants reported the role of the high school principal as tiring and multi-interactional, as well as requiring high visibility.** Participants described the high school principalship in a variety of ways. They shared the long hours, the multiple daily interactions, and the different activities included in their workdays. One universal idea was that there was no such thing as a typical day due to the unpredictable nature of the comprehensive high school. The participants' descriptions of their daily schedules were reminiscent of the work of Wolcott (2003), who characterized the time spent as a principal as "an almost endless series of encounters from the moment he [sic] arrives at school until the moment he leaves" (p. 88). It is this daily grind that makes the high school principalship so stressful. West et al. (2010) attribute this stress and pressure to the heightened accountability of the principalship. Participants referenced the pressure in the interviews but also displayed a certain resignation to the innate pressures and stresses associated with the role of the high school principal. People who can sustain and maintain the high school principalship must demonstrate the ability to handle the responsibility of making decisions that impact all types of stakeholders (sometimes at a moment's notice) all to create a learning community that meets the needs of the students, staff, and families within it (Sebastian et al., 2018; Tirozzi, 2001).

The contemporary principal must possess a specific skill set, have the ability to assess, prioritize, and handle various tasks, and communicate and implement a vision appropriately and effectively with a diverse set of stakeholders. As our nation's high schools become more diverse, districts must identify leaders of color to recruit and retain for the principalship (Perrone, 2022). Black women leaders not only possess this skill set but can execute these skills in a way that

builds stakeholder relationships and promotes student achievement. The women in this study understood the assignment of the high school principal and worked diligently in their respective high schools to create a learning environment focused on student achievement and preparation of the whole child for the next level. These women intentionally worked longer hours and attended various school events to ensure that their communities "saw" them at most of the events at the school. Reid and Creed (2021) found that principals spend time outside working hours to attend events and complete job duties, like the women in this study. They also found that while principals enjoy their roles, time consumption makes maintaining a positive work-life balance difficult.

In another finding related to my initial research question, I noted that **the participants shared images representing their perception of the high school principalship.** The images of the high school principalship shared by the participants appear to align with the available literature on the school executive, particularly in North Carolina. The image of the octopus as a high school principal correlates well with the North Carolina evaluation instrument, which includes the eight leadership standards of strategic leadership, managerial leadership, instructional leadership, human resource leadership, micropolitical leadership, cultural leadership, and external development leadership. Each standard is important to the effectiveness of the high school principal but also signifies the complexity of the principal role. High school principals must possess the skills and know when to employ each skill within the school and out in the community (Tirozzi, 2001). The octopus image with its tentacles going in all directions simulates the multi-interactional aspect of the principalship and the occasionally hectic nature of the day-to-day activities. Unsurprisingly, Holly, the youngest and novice principal, generated this image of the high school principalship.

The other images provide a more nuanced view of the high school principal's role. The image of the circus ringmaster and symphony conductor speaks to the strategic leadership of the high school principalship and how these women approached transformation and positive change in their schools. Each participant could point to their school report card and share improvements in student opportunities and visible successes during their principalships. From creating a vision and mission to meeting with PLCs, the high school principals in this study built and nurtured relationships with stakeholders to move their schools forward academically and instructionally. This image aligns with the leadership personas presented by Laura and Jenny: seasoned, methodical leaders who led and guided their staff and students through intentional and purposeful acts.

The image of the mayor connects to the micropolitical and external development areas of the high school principalship (Rousmaniere, 2013). Each respondent discussed the many interactions with various stakeholders internally (students, teachers, staff) and externally (parents, district staff, school board members, etc.). The high school principal must attend to the various stakeholder needs in the school, even when stakeholders have competing needs.

Research Question 2

In my second research question, I asked, "*How do participants perceive that race and gender influence their work as high school principals?*" First, I found that **participants reported encountering challenges that resulted from or were exacerbated by their identities as Black women.** The participants revealed an array of barriers and roadblocks, ranging from getting to the principalship to different interactions with the various stakeholders served in the role of the high school principal, including teachers, students, parents, board members, colleagues, etc. Often, participants wanted to act or behave in a certain way that was genuine in the given

situation, but they would adjust their behaviors to combat perceived stereotypes held by stakeholder groups. In any given situation, these Black women had to "weigh" the cost versus the benefits when engaging in discourse within their roles as high school principals.

When considering the experiences of these Black women leaders, the concept of intersectionality is particularly relevant. This concept holds that Black women may face discrimination and marginalization based on their membership in two disadvantaged groups (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1990). They may encounter sexism and gender-based discrimination in addition to racism and discrimination based on race. They may also experience microaggressions and other forms of discrimination and oppression based on their intersecting identities. These intersecting forms of discrimination can create unique challenges and barriers for Black women as they seek to navigate the workplace, politics, and society more broadly.

Similarly, the women in this study encountered various challenges ranging from attacks on their credibility, instances of prejudice, issues with politics, and the presence of White male privilege. The presence of these stressors in the workplace increased the complexity of the high school principalship. For example, they may have been excluded from leadership positions because of their gender and race or face stereotypes and biases that assume they are less competent because of their intersecting identities. Jenny stated "I missed out on a principalship just because district leadership felt that community wasn't 'ready' for a Black woman." Kelly was told to 'just sit and look pretty' by a colleague in a principal's meeting when discussing a managerial issue.

In the end, Black women principals like those in my study may unintentionally internalize the negative stereotypes that society can hold for them, and it fuels their belief that they must be "better" than average leaders. Woods-Giscombe et al. (2016) describe this as the

"superwoman" schema. This condition involves a perceived obligation to project strength, suppress emotions, resist feelings of vulnerability and dependence, succeed despite limited resources, and prioritize caregiving over self-care. The women in this study recognized this concept in themselves and accepted the notion that, as Black women, they were built for the role. As Jenny shared, "I have to do more because I do not have the space to make mistakes. Mistakes are attributed to my identity, not my humanity." When asked how they persevered, Holly said, "It's just what we do."

I also found that **faith and spirituality are a common component of the high school principalship for these participants.** This spiritual center affects and impacts the Black women's perspective on the high school principalship. Even though the principalship is difficult and stressful, these women persevered. As Tina and Jenny noted, "Being a high school principal is like mission work." As defined by Merriam-Webster, mission work is when an individual of faith crosses a culture to share her belief with others to influence others to their belief system. While these women were not actively "converting" students to their belief systems, their spiritual center created a mission within them to serve their students and school communities. Each of these women worked diligently each day, intent on helping students acknowledge, understand and pursue the opportunities available to them in the high school experience. Jenny concurred with the idea of the role of the high school principal as her mission. As she stated,

> Mission work is sharing the word of the gospel with other cultures. Well, let me tell you.
> A high school has a culture of its own. I crossed that threshold every day, determined to
> advocate for my students and let them know about the opportunities the world had for
> them … But to be clear, it was a sacrifice. I sacrificed my personal life, my family life
> because I was always working for my students.

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The idea of the high school principalship as mission work speaks to the type of servant leadership that these women exhibit. Tina shares,

> I always felt this spiritual connection. It was the best two years of my life. I was doing God's work every single day, so I never went to work. I went to serve. It was truly the most rewarding time of my educational career.

As they shared their experiences, it was clear that each woman felt a strong connection to the work and believed that their work was an act of service, serving a purpose greater than the actual job or the challenges it presented.

Throughout the interviews, these women could articulate the complex nature of the principalship while also stating a clarity of personal purpose and divine placement in the role. Each woman referenced their spiritual foundation in their placement in a high school principalship or the basis for their ability to deal with the challenges associated with the role. These findings are like several studies in the literature that discuss the spiritual foundation of Black women principals that my study's participants discussed. Lomotey (2019), for instance, shared that 23% of the studies on Black women principals include a spiritual component in their findings. Jean-Marie (2013) shares the importance of spirituality and creating a support system as coping mechanisms to help Black females pursue and persist as educational leaders.

Witherspoon and Taylor (2010) discussed the concept of religio-spirituality of principals and how it impacts their actions and beliefs. Religio-spirituality, as a concept, is a combination of religion and spirituality that is often associated with African diasporic religions and belief systems. Religio-spirituality, in the context of Black women principals, is often characterized by a holistic worldview that encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions

of existence. It recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings and emphasizes the importance of community, ancestral wisdom, and reverence for nature. The idea that the principalship was described as mission work by two participants reflects this view of the world and, subsequently, how these women viewed and executed the role of the principalship.

Approaching the principalship through religio-spirituality is also connected to social justice, liberation, and empowerment, as Black women have historically faced systemic oppression and discrimination (Collins & Bilge, 2016). It is this view that Holly references when discussing how Black women can develop strong relationships with all types of students. Religio-spirituality for Black women principals can also be deeply personal and individual, allowing for diverse spiritual practices, beliefs, and expressions. Each of the women in my study revealed their individual spiritual foundations in the interviews, perhaps reflecting that three of the five participants were preachers' kids.

In my next finding related to my second question, I discovered that **the participants reported needing mentoring and trusted thought partners to function effectively.** The theme of support came up with every participant, from the idea of the mentor to the need for a thought partner for beginning and seasoned high school principals. There is existing research concerning the importance of effective support for teachers and beginning principals. For instance, Peters (2012) concluded that it is not enough to put capable leaders in place; they must also be supported. However, the women in my study shared their perception that the support, mentorship, or coaching received was minimal, situational, or left room for improvement.

While the existing research is clear that mentors and sponsors are important to the success of educational administrators (Allen et al., 1995; Yirci & Kocabas, 2010), the question

remains as to what this support should look like. One area of support to "spread the wealth" would be to reduce the workload somehow. The high school principalship is isolating; the time demands and the multiple interactions do not create natural opportunities for teamwork and shared tasks. Savvy leaders employ a shared governance to attempt to share the load. Black women who attempt to create this type of environment may erroneously be seen as unable to meet the job demands. As "superwomen" (Woods-Giscombe et al., 2016), Black women may not share the load because they fear being perceived as incompetent or unable to handle the pressure of the role like their White and/or male colleagues. It is why Black women leaders may not feel safe asking for help or assistance.

Each woman in the study stressed the need for someone to strategize with, bounce ideas off, and share job frustrations. Because high school principals must engage with multiple stakeholders on any given day, they are exposed to and privy to varying levels of confidential information, with only some portions able to be shared with stakeholders at the appropriate time and level. Having that trusted confidante who understands the pressures and delicacies associated with the role is vital to building leaders (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). This trusted person is critical for high school principals, but even more so for the Black women in this role, who already operate in a marginalized environment.

The final and most intriguing finding related to my second research question was discovering that **most participants reported that their identity was sometimes an advantage in building relationships with stakeholders.** While each woman was keenly aware of the challenges that their identity presented, they could also describe the advantages associated with

their identity. For instance, at least two participants discussed a mothering aspect of their principal role, whether it was being treated like a mom or responding to students like a mother would respond to them. This surrogate mother aspect is a role that Black women can easily use as they execute the role of high school principal to make connections to students, particularly students of color. The existing research that discusses othermothering (e.g., Case, 1997) connects with this finding.

Being a Black woman can positively impact the role of the high school principal. Peters and Miles Nash (2021) assert that Black women in leadership have been taking what they know about themselves and their experiences to serve the communities they are dedicating to improving. The participants from the study overarchingly saw their identity as Black women as a plus for the students and staff they serve despite the challenges and concerns that others might present because of their identity as Black women leaders. They focused on student and staff relationships and creating a nurturing learning culture in their schools. Building relationships was critical to their leadership behaviors, which participants attributed to their identities as Black women. Lomotey (2019) asserted the importance of having Black leaders in schools with high minority populations for this reason. The Black female principals in this study saw themselves as possessing a strong ability to build relationships and attempted to create a strong culture to unite the school communities in which they served.

Implications

I began this study to illuminate the voices of Black women high school principals. I firmly believe that this group of leaders are our state and nation's best chance at creating positive learning communities that serve all students. As a former member of this group, I wanted to

deepen my knowledge base as I hope to blend my passion for children and capacity building to support school building leaders in a coaching role. As I reflected on my participants' experiences as well as my own, there are some things that I gleaned from this study and the research in the field.

First and foremost, we must acknowledge that while we have made advancements in our society in regard to dealing with racism and sexism, Black women are still marginalized in the workplace. Their double minority status renders their viewpoint virtually invisible not only in educational leadership, but in society. As a mentor and representative of this group of leaders, it is crucial that I and others like me actively work to dismantle the processes that contribute to the discrimination facing these valuable African American women leaders.

Black women principals have a lot to offer as high school leaders. Our lived experiences as nurturing, caring members who are marginalized in society inform the leadership characteristics that we portray in school buildings. The vantage point that we employ to serve and support the school communities can help stakeholders learn how to transform our schools into inclusive, supportive learning environments that serve all students. Prior research notes the importance of culturally relevant leadership in urban schools (Khalifa et al., 2016). While personal experiences alone will not ensure a successful leader, it serves as a springboard for developing the skills necessary to lead at the high school level.

Secondly, Black women need allies to support them as they pursue roles in leadership. As I listened to the stories of each participant who shared their pathway to the principalship, I was struck with the variation of experiences as well as the distance and disconnect between when each woman decided she wanted to be a principal and how long it took to get the opportunity. I was disheartened with the lack of support that the Black women in this study experienced when

pursuing the position of principal. While the work of Bailes and Guthery (2020) reveal findings of delays and denials associated with Black women's ascension to the principalship, it was difficult to hear the replication of these findings in the stories of my participants. District leaders must be intentional about implementing and maintaining a pipeline to recruit and retain Black women in their districts. Advocating for Black women must become a priority for all leaders to ensure that they get the opportunity to lead high schools.

Thirdly, it is time that the educational community recognizes that Black women can lead in all types of high schools. The participants in this study all led in urban settings with high minority enrollment or in rural communities where socioeconomically disadvantaged students represented most of the student population. While the research supports the success of same race leadership for same-race students (Jang & Alexander, 2022), it should not mean that Black women leaders should not get the opportunity to lead in high school positions typically held by White men.

Finally, it is important to remember the four assumptions associated with Black feminist thought when working with Black women principals. Their identities are inextricably linked, so it is difficult for them to see themselves as just Black or just female. Black women have some common lived experiences; however, each woman is unique and may not identify with the shared experience of oppression. Balancing the benefits of sharing similar experiences while valuing the unique lived experiences of Black women will be crucial to a successful coaching relationship for practicing high school principals.

Recommendations

There's still this challenge when people try to make the plight of women of color, Black women, visible. - Stella Nkomo

Recommendations for Practice

The number of female principals in our schools is growing each year. The percentage of female leaders has grown from 51 to 56% since 2011. While the percentage of African American principals in our nation's public schools still hovers around ten percent, Black females represent more than half of the African American principals. Schools need effective leaders to serve today's public schools, which serve increased numbers of students of color. School districts must intentionally create and maintain a diverse leadership pool to align with the diverse school populations they serve. To that end, school districts should expand and strengthen the support system for administrators to serve not only beginning principals but all principals. Institutions of higher learning must intentionally support administrators during their training in the development of networks.

To recruit and retain Black women leaders, one area of support districts can provide would be offering coaching or mentorship for educators of color. Having a trusted network to support Black women on the journey to the principalship will help more women stay the course to obtain a principalship. Bailes and Guthery (2020) assert that Black women are systemically delayed and denied principal promotions at a greater rate than their counterparts. So, ensuring that Black women are supported and nurtured as they await the opportunity to lead is critical in recruiting new female leaders of color.

Another area for districts to consider is providing leadership thought partners or cognitive coaching for new and experienced principals to prevent burnout and increase job satisfaction.

Cognitive coaching is typically used with teachers; however, the concept could also be used with building leaders. Knight (2009) asserts that coaching is the best way to translate research into practice. Cognitive coaches are trusted thought partners trained to engage in reflective dialogue to empower those with whom they are working to implement effective practices. A coach or thought partner familiar with the high school environment and who has served as a high school principal is a critical attribute. Having this person discuss and problem-solve the myriad challenges that high school principals face would make the role more manageable and reduce the stress associated with the many daily interactions that high school principals must manage.

Recommendations for Research

As I listened and learned about my participants' experiences, it was evident that a plethora of information could be learned from a large-scale national study of Black female high school principals. The study participants shared their experiences as high school principals and had many ideas on the role and how to be effective. One of the topics that arose during interviews was how each participant was concerned about the success of all students, particularly the Latino students who represented most of each school's minority population. While there is research that connects Black principal leadership to the increased achievement of Black students (Jang & Alexander, 2022; Lomotey, 2019) as well as Latino principal leadership to the increased achievement of Latino students (Egalite et al., 2015), I was not able to locate research on the possible impact of African American female leaders on Latino student achievement.

Another area of research that can be explored further is the need for effective support systems for high school principals. Participants expressed their desire for effective support through mentors, coaching, or collegial thought partners. Psencik (2019) cites principal coaching as an essential part of helping principals stay focused on the core work of instructional

improvement but acknowledges that professional development for principals is episodic and lacks coherence. The existing research is centered on mentors and support for beginning principals (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016; Bloom et al., 2003; Daresh, 1988). The participants in this study discussed not only the desire for continued support after Year 3 but also the need for that support to be differentiated similarly to teachers and for that support to be someone who has served as a building leader at the high school level.

Along the lines of support, there is a need for additional research on work-life balance for high school principals. Each participant was passionate about their work as a high school principal but was also clear about how much they had to sacrifice in their personal lives to be successful. While there is quite a bit of research concerning work-life balance and principal burnout for the principalship, the findings of this research study suggest a magnified imbalance for women of color.

Final Thoughts

Leadership is not about you; it's about investing in the growth of others. – Ken Blanchard

When I began my study, I believed Black women leaders were uniquely qualified to serve our communities as high school principals. I felt that way mainly because I possess a deeply personal perspective on the role of a high school principal and how best to create conditions for a highly engaged, student-focused learning environment that supports all learners. Engaging with my participants, listening to their voices, reflecting on my own experiences, and leaning into the existing research afforded me the opportunity to make meaning of my experience and connect the dots for myself as to why I believe that Black women are so well suited to prepare students for life after high school.

As I reflect on my own experiences as a high school principal, I must recognize the impact that mentors and respected supervisors had on my ascension to the role. I was fortunate to have leaders who acknowledged my leadership abilities and provided opportunities for me to lead as a teacher leader. From my second middle school principal I worked for as a teacher to the three principals I worked for before becoming a high school principal, each of those individuals directly affirmed my ability to lead and gave me opportunities to do so within my roles. Had I not had these experiences and support, I probably would not have pursued a principalship, much less a high school principalship. In addition, it would have taken much longer to get the opportunity to serve as a high school principal.

It also puts in perspective some of the challenges I experienced in my journey to the principalship and when I was working as a principal. While I do not feel that my ascension to the principalship was delayed, there were some principalships within my district that I was not considered for because of my identity as a Black woman. There were some systemic issues at work. District leadership felt that certain school communities would not support a principal of color. In these instances, my leadership abilities were not considered, only the package that they came in.

Listening to the stories of my participants reminded me of situations where my identity as a Black woman presented an issue for someone. Like some of my participants, I worked to defy some of the stereotypes associated with Black women. I rarely displayed anger or frustration when dealing with staff because I did not want to be written off as the "Angry Black Woman." I spoke with proper diction on the weekly school updates so that no one questioned my credibility as the principal. Sometimes it still was not enough. I remember a parent coming in to ask for an administrator, and when I came to the front desk, he told me that he wanted the White principal

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that does the school messages on Sunday. He openly shared that I did not talk like a Black person. I have always believed that these efforts were necessary for my success as a principal; after hearing the voices of other Black women, I wonder if we will ever feel safe enough in a space to be our authentic selves at all times.

This research study has also helped me to better understand the passion and purpose that I had as a high school principal. I felt a deep responsibility for my students and making sure that they had access to every opportunity possible to make sure they could be successful after high school. It is why I advocated for a one-to-one technology initiative and actively pursued the location of specialty magnet programs at my school site. That responsibility that many Black women feel to nurture and grow their communities is deep rooted in who we are as people and is directly connected to the spiritual center that we possess.

These personal reflections coupled with the experiences of this research study brings my thoughts full circle. Our society sees and treats Black women as the bottom of the heap. We are marginalized and experience instances of discrimination based on racial and gendered identity. Culturally speaking, Black women are conditioned early on to care for others, do what it takes to get things done, and bring everyone together. As a result of our generally lived experiences as Black (non-White) and female (non-male) double minorities, we approach the world from an oppressed lens, as the world at large has never allowed us to start from a prioritized vantage point. As a result, we learn to deal with life from behind the eight-ball. Because it is a part of our everyday lived existence, we have normalized this marginalized viewpoint and used it to our advantage to always see all sides of a situation to cope with our personal and professional lives. This is what the women in this study have embraced as Black women leaders. We bring this skill to the high school principal's chair and to the students we serve.

This skill is modeled for our students as we execute the role of the principal. We build the community so that all feel included. We stress the importance of excellence in ourselves and others because we recognize it in everyone, even when we know the outside world may miss it in some of the people we serve. We create opportunities for students so that they can figure out their life's purpose because we are living out our purpose, and we know how life-changing that can be for a person.

The women in this study who served as high school principals recognize the hard work associated with the role. They recognize how their identities as Black women positively and negatively impact their roles, and they choose to serve anyway, sometimes to the detriment of their personal lives. School districts interested in creating high schools with strong learning communities should recruit and retain Black female leaders to serve as high school principals by advocating and supporting their development and growth. Black women principals possess the fortitude and resilience needed to handle the challenges and complexities surrounding the complex, intricate institution we know as the high school. The rewards will far outweigh the investment.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview #1:

1. Please tell me about yourself and your career in education

2. How long have you been an administrator? How long/what level were you an AP?

3. What led to your desire to pursue administration?

4. Who influenced your decision to pursue administration?

5. Tell me about your career path to the principalship. What led to your decision to pursue a principalship? Did someone encourage you to pursue a principalship? If so, tell me about that experience or relationship.

6. What made you decide to become a high school principal?

7. Tell me about the school you serve. What are the demographics?

8. What is it like being a high school principal? Describe your experience fulfilling this role.

9. What does a typical day look like for you?

10. How do you identify priorities for your daily work?

11. How does your community respond to you as the high school principal?

12. How would you describe your principalship to someone?

NOTES:

Interview #2:

1. What successes have you experienced during this principalship? Can you tell me more about that?

2. What, if anything, has helped you be a more successful principal?

3. Who has influenced your success as a high school principal?

4. What is one thing that your district could provide you that would make your current principalship more successful?

5. What would you like to share with any district interested in supporting their principals more effectively?

6. What is the most difficult thing about being a HS principal?

7. What challenges have you encountered with Students/Parents/Staff specifically in the principalship? How do you handle these challenges?

8. What frustrates you about your role as a high school principal?

9. What is the most difficult thing about being a black female HS principal?

10. What advantages or disadvantages do you have as a black female principal?

11. How has being an AA female influenced your work as an HS principal?

12. Can you think of a situation where your race and/or gender affected a parent's interaction/response to you? Tell me more about that experience.

13. Can you think of a situation where your race and/or gender affected a supervisor's response to you? Tell me more about that experience.

14. Can you think of a situation where your race and/or gender affected a district staff/school board members response to you? Tell me more about that experience.

15. What do you think it means for the students in your building to have an African American female as their principal?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about being an African American female high school principal?