NEWSOME, TIFFANY A. Ed.D. Meeting the Career Development Needs of Black Women Aspiring to Become Principals. (2022)
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The career development needs of Black women who aspire to become principals are multi-dimensional. With the limited body of research on career development for African American women in school leadership, it is important to address how African American women can successfully navigate the unique experiences and challenges related to school leadership. While women have made much progress in leadership, the impact of intersectionality for black women means that they are subject to race and gender discrimination and held to higher standards. Consequently, Black women struggle to overcome such negative career mobility experiences. However, this study emphasizes mentorship as one aspect that is critical to meeting the career development needs of African American women who aspire to become principals.

The purpose of this action research practitioner inquiry qualitative study is to better understand the career needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. This study utilizes Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as a lens to understand and validate this phenomenon, especially when it comes to the lived experiences of African American women. I conducted two focus group interviews using a semi-structured research guide. One group consisted of six credentialed African American women who are current assistant principals, program facilitators, or other teacher leaders in the Agape School district. The other group consisted of seven current principals in the same district. All participants identified as current Black female educators with a master's or post-master's Certificate in School Administration. My data analysis process incorporated a four-step process outlined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006).

I found that both Black principals and Black aspiring women principals deeply desire support from the district, their peers, and other experienced principals. While mentorship is one component that Black women perceive will help them combat promotional delays, participants really need to feel safe, respected, and valued for the experiences that they bring to the K-12 environment. Without strong mentorship and professional development from other black principals, Black women will not feel adequately to assume the principalship.

MEETING THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF BLACK WOMEN

ASPIRING TO BECOME PRINCIPALS

by

Tiffany A. Newsome

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Approved by

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Dr. Katherine Cumings Mansfield
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing community of support—those who have encouraged me, nurtured me, and prayed for me while I was on this journey. To my amazing family and friends, I cannot thank you enough for all that you have sacrificed so that I could reach this point in my career journey. To my loving mother and my fearless grandmother who have been the epitome of strength, thank you for your support and prayers. Lastly, to the beautiful Black women like me who will read this work and continue the legacy, I salute you!

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Tiffany A. Newsome 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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Social injustice in the form of racism, sexism, ageism, and more has plagued the American education system just as it has plagued other areas of our society. Our school systems continue to reproduce racial and gender inequalities, and without strategic efforts to dismantle them, there is no real progress toward achieving equity. Currently, our schools lack diversity in school leadership, and there is a significant need for more women of color in leadership. In particular, there are fewer Black women who have obtained and been successful in leadership within the public school system. Moreover, when we compare their experiences to those of their white counterparts, the opportunity gap continues to grow exponentially.

While some Black women are fortunate enough to become school administrators, their levels of success and longevity in the position vary. Women may enter school administration with the belief that they will be seen as instructional leaders who impact students, but instruction is often not viewed "as the main purpose of their position" (Robinson, 2015). Instead, they focus on responding to how others perceive them in their leadership role. According to Calderone et al. (2020), a recent study that unpacks women's thoughts on access to the superintendency, there are "substantive barriers" like gender bias, professional demands, outstanding family obligations, and professional gatekeeping that have continued to keep women from reaching their career aspirations in school leadership (p. 3). Professional gatekeeping, for example, impacts women through processes that are intentionally designed to keep men in positions of power and leadership. In fact, Calderone et al. (2020) purport professional gatekeeping as a history of "legislative steps, board maneuverings, and credentialing challenges that all serve to undermine access and entry for women and people of color" (p. 4). As a result, women of color are least likely to successfully obtain and sustain their roles as school leaders. Without adequate

transformation in current selection processes and strong initiatives to support women within this sector of education, male-dominated leadership will continue to be perpetuated within our school districts (Calderone et al., 2020). As a Black woman who currently holds a position as a school principal, this reality troubles me.

African American women who work in K-12 schools face unique challenges that are associated with their identity and positionality within various social and political contexts. They are discriminated against based on the intersectionality of race, class, age, gender, etc., which impacts them both inside and outside the work environment (Jean-Marie et al., 2016; Weiner et al., 2019). Consequently, the discrimination that African American women leaders face can often lead to internal conflict where they choose to dedicate themselves to certain parts of their identity without affiliating themselves with other parts (Roane & Newcomb, 2013). While I am deeply perplexed by the notion that racial inequality hinders Black women from favorable opportunities in our education system, I am even more disturbed by the additional implications of gender inequality. According to Roane and Newcomb (2013), Black women not only face discrimination when they have to compete against their white counterparts for job opportunities, but they also "face even more discrimination than Black men since their gender and race may evoke negative responses from employers" (p. 3). As a result of this gender preference, Black women face double jeopardy and may consequently lose job opportunities to Black men. My own experiences as an educator have compelled me to reflect on my identity as a Black woman in order to better understand the complexities of my leadership journey. Given my passion for and pursuit of equal rights and opportunities for Black women, some might consider me to be a Black feminist.

The intersectionality and positionality of being a Black woman in America is not an identity to be coveted. Regardless of their education, experience, and aspirations to advance in school leadership, the complexity of their identity as Black women in school leadership is layered with challenges that leave them feeling deflated, silenced, and devalued to the point where they question their ability to significantly impact the field of education if at all (Weiner et al., 2019). Women in school administration have felt as though they are "constantly fighting a losing battle," in which the pressures to perform according to the dominant perceptions of their role outweigh their personal love and passion for instruction (Robinson, 2016). Additionally, African American women are oppressed by a system in which they struggle for visibility and equality, which makes these women seem inferior. However, this phenomenon is nothing new as inferior perceptions of leaders of color are prevalent in schools throughout the United States (Roane & Newcomb, 2013). As a result of these negative experiences, schools lack diversity in leadership, and African American women are less likely to advance in obtaining principalships in education. These inequalities not only impact diversity in public schools because school leadership may not adequately reflect the student population: they also affect how African American women perceive themselves within their profession.

When I reflect on my background in education, I have come to realize how deeply these experiences have resonated with me and impacted my perception of how African American women are valued in the education field. I have heard the saying that "education is the great equalizer," but when I became an educator, I questioned this statement. While I believe that education is a powerful tool, I have questioned the implications of who it benefits most. African American women school leaders have been marginalized. I have seen Black women obtain degrees from the best universities in the world, yet they continue to be treated as though they are

subordinate to other groups. This observation can lead us to wonder, will African Americans ever be able to do enough to be treated fairly and access the same opportunities as their competitors, particularly their White counterparts? As a Black woman who has continued my pursuit of education and leadership through my career in school administration, I question whether my degrees and various experiences are adequate to be recognized by potential employers who could contribute to my career advancement.

My research will explore the experiences of African American women who aspire to become principals who, like me, have questions that need to be answered. This research acknowledges that their unique needs matter and brings about a call to action for school districts—particularly those who aim to increase diversity and develop programs that are designed to support women in their school leadership journey. Without adequate research on the career development needs of African American women who aspire to become school leaders, I fear that public schools will continue to lack diversity in school leadership and never acknowledge their role in combating systemic oppression. Without proper assessment and exploration of the current supports that exist for these women, organizations run the risk of never adequately addressing the specific needs of African American women who work in the school systems and who aspire to become principals. Additionally, African American women, like myself, who are already in school leadership may not last long, which could also lessen the much-needed diversity amongst school leaders.

Statement of the Problem

According to Calderone et al. (2020), African American women in school leadership struggle to obtain and sustain positions in school leadership. Some of their challenge is rooted in years of vying for visibility and acknowledgment, but it is also rooted in their unique leadership

experiences linked to aspects of family, spirituality, and culture. All three components significantly impact their lives, especially when it comes to juggling the demands of each while also attempting to demonstrate balance. The management of such tasks do not come easy and require great sacrifice. According to Roane and Newcomb (2013), "examining the reflections and experiences" of African American women who are currently in the education field raises awareness of and gives voice to their work, and it "allows them to share strategies of success for those who will follow" (p. 2). On the one hand, the study suggests that success for African American women impacts the level of success for those who are looking to follow in their footsteps. On the other hand, it also suggests that other Black women will greatly suffer when there is not enough examination and reflection on Black women experiences. This is particularly problematic in a world where the field of school leadership, more specifically the principalship, is dominated by white male counterparts (Roane & Newcomb, 2013). Preference is given to those in the dominant groups in society, while other groups stay marginalized and fight for recognition. For example, African American women experiences that are uncovered in the Lomotey (2019) study support the viewpoint that these powerful voices have been muted for far too long; therefore, they need to be deconstructed in a way that leads to further insight into what Black women principals' proteges may need to combat systemic practices of racial and gender inequity.

An important component of career development is mentorship. Mentorship for principals can be described in various ways (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020); however, the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender has a significant impact on the mentor-mentee relationship (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; A. L. Peters, 2011; Simon et al., 2008; Tillman, 2009). In particular, it impacts what the mentor and the mentee can gain from each other in the mutual

relationship. Consequently, the specific support needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship are variable and context dependent. Thus, exploring intersectionality—particularly issues related to the impact of race, gender, age, and class—are important for understanding how issues "interact to maintain the oppression of Black women and many groups" (Lomotey, 2019, p. 337). Thus, further research is needed to identify these needs and develop adequate programming to support African American women aspiring to become principals.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research is to understand the needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. With the limited body of research on career development for African American women in school leadership, it is important to address how African American women can successfully navigate the unique experiences and challenges related to school leadership. As a result of understanding their needs, districts have an opportunity to better prepare African American women for the principalship and adequately support them throughout their tenure. However, the development of such programs cannot be a matter of speculation of what districts think African American aspiring principals need. Rather, districts should develop programs for African American women who aspire to become principals based on their defined needs and subsequently implement strategies that adequately address them. This study will support school districts in their discovery as they learn to combat discriminatory practices that perpetuate oppression and yield to exciting new perspectives that have once been ignored.

This study will be conducted in three phases. The first phase of this study aims to better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of aspiring Black women principals as they

compare to the lived experiences of Black women who are currently serving as principals. Thus, data must be collected to understand the current situation before moving toward action to create change based on participants' needs. The following questions guide the development of this study:

1. What is the school district currently doing to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

2. What are the perspectives of Black women aspiring to the principalship concerning the career supports they are receiving and/or need to move forward in their careers?

3. What are the perspectives of Black women currently serving as principals concerning the career supports they received and/or needed to receive to move forward in their careers?

4. What else can the school district do to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

Before giving an overview of the other phases of the action research project, I give additional context that grounds the purpose and focus of this study.

Background Context

African American women yearn for emancipation from social and political oppression in the school system. Black women's experiences in education have been ignored, which has perpetuated a cycle of systemic oppression. This, along with the need for more research, is cited by many scholars (Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Roane & Newcomb, 2013; Robinson, 2015). While some research exists on the topic, further exploration of Black Women's experiences with particular insights into their unique challenges and struggles is important. The limited research that is recognized in the education field acknowledges the oppression that Black

women face, especially when intersectionality is considered (Lomotey, 2019). For example, Weiner et al. (2019) document the preparation experiences of 10 Black female school leaders and discusses the connection between their experience with racial and gender discrimination and their access to school administration roles. This research reinforces that African American principals are greatly impacted by what they experience in the school environment and how they experience it. Weiner et al. (2019) found that Black women felt isolated from others because of the microaggressions and microinvalidations they experienced.

Feeling isolated is just one indicator that African American women continue to be marginalized in education. African American women are also greatly impacted by the "identity blind" approaches that preparation programs continue to uphold without shifting their practices to more diversity and inclusion (Weiner et al., 2019, p. 19). Understanding how Black women experience and perceive their intersectionality is significant to understanding their identity in school leadership. This is also key to understanding their aspirations for becoming principals. African American women's experiences are also essential for learning what they need to stay in the role once they obtain it. For example, Robinson's (2015) exploratory study revealed that women went into leadership roles to make an instructional impact, yet they left because they were tired of being "superwoman" and needed to be liberated from what others perceived their role to be, opposed to what the actual roles and responsibilities were (p. 2). Such research suggests that while African American women may enter school leadership with a passion for instruction, they exit the role when they are faced with unrealistic expectations.

Roane and Newcomb (2013) sought to understand how African American women principals negotiated their intersectionality amid the historical and inferior perceptions of their leadership as "followers under the tutelage of White principals" (p. 2). Under this notion, African

American women who aspire to become principals are less likely to be deemed as significant contributors to the field of education compared to their white counterparts. However, Lomotey's (2019) research on Black women principals serves as a catalyst for change regarding the perspectives and experiences that are known about women in school leadership. More specifically, his work revealed that a "culturally responsive orientation" enables principals (specifically Black principals) to make a difference in success for Black students (p. 336). This study is significant because it offers a counter-narrative to the deficit thinking surrounding African American women in school leadership and suggests that their leadership is highly likely to have a positive impact on Black children.

In the context of K-12 education, students benefit from seeing school leaders with whom they can identify; however, children are less likely to see African American women in school leadership if they are unsuccessful with obtaining principalships and advancing in their career. An emerging body of research (Jean-Marie, 2013; Roane & Newcomb, 2013) suggests that African American women heavily rely on their faith and spirituality to help them "act as successful leaders" or "guide them through difficult moments," which suggests that they have specific needs that need to be met to overcome barriers and limitations that come with the demands of the principalship. Jean-Marie (2013) also indicates that Black women are likely to face negative attitudes concerning their success as principals, which are unique to their gender, race, and age. These negative perceptions are likely challenging for women and could lead them to a struggle with their intersectionality. For example, young black women who aspire to become principals, especially, must work hard to fight against social norms because their youth is perceived to be a detriment instead of an asset. Some black women are presumed unfit for leadership because they lack the amount of experience that other women have in their field.

These women are influenced by the "triple jeopardy" of the intersectionality of being young, black, and female, which has multiple meanings and levels of impact, given their various experiences with obtaining the principalship (Sherman et al., 2008).

Unpacking these issues of intersectionality and positionality within African American women's experiences in schools is critically important to securing increasing diversity within the school system. Additionally, research on their journeys and experiences is essential to preparing aspiring school leaders to make a positive impact on student success. Lomotey (2019) suggests that previous research findings for Black women in leadership, previous findings for Black children, and the impact of race, gender, age, and class, are characteristics that may be of relevance for the preparation of and professional development for Black women principals. Research suggests (e.g., Craig, 2014; Haynes, 2016; Hobson-Horton, 2000; Leathers, 2011; J. R. Lewis, 2014; Reed, 2012) that Black women in principal roles must behave a certain way in order to be successful. On the one hand, women may feel pressured to shift from part of their identity to reconcile the part that makes them most noticeable. Jones and Shorter-Golden (2003) assert that African American women shift into historically suppressed roles to survive and appease others. For example, they change their hair, their use of the English language, and their facial expressions to fit a certain mold (Echols, 2006). Although African American women shift to survive, the pressure of conforming to a specific way of being brings about a certain degree of inauthenticity.

According to Jean-Marie (2013), "ongoing support (mentoring) and professional development can help cultivate their leadership capacity and prepare them to confront the biases they face" (p. 636) that often force them to shift from their true identity and conform to that of others. Therefore, the exploration of the intersectionality of race, gender, and age is essential to

preparing African American women to become principals. However, efforts to support and mentor aspiring African American women school leaders cannot be a matter of speculation; rather, their needs must be assessed and coupled with a strategic plan for addressing the inequities that are reinforced within the public school system.

Description of Methods

As previously stated, I plan to conduct this action research in three phases. Although I speak of my research in phases, I draw from Mertler's (2020) four-stage procedure of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting to consider how my research can be broken down into specific steps. As can be gleaned by the earlier sections on purpose and research questions, phase one will consist of conducting a needs assessment to understand what African American women holding an MSA in one school district believe they need to prepare and be selected for a successful principalship experience. I will conduct interviews with African American women with an MSA who aspire to the principalship. This includes teachers, program leaders, and current Assistant Principals. I will also interview African American women who are currently serving as principals to gain additional insights on career development needs and solutions. Other data collection methods will include focus groups and semi-structured guided interviews.

In phase two of this study, I will utilize the components of phase 1 to design a mentoring program based on the findings of the needs assessment and further reflection on the research around best practices. I will document the process of program development, and I will also use member-checking to validate my findings and ensure that the components of the program match what African American women share that they need. In the third phase of the study, I will develop a strategic plan that the district can use for program implementation.

Conceptual Framework

This study will utilize Black Feminist Thought, which is a theory that "centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender," especially when it comes to the lived experiences of African American women (Grant, 2012). I considered using Critical Race Theory, which explores racism as the structural norm. However, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a better approach for gaining insight from Black women's experiences and using those experiences to combat the very issues of discrimination and oppression. This work is anti-racist and anti-oppressive in nature. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggests seven themes that are relevant to BFT:

1) Analyzing Black Women's Work and Labor. This theme focuses on the dehumanizing nature of how Black women are treated in the workplace, and particularly their experiences with navigating their intersectionality. Not only are they dehumanized, but many are treated as objects that are both exploited and constrained, even within the labor market settings. Moreover, Collins (2000) points out that Black women's labor is exploited even within their family networks (p. 46).

2) Analyzing Power and Black Womanhood. This theme focuses on challenging the controlling images of Black women through objectification as a form of exploitation. For example, Black women are often portrayed as "stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas" to justify their oppression (p. 69).

3) The Power of Self-Definition. That is, understanding how women resist what Collins (2000) calls the "mask of behavioral conformity" (p. 97) that is imposed on Black women. Black women combat the oppressive nature of societal norms and use it to assert their self-identity. For example, they deflect the "psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their

dignity" (p. 97), and even in the attempts to define them as inferior, they work to retain their self-worth.

4) The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood. This theme focuses on how Black women's sexuality as silent, void, which is reflected through the "lack of access to positions of power in U.S. social institutions" (p. 123). Black women struggle to be recognized in these contexts. Moreover, their sexuality is persistently silent in the literature as it is in other social contexts. If Black women experiences are included, they are often presented as part of the narrative on Black men (Collins, 2000). Thus, it serves as an act to further silence the Black women's identity and perspective from the overall social narrative.

5) Black Women and Their Love Relationships. This theme explores the exploitation of Black women as having erotic and oversexualized nature to assert power. Essentially, the exploitation of African American women in social institutions are depicted in their experiences with "pornography, prostitution, and rape" (p. 150). This suggests a troubling perspective about Black women in society. Black women challenge this degradation, basing this rejection on a critique of Eurocentric heterosexism.

6) Black Women and Their Motherhood. This theme explores Black women's work to demystify traditional motherhood that is rooted in White, middle-class experiences. Collins (2000) recognizes that Black women's experiences with motherhood are quite different from those depicted in society. While, Black motherhood is rooted in themes of power, sacrifice, and unconditional love, Black women challenge this seemingly glorified position by combating the notion that they have to continue to sacrifice their own personal needs in order to be seen as important.

7) Rethinking Black Women's Activism. This explores the private and public spheres of Black women's activism. Most mentions and definitions of Black women activism is focused on "public, official, visible political activity"; however, Collins (2000) asserts that the "unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important" (p. 202). Therefore, rethinking the approach to political activism for Black women is reflected in this theme.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus on the two themes: 1) Black Women's Work and Labor and 2) The Power of Self-Definition. The first theme of analyzing Black women's work and labor is important to this study because I aim to explore the experiences of Black women as workers in the context of K-12 education. Additionally, I seek to understand the ways in which Black women may deal with exploitation of their labor as they advance in their careers. The second theme of exploring the power of self-definition is emphasized most in my selection of research methods as it explores how Black women respond to societal definitions of their identity. Furthermore, the research methods are most appropriate for understanding how aspiring Black women principals respond to societal pressures to conform to oppressive roles. I do not center the study in the other themes because they do not pinpoint the specific focus of this research. While the other themes are relevant, I do not aim to focus on Black women's sexuality, womanhood, or love relationships. In Chapter III, I expand this discussion to include how I will use BFT in my data analysis procedures.

Significance of the Study

Without career development programs that feature strong mentorship and support for current and aspiring women in school leadership, African American women are more likely to become stagnant in the education field or leave their leadership role (i.e., principalship)

altogether to preserve their health, family, and a different means of living. District-level programs that have strong mentorship components for African American women in school leadership may be an effective way to see more longevity and diversity in K-12 schools. Designing a model mentorship program for implementation in school districts can lead to ingenuity and reconceptualization of leadership roles for African American women in Pre-K-12 education. As a result, many women who aspire to move up in leadership would not only feel more confident in their ability to pursue principalships, but they would also become unapologetic about embracing their intersectionality within the role. When this happens, there will be major breakthroughs in diversity and inclusion for our school systems. My study will add to existing research on the lived experiences of African American women, but it will also extend the research conversation on how districts can better understand and support the needs of aspiring African American women who want to become principals.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter II synthesizes the literature relating to African American women in school leadership, mentor-mentee relationships, and preparation and coaching for aspiring leaders. Chapter III presents the action research design, describes the site where the research is proposed to take place and explains participant selection. In addition, the data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations will also be presented in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, I share my findings and elaborate on eight themes that emerged from participant responses. Finally, in Chapter V, I discuss the implications for practice and professional development for the district, aspiring principals, and current principals. I also make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter (a) reviews existing literature relating to the advancement of women in leadership, African American women in school leadership, and mentorship; (b) describes the factors contributing to a continued lack of women, more specifically Black women, acquiring senior level positions compared to their male counterparts; (c) presents and describes the intersectionality of race, gender, and spirituality in relation to Black women's lived experiences within the workplace (d) explores different approaches to mentorship as a strategy for supporting Black female aspiring women in school leadership.

These topics provide background for this study pertaining to Black women aspiring to become principals in that it establishes the foundation for understanding the challenges that African American women face in pursuing the principalship. By understanding the literature centered on the lived experiences of Black women in school leadership and types of mentorships for African American women in education, this research will provide a deeper understanding of the career needs of those seeking to obtain the principalship. Although the literature describes some advancement for women in leadership, this study focuses on Black women experiences because they are often overlooked for positions in school leadership. Moreover, the literature depicts barriers for other people of color (including black men), yet the greatest disparity stems from the discrimination of women based on the intersectionality of race and gender.

Women's Advancement in Leadership

Within the last 5 years, women have made much progress in leadership, especially in the areas of business and politics. For example, in 2017, 6.4% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies were women (McGregor, 2017). As a result of women advancing to senior-level positions specifically, they can now see themselves in positions of power in other leadership areas, like

education. Women can also see themselves as influential leaders who are able to impact other women's lives (Kraft et al., 2021). Mentorship is one way that women influence other women to advance in their careers. In fact, Kraft et al. (2021) suggest that a woman's success in leadership is often dictated by the way that she models for and mentors other women so that they are better positioned to navigate their own career paths to leadership. National attention has been placed on increasing diversity within the education field, specifically when it comes to female school leaders. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) asserts that, within the last half-century, women have surpassed men in educational achievement by earning 60% of all undergraduate degrees and 60% of all master's degrees (NCES, 2016). Unfortunately, securing advanced degrees in the field does not automatically equate to women having the access that they need to obtain school leadership positions. While research from Bailes and Guthery (2020) indicates that the percentage of female principals over time has doubled from 25% to 52% over the past 3 decades, this type of advancement in women's careers often came when they had spent a significantly long time in the classroom. However, the length of time that women have had to wait to be promoted to school leaders has had serious implications for students.

Delayed Promotions with Gender and Race Gaps

The ever-changing, ever-increasing demographics of student populations within our schools have revealed the need for increased diversity (specifically involving women). Literature on principal promotions (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Simmons, 2007) reveals a disconnect between patterns of promotion for men and women and exposes how women (and people of color) have taught longer than men before they were promoted. These differences in promotion are inequitable and continue to unveil the transformation needed to close the gender gap that exists in education. Even when women are "sufficiently qualified for advancement," research has

shown that no number of advanced degrees has been able to combat the discrimination that they face when trying to advance in their careers (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Therefore, gender gaps in promotions for women reveal the need for intentional diversity work in education to overcome the status quo, improve negative trends, and ultimately meet the specific needs of growing student populations in our schools. Kim and Cryss Brunner's (2009) study asserts that not only are there differences between how women and men approach their careers, but their relation to the job differs significantly. Whereas men can view teaching as a stepping stone to obtaining higher positions in administration, women value the instructional component of teaching and learning over the need to take advantage of network working opportunities (Kim & Cryss Brunner, 2009).

Gender gaps in leadership promotion have also had implications for aspiring principals in the field. These implications can be seen even in the jobs that men and women pursue before the principalship. For example, middle and high school male teachers who take coaching positions had leverage and access to administrative positions at the next level and were given superintendencies (Kim & Cryss Brunner, 2009). These types of positions seem to loosely define a track to senior-level positions. That is, men are given preference for senior-level roles even when they take nontraditional routes (e.g., middle or high school coaches). In contrast, leadership tracks for women place a demand on having a traditional preparatory role (e.g., teacher) before they are considered for a senior-level position. Moreover, when it comes to positions like the superintendency, women, especially women who have elementary teaching experience, "lack opportunities to participate in this, so called, normal track to senior level positions" like men have (Kim & Cryss Brunner, 2009, p. 76). Consequentially, career mobility for aspiring women administrators is more difficult the higher the position in administration. This is reflected in the

career mobility rates for aspiring women superintendents. Additionally, there have been slower rates for aspiring women superintendents than for aspiring women principals or central office administrators (Kim & Cryss Brunner, 2009). In other words, the higher a woman aspires to advance in their career, the more delay in promotions they experience. Consequently, delayed promotions for women to the most senior-level roles suggest that women are being contained or confined to lower-level positions. This not only contributes to the gender gap between men and women in leadership roles in education, but it also reflects the oppressive nature of the processes for career advancement for women.

The outcomes for assistant principals are like that of principals since they are the pool of candidates from which new leaders are selected to advance in school leadership (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Even when they are promoted to principalships, they are not set up to experience success, especially if they are women. For example, first-time principals are likely to be promoted in schools where there is high poverty and low performance (Bastian & Henry, 2015). For inexperienced principals, this pathway to the principalship can be daunting, especially when better-experienced principals may be given preference to fewer challenging schools. This is not to say that first-time principals cannot lead well in low-performing schools. In fact, studies have shown significant impacts on student achievement for individuals who become principals in the same school where they have been a teacher or assistant principal (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Whether women and people of color are homegrown administrators or not, the probability of promotion to a principalship where they can positively impact student achievement is small. Thus, race and gender matter for promotion. Research from Bailes and Guthery (2020) concluded two problematic findings: (1) men are given preference for promotion over women assistant principals, and (2) White assistant principals are promoted over Black assistant

principals in shorter amounts of time. Inequities based on gender and race remain salient to the study of career development and advancement.

Differences in Styles of Leadership

The difference in leadership and managerial styles for women and men is another key factor for leadership advancement for women. Researchers agree that women in leadership roles are notorious for having dual commitments to both their family and career, and this multifaceted approach to leadership sets them apart from their male counterparts (Calderone et al., 2020; Robinson, 2015; Weiner et al., 2019). However, societal views on gender roles make it difficult to acknowledge this difference as a strength for women in leadership. Consequently, women are scrutinized in leadership because of their race and gender instead of being judged by their true interactions with those whom they lead. Research on racial and gender discrimination from Weiner et al. (2019) indicates the well-documented implications of who has access to leadership opportunities and what supports they receive once they obtain a leadership position. More emphasis is placed on a leader's physical attributes than their true leadership qualities. Despite women's accomplishments, Lyness and Grotto (2019) reveal statistics related to how "women remain underrepresented in elite leadership in both the private and public sectors in the United States" (p. 228). Black women remain underrepresented in school administration, even despite their efforts to conform to mainstream leadership styles (Alston, 2005; Weiner et al., 2019). Therefore, the underrepresentation of Black females in leadership is indicative that school leadership remains a White endeavor. Unfortunately, there is not much change in gender outcomes for school leadership when it comes to career preparation either. Despite social justice efforts to apply an equity lens to administration preparation programs and increase diversity of

perspectives, the lived experiences of school leaders like those noted in Simmons (2007) indicate that we are far from improving equitable outcomes for women in education administration.

Minimal Advancement to Senior Positions

Women have come a long way in securing more leadership positions than in the past. It is important to note that while they have obtained leadership positions, opportunities for leadership are least likely to be senior-level positions. Almost half (44.3%) of the employees in the S&P 500 companies are women, but statistics from Lyness and Grotto (2019) make it difficult to conclude whether the gender gap in leadership is closing between women and men. Recent studies from Kraft et al. (2021) show that historical trends in women's underrepresentation continue to be perpetuated in government, non-profits, and in education. These trends are indicative of barriers to career progress at various levels in their organizations. For example, recent literature from Calderone et al. (2020) discusses the small increase in women obtaining the superintendency from 9% to 11% over the span of two decades from 1910 to 1930; yet it unveils the inconsistent changes in the number of women entering the superintendency up to the 20th century. As a result of these inconsistent periods of growth, researchers have turned to an exploration of perceptions of barriers to entry for women in leadership. The intersectionality of race and gender within public school administration remains a concern as women face additional barriers to being promoted to the highest-ranking positions (Simmons, 2007). Therefore, researchers have begun to identify other barriers outside gender and race to fortify their arguments on access disparities and establish a call to action in school administration in K-12 schools.

Barriers for Women in School Leadership

Women in leadership roles are often impacted by high work-life demands, which make it difficult for them to have a healthy work-life balance. They are expected to work under high work pressure while also balancing additional roles like being a wife, mother, and homemaker (Ahmed & Ambreen, 2021). This conflict with family obligations causes internal conflict for women who pursue senior-level positions in administration. They are expected to choose between their personal life and their professional life. Eventually, the desire to have a work-life balance becomes too much, and thus, women decide to leave their jobs and regain their sense of flexibility and control (Ahmed & Ambreen, 2021). Some women have chosen to leave their profession (Robinson, 2015), while other women have chosen to combat their feelings of rejection from lived experiences (i.e., rejection of their publications submitted to mainstream journals and student resistance to their social justice efforts in the classroom) with grit and resilience (Simmons, 2007). These experiences represent typical gatekeeping efforts that are designed to perpetuate systemic oppression.

Professional gatekeeping is another strategy that has been used to keep men in power over women. With male-dominated school boards and strategic efforts to undermine women's credentials in education, the journey for women in leadership becomes complicated. Intentional efforts include the purposeful selection of men on hiring committees so that other men continue to stay in high positions of leadership (Calderone et al., 2020). There have also been major discrepancies in the professional leaps that men and women have taken. Whereas men have been able to move from the principalship to the superintendency without much vetting, women have been halted at lower-level positions in their career pathways because of deficit thinking concerning their knowledge of the field (Calderone et al., 2020; Robinson, 2016). Other

inhibitors characterized by professional gatekeeping include structural barriers surrounding when women decide to pursue their career in administration. Research from Robinson (2015) indicated that women had pure motives for entering the superintendency: "they believed they could make a difference for students" (p. 3). Their motivations for pursuing higher-ranked leadership positions came at the expense of their much more than they had anticipated. On the other hand, men were much more likely to see themselves as "leadership material" nearly 10 years earlier than women (Calderone et al., 2020). When it comes to evaluating their "why" for pursuing leadership, women are at a disadvantage. This is mainly due to systemic structures that are designed to keep them in areas focused on curriculum and out of areas that focus on human resources and fiscal responsibilities, which are often given to male superintendents (Calderone et al., 2020; Robinson, 2015). The literature surrounding women in leadership is complicated, yet it reveals a greater need for change in dismantling discriminatory practices in the educational field.

African American Women in School Leadership

African American women have unique experiences in school leadership that are often hidden within the broad categories of research on women minorities as a whole, yet their voices yearn for emancipation from social and political oppression. The undervaluing of Black women's experiences has been caught in the perpetual cycle of systemic oppression for years. Many scholars (Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Roane & Newcomb, 2013; Robinson, 2015) agree that there is a dearth of research on Black women in K-12 education. However, the undervaluing of Black women's experiences has also been impacted by the field of education itself and its history. For example, Jean-Marie et al.'s (2016) study shows how a one-size fits all approach seems to be the model that has continued to influence educational administration programs and how they prepare students for the field. That is, administration programs have used

the same approach to prepare leaders, without considering diverse needs. When preparatory programs use this type of model and approach to preparing school leaders, Black women are put at a disadvantage in the field and their unique experiences (including a diverse perspective on challenges and barriers) may often be overlooked. According to the Weiner et al. (2019) study, "some difficulty in moving educational administration programs to be more inclusive" of diverse perspectives (like African American women perspectives in school leadership) may stem from the field's history, which has typically ignored any perspective that deviates from the standard White male leadership perspective (p. 7). Thus, the historical context of educational administration programs shapes the basis for what we see happening in the field.

Importantly, a study from J. A. Lewis and Neville (2015) supports the idea that research on African American women is moving toward a more intersectional perspective, borrowing on Cole's (2009) idea of "interlocking identities that simultaneously influence a person's life experiences" (as cited in J. A. Lewis & Neville, 2015, p. 290). Though this may mean that literature on race and gender discrimination against African American women exists, it does not mean that the literature is sufficient. There is a great need for further exploration of and insight into the challenges and successes associated with how Black women experience their school leadership roles. The limited existing research acknowledges that "Black women principals continue to be oppressed, at least by race and gender" (Lomotey, 2019, p. 337). White males with dominant leadership styles have been preferred over women (especially African American women) who exhibit leadership traits that are more feminine, meaning not as authoritative. This means that insights from "the unique experiences of women of color are often overlooked and/or undertheorized" in practice and in the research (J. A. Lewis & Neville, 2015, p. 290).

Although there is some research on African American women school leaders, there are many challenges or barriers to recognizing the value of their experiences and their contributions to the field of education. One major barrier to proper recognition is found in Tillman's (2004) study of African American principals in pre-K-12 education, which raises concerns surrounding how research on African American women is often generalized under a broad category of "women and minorities" (p. 126). Her research suggests that African American women in school leadership are not only underrecognized but many of their unique stories are hidden behind mainstream research on women as a whole. When research is done this way, it carries the dangerous assumption that all women experience school leadership in the same way. However, Jean-Marie's (2013) research study revealed that "African American female principals are likely to face a unique set of challenges associated with gender, race, and negative attitudes about age in achieving success as principals" (p. 634). This assertion reinforces Tillman's (2004) concerns that "research rarely presents detailed portraits of the lives, work, vision, and impact of African American female principals on the school community and student achievement or discriminatory practices that affect their work" (p. 126).

Connecting Race, Gender, and Discrimination With Opportunity Gaps

Based on the literature concerning race, gender, and discrimination in the United States, Black women have unique experiences because they do not fit the stereotypical white male approach that is preferred in school leadership. Researchers agree that stereotypical female traits are communal (i.e., nurturing), yet they conflict with masculine leadership, which is a directive approach that is "strong, decisive, and in charge" (Yep & Chrispeels, 2004, p. 164; see also Weiner et al., 2019). Thus, when we consider how Black female school leaders are stereotyped, their positionality puts them in a jeopardizing position. That is, they either must "behave aligned

with leadership expectations and break gender norms, or they can act in ways aligned with gender stereotypes and break leadership norms" (Weiner et al., 2019, p. 3). Regardless of which normative role they break, they are likely to experience hardship. Therefore, understanding how Black women navigate the intersectionality of their race and gender is significant for understanding how they are likely to operate as school leaders. Moreover, understanding their experiences with defying the odds against "double oppression or double jeopardy" (if they are successfully able to do so) is central to exploring ways to support Black women who aspire to be or are currently serving in school leadership roles.

Research on career mobility for Black principals from Berry and Reardon (2021) purports that despite their ability and academic credentials, Black teachers who aspire to be administrators are greatly hindered in their efforts to advance in their careers. That is, their leadership pathways vary regardless of how much planning and preparation they attempt. Consequently, Black principals are deprived of administrative opportunities even before they have the opportunity to prove themselves as quality leaders. For Black principals, the "lack of support for their candidacy" create additional barriers for their leadership journey and promote access disparities for future school leaders (Berry & Reardon, 2021, p. 5). The lack of support for Black principals is reflected in two ways: how they prepare for the job with leadership training and how much previous administrative experience they have secured for the job. Moreover, discrimination against Black educators is reflected through the idea of "stalling" in Berry and Reardon's (2021) study of "exogenous (academic credentialing and management experience attained outside of the field of education) and endogenous (sponsored leadership training and previous administrative experience" (p. 9). This study revealed reveals the major access and opportunity gaps between Black and White teachers. Whereas White teachers are promoted to leadership positions, Black

teachers, for example are being "stalled before the acquisition of leadership positions" (p. 8).

Even when Black teachers are promoted to leadership positions (such as assistant principal and principal), it creates a lack in diversity at the teacher level. In other words, the overrepresentation of Black assistant principals and principals, creates an underrepresentation among Black classroom teachers, especially in interethnic school districts (Berry & Reardon, 2021). This is not the case for White teachers and principals. They are "generally overrepresented" in all job categories, which further reflects that barriers to equal employment opportunity exists for Black educators.

Adding "Age" in the Mix

Young black women, especially, have to work hard to fight against social norms because their youth is perceived to be a detriment instead of an asset. Even after they have successfully obtained a leadership role, young Black women are "likely to face a unique set of challenges associated with gender, race, and negative attitudes about age in achieving success as principals" (Jean-Marie, 2013). Some black women are presumed unfit for leadership because they lack the amount of experience that other women have in their field. These women are influenced by the "triple jeopardy" of being young, black, and female, which has multiple meanings and levels of impact, given their various experiences with obtaining the principalship (Sherman et al., 2008). Unpacking these issues of intersectionality and positionality for young African American women is also critically important to securing the future for women in senior level roles. Therefore, young African American women school leaders are not only needed in K-12 education, but research on their journeys and experiences is essential to preparing aspiring young school leaders to make a positive impact on student success.

Navigating Intersectionality, Identity, and the Principalship

Although some women serve in school leadership positions, the impact of race and gender for women of color who serve in these roles is greater. For example, Black women are likely to experience "extra scrutiny in the role," "lower performance evaluations" compared to their white male counterparts, "higher stress levels" and "shorter tenures" (Weiner et al., 2019, p. 4). Unfortunately, Black women educators are put at a disadvantage when they are held to higher social standards than their colleagues of other races. Black women are not only underrepresented in administrative positions (Williams & Loeb, 2012), but they also "tend to receive far fewer supports (e.g., mentoring, networking) than their White male colleagues; they are less likely to be recognized for having leadership potential; and they take longer to obtain a school leadership role" (Weiner et al., 2019, p. 4).

Other research (e.g., Craig, 2014; Haynes, 2016; Hobson-Horton, 2000; Leathers, 2011; J. R. Lewis, 2014; Reed, 2012) suggests that Black women in principal roles have to modify their behavior in order to be successful. On the one hand, women may feel pressured to shift from part of their identity in order to reconcile the part that makes them most noticeable. Jones and Shorter-Golden (2003) assert that African American women shift into historically suppressed roles in order to survive and appease others. For example, they change their hair, change their use of the English language, and use facial expressions to fit a certain mold (Echols, 2006). Although African American women shift to survive, the pressure of conforming to a specific way of being brings about a certain degree of inauthenticity. According to Jean-Marie (2013), "ongoing support (mentoring) and professional development can help cultivate their leadership capacity and prepare them to confront the biases they face" and that often force them to shift (p. 636).

Consequently, not every Black woman is able to overcome the stereotypes and experiences that are rooted in racial and gender discrimination. Studies on stereotypes that pertain to Black women continue to reinforce the idea that they do not belong in leadership roles and that men are "most appropriate" for the job (Weiner et al., 2019, p. 5). As a result, African American women may be tempted to give up on their leadership roles. For example, Robinson's (2015) exploratory study indicated that women went into leadership roles (i.e., The superintendency) because of their desire to make an instructional impact on students, yet they left because they could not meet the ever-changing, ever-increasing demands of their role. In essence, what others perceived their role to be differed from why they decided to pursue leadership. While this research is specific to the role of superintendent, it serves as a signifier of similar issues that happen for Black women in school leadership when the intersectionality of race and gender are explored. Roane and Newcomb (2013) sought to understand how African American women principals negotiated their intersectionality amid the historical and inferior perceptions of their leadership as "followers under the tutelage of White principals" (p. 2). Under this notion, African American women are less likely to be deemed as significant contributors to the field of education, even if they become school leaders.

Changing the Narrative for African American Women in School Leadership

While several research studies focus on the racial and gender discrimination that Black women face and how it impacts perceptions of them in school leadership roles, other studies show how Black women are needed to disrupt the social norm. Kofi Lomotey's (2019) research into Black women principals serves as a catalyst for change regarding the perspectives and experiences that are known about women in school leadership. More specifically, his work revealed that a "culturally responsive orientation" enables principals (specifically Black

principals) to make a difference in success for Black students (p. 336). This study is significant because it offers a counter-narrative to the deficit thinking surrounding African American women in school leadership.

Lomotey's (2019) research also suggests that Black women in leadership roles are highly likely to have a positive impact on Black children. In the context of K-12 education, students benefit from seeing educators with whom they can identify; however, children are less likely to see diversity in school leadership if African American women school leaders are not being adequately trained to obtain school leadership roles or if they are not being adequately retained in the field. Research from Simmons (2007) attests to the lack of diversity in schools; many students confessed to never being taught by an African American or attending class with students of color. Consequently, students may graduate from K-12 schools with little to no exposure to diversity in school leadership, which would continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes and deficit thinking toward Black educators and students.

Race, Gender, and Spirituality

There is an emerging body of research (Jean-Marie, 2013; Roane & Newcomb, 2013) that suggests that African American women heavily rely on their faith and spirituality to help them be successful leaders during difficult moments. Their faith not only grounds them in ethics concerning their job, but it also serves as a catalyst for their leadership for social justice. Tillman's (2004) study captured the relationship between race, gender, and spirituality from the 1800s when students were taught core subjects (like reading and writing) as well as Christian morals. The history of Black women in educational leadership has often served dual purposes. Black women served as both teachers and principals simultaneously, and according to research from Tillman (2004), the duality of this role "played exemplary roles in the education of Blacks

in the pre-*Brown* era" (p. 108). Black women have been known to exhibit the qualities of a pastor, caring for the whole child: mind, body, and soul (Roane & Newcomb, 2013). The parallels between pastoral leadership and school leadership have served as an anchor for women who have struggled to overcome oppression from society. Researchers (Jean-Marie, 2013; Roane & Newcomb, 2013) have found prayer and faith to be essential to Black women's resilience and ability to overcome adversity.

Microaggressions As Barriers in the Workplace

Microaggressions against Black women in the workplace have been well documented throughout the history of school leadership (Jean-Marie, 2013; J. A. Lewis & Neville, 2015; Weiner et al., 2019). They represent the oppressive nature of negative stereotypes regarding women of color. A recent study by Weiner et al. (2019) describes microaggressions as significant barriers for African American women in school leadership, which is why she urges a call to action for critical reflection on current administration preparation programs and on White privilege. Much of the racial and gender microaggressions that Black women face are overlooked in the body of research (Jean-Marie, 2013). This reflects the real-life experiences that Black women face in various professional settings. Black women are not respected and remain seemingly invisible to some; however, unpacking their silence regarding their experiences in educational leadership not only exposes oppression but could lead us to better understand what they lack. Thus, more scholarship is needed that explores the change in leadership programming and administration preparation. According to Weiner et al. (2019), administration preparation programs are urged to revamp their approach to focus on equity, critical thought, and white privilege. Making others aware of the historical and social events that marginalize Black women is important. Thus, acknowledging the way in which privilege and power show up in preparation

31

programs and subsequently in how aspiring leaders are taught to lead schools may yield insight into combating issues of inequity within school administration.

D. W. Sue's microaggressions framework is one way of directly approaching issues of discrimination at the administration preparation level. Concerns regarding microaggressions for Black women have needed to be validated in the literature. Thus, a growing body of research (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007) has further developed the framework to include encounters of oppression and the psychological impact that it has on marginalized groups. This is significant to understanding the lived experiences of Black women and their intersectionality within leadership.

Mentorship

Many scholars agree that mentoring is an elusive construct that differs given the various contexts of education, psychology, human development, and other fields (T. D. Allen & Eby, 2007; Applebaum et al., 1994; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Friday et al., 2004; Garvey, 2004; Gibb, 2003; Jacobi, 1991; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016). As a result, scholars focus on describing mentorship as a major part of their research rather than struggling to settle on a single definition. For example, some scholars (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; A. L. Peters, 2011; Tillman, 2001) describe mentorship as a key indicator of academic success and career advancement, especially in higher education. Although there are various beliefs about how mentorship is defined within the educational context, there is also some research that discusses the transformation and evolution of the different approaches to mentorship. That is, research over the past few decades has shifted from a traditional view of mentoring to a relational view (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020). In a traditional mentorship model, there is a more formal, hierarchical interaction between the mentor and the protege. However, mentorship cannot be described as a

one-size fits all phenomenon. In fact, Grant (2012) purports that "no two mentorships are the same and [that] distinct interpersonal exchanges and idiosyncratic interaction patterns can shape the mentoring relationship" (p. 102). That is, mentorship can be life-changing or superficial, long-lasting or short-lived, reciprocal or non-existent at any given time in a person's life.

Mentorship for African American Women in School Leadership

African American women are often overlooked, silenced, and oppressed when it comes to their positionality in the work environment and their desire to advance in their careers. They are least likely to obtain senior-level roles in their jobs, which means that their white counterparts have a significant advantage over them for competitive roles. Despite the wide variety of experiences that African American women may have in educational leadership, they face great limitations in their career because there are little to no structures of support in place at the graduate or postgraduate level to help them succeed. Mentorship is one research-based strategy that helps a person advance in their careers; however, there is sparse research on mentorship for African American women. There is even less research on effective mentorship and ongoing support for African American women in K-12 education, especially when they aspire to become senior-level leaders.

While some women may defy the narrative concerning the lack of African American women in educational leadership, there are many who do not obtain the level of organizational career success in K-12 education that they may initially desire. The experiences that they may have along their professional journey may actually deter them from school leadership instead of driving them to pursue it more. Without adequate mentorship that is specific to their needs and targeted toward growth and advancement, African American women may not feel successful in obtaining senior-level positions in K-12 education. As a result, there is not only a great need for

mentorship, but there is a need for greater specificity around how African American women can leverage key resources to support their own career advancement. Many scholars acknowledge that mentorship is a powerful tool for maximizing success in educational leadership, but more research in this area could lead to greater diversity and sustainability in the field.

Mentorship As Strategy for Relationship

Mentoring is an important support strategy that can positively impact leadership journeys for women in school leadership. The importance of mentorship for women in school leadership has been widely acknowledged in research (K. Allen et al., 1995; King, 2012). However, in his review of the literature, Lomotey (2019) suggests that school districts could stress the value of "facilitating" additional "mentoring relationships for Black women principals" (p. 342). Mentoring has many benefits for African American women, but there is very little research that explains the specific connections between mentorship, equal opportunity, and career success— especially given the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women in graduate-level programs. Scholars agree that race, ethnicity, and gender greatly impact the reciprocity and developmental role between the mentor and the mentee (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; A. L. Peters, 2011; Simon et al., 2008; Tillman, 2009). This reflects the notion that it is not only about what the mentee knows or does not know, but it is about who the mentee knows or does not know. According to Calderone et al. (2020), effective mentors are able to call upon their experience and professional connections to support mentee growth and development. However, Crawford and Smith (2005) and Tillman (2001) place much emphasis on the role that mentors play in initiating the mentoring process with the mentor or protege. Therefore, mentorship that is requested or initiated by the mentee, which in some cases represents the less-experienced person, may jeopardize the authenticity of the mentorship.

The relationship between a mentor and a mentee can take on different forms. For example, traditional mentoring can be "depicted as a hierarchical relationship with the mentor in the top/superior position and the protégé in the bottom/inferior position" (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020, pp. 725–726). The mentor's superiority over the protégé is reflected in their level of experience, which supersedes that of the protégé. Moreover, this type of relationship is one in which knowledge can be transmitted from the expert (mentor) to the novice (protégé), thereby making the protégé the beneficiary of knowledge (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020). Mentor relationships for principals can also be focused on guiding them through managerial tasks and the daily operations of their job. In this context, the mentor advises through sharing or transmitting knowledge to the protégé. Other relationships between the mentor and protégé can be described as mutual rather than hierarchical. Thus, the mentor and protégé creatively construct knowledge together rather than transmit a set of facts, skills, and practices from the mentor to the protégé (Crow, 2012). Whether the mentor-protégé relationship is hierarchical/traditional or mutual/relational, they are all a significant part of developing school leaders. It is important to remember that the "mentoring process is always fluid, reciprocal, multi-dimensional, and dynamic, thus presenting both benefits and challenges to mentoring" (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020, p. 728).

Other Approaches to Mentoring

There are different approaches to mentoring that contribute to professional development and growth for school leaders. Gary Crow draws upon research on "co-mentoring, peer mentoring, multiple mentoring, team mentoring, and e-mentoring" to show the dynamics of mentoring relationships (Crow, 2012, p. 229). Mentoring can be formal or informal, and each type has its own benefits and challenges. Whereas formal mentoring usually involves mentoring

programs, informal mentoring usually occurs more naturally and organically. That is, informal mentoring is "built on shared interests and personal characteristics" that are most likely a result of the protégé seeking out a "trusted adviser or friend with whom they have an affiliation" (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020, p. 737). While informal mentoring is more personable and seemingly organic, there are some disadvantages to this type of mentoring. Hayes and Mahfouz (2020) suggest that informal mentoring may focus more on socialization rather than professional development. When formal and informal mentoring approaches are considered in relation to traditional approaches, one might consider formal mentoring to resemble traditional approaches. Additionally, informal mentoring may reflect more of a relational approach.

While Tillman (2001) is foundational in exploring the phases and types of mentorship for African American women in education, Chao et al. (1992) explain that initiation is a distinguishing factor between formal and informal mentoring. Although mentoring is instrumental for professional growth and development, many African American women have to turn to nontraditional forms of mentoring to compensate for sparse interaction between themselves and their mentors. In the subsequent sections, I will focus on different types of mentorships and how they contribute to how African American women experience success in education.

Why Mentorship is Needed

Without strong mentorship and support for current and aspiring women in school leadership, women are more likely to leave their leadership role (i.e., superintendency or principalship) in order to pursue their health, family, and normalcy of living. Since women are underrepresented in educational leadership, the number of women mentors and access to networking is limited (Calderone et al., 2020). Strong mentorship for women in school

leadership may be an effective way to see more longevity and diversity in Pre-K-12 leadership roles. Perhaps, exploring a model for mentoring could lead to ingenuity and reconceptualization of leadership roles for African American women in Pre-K-12 education. As a result, many women who aspire to move up in leadership would not only feel more confident in their ability to pursue principalships and superintendent positions, but they would also embrace their intersectionality.

Chapter Summary

As I read more about the literature on women in school leadership, I learned that while women have made progress in leadership, gender gaps continue to exist between men and women who advance to school leadership positions. Regardless of their preparatory experiences, women still face barriers to obtaining principalship. Moreover, career mobility is even harder for Black women due to discrimination. Despite their credentials, they are not promoted to the extent of their white counterparts. As a result, there is an underrepresentation of Black principals in schools. Black women face stereotypes, are discriminated against, and are subject greater scrutiny in the workplace Consequently, that they may feel pressured to shift from their identity. Therefore, there is a need change the narrative concerning Black women in school leadership.

Mentorship is one strategy that benefits Black women; however, there is little research that explains how this connects their career success. Regardless of what approach a mentor takes, strong mentorship is critical for longevity and diversity in school leadership roles.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

African American women who aspire to become principals in K-12 schools face unique challenges that are associated with their social identity and positionality within their work environment. Although many African American women aspire to advance in their educational careers, they are often overlooked for job opportunities, silenced by dominant male voices, and oppressed by an educational system that favors their white counterparts over themselves. Consequently, school districts perpetuate these inequities when they are not intentional about adequate professional development, training, and support for African American women who aspire to become principals. African American women experience various challenges in the work environment that need to be addressed. However, addressing these needs cannot be a matter of speculation; rather, these programs should be to meet the unique challenges that African American women face.

As mentioned in Chapter I, the purpose of this study was to better understand the career needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. I aimed to explore the unique challenges that aspiring African American women principals face in K-12 schools. Although there is a limited body of research on African American women in school leadership (Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Roane & Newcomb, 2013; Robinson, 2015), the few studies that exist suggest the need for mentorship and preparation for navigating their unique challenges in K-12 schools. As a result of assessing and evaluating aspiring principals' needs (especially those specific to Black women), districts have an opportunity to better prepare African American women for career advancement in K-12 schools. School districts can also explore and develop new

mentorship programs that provide ongoing support for African American as they navigate their own leadership journey.

Although this study was designed to support a specific school district in time and place, I aim for it to be adapted to suit other school districts that are interested in combating discriminatory practices. Moreover, this study yielded new perspectives that school districts can consider in their approach to dismantle the perpetuation of oppressive working conditions for Black women in school leadership. These were the components that represent an overarching commitment to career development and advancement for Black women.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the development of this study:

1. What is the school district currently doing to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

2. What are the perspectives of Black women aspiring to the principalship concerning the career supports they are receiving and/or need to move forward in their careers?

3. What are the perspectives of Black women currently serving as principals concerning the career supports they received and/or needed to receive to move forward in their careers?

4. What else can the school district do to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

The purpose of the first question was to ascertain information from participants about what forms of district support currently exist, specifically for credentialed African American women who aspire to become principals. While university-based administration preparatory programs exist, these programs have difficulty in diversity and inclusion. Weiner et al. (2019)

found that these programs remain predominantly in White spaces where minoritized groups often feel "unwelcomed or invisible" (p. 5). Although this research on preparatory programs is centered on the university, more exploration of similar outcomes from existing district-level support structures and preparation programs could yield a greater understanding of additional components.

The purpose of the second question was to better understand the support needs for Black women who are aspiring to become principals. Additionally, this question was designed to obtain information pertaining to the participant's lived experiences with receiving current district supports. However, this question also aimed to identify any gaps that reveal what aspiring principal participants perceived they still needed in order to advance to the principalship.

The purpose of the third research question was to understand the perspectives of current Black women principals on the supports that they received while they were seeking to advance in their career. This research question was reflective in nature because it asked sitting Black women principals to reflect on their preparation experiences prior to the principalship.

The purpose of the fourth research question was to reflect on the action phases of the research whereby I used the data I collected to design a mentoring program model with specific action steps for implementation within a particular district. Additionally, the fourth research question was designed to help districts think critically about identifying additional ways to adequately prepare Black women to advance to the principalship, despite social injustices and discrimination.

Even in university preparation programs, scholars agree that there are concerns about race, racism, and even other types of discrimination that are constantly ignored (Hawley & James, 2010; Johnson & Campbell-Stephens, 2014; O'Malley & Capper, 2015; Rusch, 2004).

When matters of race, gender, identity, etc., are disregarded, entire groups of people may be disregarded in other educational settings (i.e., school district programs). As a result, these experiences make it difficult for Black women to advance into higher leadership roles. Hence, the goal of my research was to distinguish between what is working and what is not working so that districts can implement the necessary changes to achieve different results.

Current supports were inadequate for addressing barriers to successful leadership. Weiner et al. (2019) found that Black women in school leadership felt isolated from others because of the microaggressions and microinvalidations they experienced. The feeling of isolation is just one indicator that better supports are needed for African American women in school leadership, but districts need to explore what this entails. By completing a comprehensive needs assessment, districts will be postured to target areas of concern and have a plan for monitoring their progress.

Description of Methodology

While I recognized that there were different ways to approach my research topic, I chose to use what is referred to by some researchers as action research and others as practitioner inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) define action research as a form of practitioner inquiry that is commonly used to describe how educators collaborate on their efforts, usually for the purpose of altering or challenging school practices (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). By using this approach, I was able to partner with participants within a collaborative space and focus on efforts to improve their experiences with support for their careers in school administration. During the focus group, these spaces became more like support groups for the participants.

While there are different variations of practitioner inquiry that have emerged throughout the history of research traditions and sociological movements (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), I chose to use action research as opposed to self-study or other forms of practitioner inquiry that

Cochran-Smith and Donnell discuss. Under this model, the practitioner is the researcher. There are many versions of practitioner inquiry, and subsequently, there are many versions of action research. However, only some are "grounded in social critique and intended to enhance social justice" (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 504). In addition to using collaboration as a key feature of practitioner inquiry, there is systematic sharing of what communities do to build knowledge as learners and researchers. When it comes to epistemology, practitioner inquiry mostly assumes that "the knowledge needed to understand, analyze, and ultimately improve educational situations cannot be generated primarily or simply by those located outside of those contexts" (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 508). Given this approach to epistemology, using practitioner inquiry yielded rich data from the participants about what they believed was needed to experience greater success in their careers. Given that my research took place within my own profession, I anticipated that my research would contribute to further defining practitioner inquiry in this field of education.

Action research emphasizes collaboration and relationships and thus lends itself to constructing knowledge in a meaningful way. Hence, I used a constructivist lens to approach my exploration and understanding of the lived experiences of aspiring African American women principals. I wanted to explore the story behind the data that I collected, even though I am a practitioner in the field that I am studying. This is one reason why I used focus groups to gain the participants' stories about their experiences as African American women who have aspired to the principalship. According to Patton (2002), understanding the story behind the data means "capturing and understanding diverse perspectives, observing and analyzing behaviors in context, and looking for patterns in what human beings do and think" (p. 46). This type of inquiry yields a great contribution to making meaning out of the research.

Research Setting and Early Assumptions

I conducted research on a school district that serves over 12,000 students. I interviewed African American women principals, assistant principals, Exceptional Teacher's Program Facilitators, and other teacher leaders within a focus group setting in order to conduct a needs assessment of how the district could improve on practices for meeting the needs of African American women aspiring principals. More specifically, I wanted to focus on African American women candidates who were aspiring to the principalship but who had not yet become or had the opportunity to become principals. Additionally, I focused on some perceived barriers to career opportunities. I interviewed current principals in order to gather additional experiences that would ultimately confirm, deny, or even expand the perceived needs of aspiring principal participants. At the time, there were five African American women principals in my district. However, no additional programming existed within the district to support current or aspiring principals with adequate resources to advance in their careers. Additionally, there are teacher leaders who held a principal licensure, but they had obtained a principalship. Therefore, I wanted to explore the participants' aspirations to obtain a principalship in order to identify supports they deemed adequate for training in the profession.

That said, I must acknowledge some assumptions I had going into this study. One of which was that districts care to understand the lived experiences of Black female aspiring principals and want to adequately support their transition to the principalship. Furthermore, I assumed that districts want to be intentional about retaining Black females as principals so that the diversity in school leadership reflects the diversity among its students. Lastly, I assumed that school districts would be willing to implement the program ideas developed from this research in order to meet the expressed career needs of aspiring Black female principals. These assumptions

contributed to the purpose of this study. Without district buy-in, an action study of this nature would be rendered ineffective and unnecessary.

However, my superintendent was passionate about the strategic development of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). As a Black woman, she was invested in dismantling systems of oppression and closing the gap of the racial divide among school leaders. Ultimately, my superintendent was invested in conducting needs assessments across several departments in the district in order to explore further barriers to success and highlight the need for program evaluation. As a part of her professional development plan for school leaders, she desired to conduct program evaluations and transform the district's approach to building school leadership so that the district can better meet the needs of all students, not just some. Her efforts included making sure that the right leaders were in schools to foster a community where every student is valued. Based on the superintendent's desire to improve educational outcomes for all (students and staff alike), this research offered additional insight and guidance for executing her strategic plan. The results of this research can shape the way the superintendent attempts to address the career needs of the Black female aspiring principals in the district.

Action Research Phases

My research consisted of three phases. Each is described next.

Phase I: Needs Assessment

Phase I consisted of using focus group interviews to conduct an initial needs assessment so that I could better understand what African American women perceived they needed to prepare for a successful career in the principalship. Focus-group interviews were my primary method of data collection. Initially, I thought that there may have been a need for additional opportunities to follow up with specific participants in personal one-on-one semi-structured

interviews to learn more about their unique experiences with some of the topics that came in the focus group. However, this was not needed. I used a semi-structured approach and an interview guide to focus the conversation on specific areas related to answering my research questions. This approach gave me some flexibility to ask additional follow-up questions related to the participant's responses. I thought that other data collection methods might have been needed to give me more perspective on identifying the needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship, but the focus group interviews were sufficient.

Research on practitioner inquiry from some scholars (Ball, 1995; Lagemann, 2000; Lampert, 1990) provides extensive examples of the complexity of conducting research in the professional work environment. It was important that the process remained ethical, as I wanted to build trust between the participants and myself. I conducted the interviews via Zoom. This way, participants could enjoy the comfort of their own homes or a desired location. I also did this to avoid intimidation or discomfort for the participants. I allotted two hours for each interview. I informed participants that I would record the interview and follow IRB procedures; After each interview, I transcribed the answers and removed any identifiable information for confidentiality purposes. I created a coding system to identify similarities among responses. These ultimately led to eight major themes. My goal was to interview at least 8-10 African American women aspiring to be principals. Since COVID-19 measures persisted and participants were comfortable with using Zoom as an online platform, I chose to do virtual focus groups instead of in-person. I considered other virtual platforms (like Google meets), but Zoom was the most appropriate and secure.

Phase II: Design a Mentoring Program

In Phase II of the study, I utilized the information from the focus group interviews in Phase one to design an overview of a mentoring program that would address the expressed needs of the focus groups. I documented my reflections on focus group responses in a journal. Where appropriate, I incorporated charts and figures to help explain my findings. Research from Mertens (2009) purports that researchers can validate their findings through various methods: "some combination of interviews, documents, field notes, member checks, among others" (p. 62). I used member-checking to validate my findings and ensure that the components of the program matched the perspectives that African American women share on the mentorship, training, and professional development that they have already received or that they currently still lack. Member-checking added rigor to the process of research and enhanced the accuracy of the data. This is because I was accountable to the participants, and I asked them to "check the transcript of their interview" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1803). Additionally, I had participants to review portions of my findings that pertained to their responses, and I asked them to review my program ideas and give initial feedback. My goal was that the combined opportunities for obtaining feedback on program ideas and the process of member checking would yield an accurate representation of Black women's perspectives from this focus group.

Phase III: Develop a Strategic Plan

Lastly, in Phase III of the study, I added a proposed timeline as a strategic plan that districts can use for program implementation. I compiled data from phases one and two to inform an overview of a pilot program for professional development and mentorship. This research study does not include the implications of the pilot program for districts; however, they can be explored at another time. While I was interested in the effectiveness of the strategic plan from

this study, my research does not explore the impact of the strategic plan on the participants discussed in my research. Future implications, however, could include implementing what I have learned from this study.

Data Collection Methods

Understanding how to select participants and collect data was essential to my research process. Since the purpose of this study was to better understand the needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education, my action research included strategic efforts in "trying out," "carrying out," and "putting into practice the changes resulting from the findings" of each phase of research (Mertler, 2020, p. 217). In other words, my approach as a practitioner researcher involved a continuous process of assessing the needs of the sample population and developing an action plan based on the needs assessment. The Council of Chief State School Offices (CCSSO) guides researchers to assess all aspects by revisiting and updating on a consistent basis just to "ensure alignment to the improvement plan and to check for progress against the original findings" (Corbett, 2017, p. 7). This is why I chose to use phases in my research approach.

Sample Population

For this research study, I used criterion sampling to approach the selection of participants, especially because I was interested in the unique experiences that apply to a specific group. More specifically, "because their life experiences reflect critical, cultural or historical positioning" that were critical for understanding the potential unmet needs for Black women aspiring to the principalship, I used a specific criterion to define the sample population (Mertens, 2009, p. 216). The desired sample population was licensed Black women who aspire to become principals. Some were teachers, program facilitators, Assistant Principals, and other school

leaders who currently serve in my school district. Participants had to have a master's or Post-Master's Certificate in School Administration. In this study, I did not utilize central office administrators to focus more on those who impact the school level. This research excluded anyone who was not credentialed (meaning they don't have an administrative license to be a principal). Since there was already an organized group at the district level that focused on staff of color, I identified participants who were members of that group first. I contacted the district's Human Resources department to get a list of all the names and contact information for members of the staff of color group. I emailed the members individually to inform them of my research study and assess their interest in participating. Once eligibility and interest were determined, I provided the individuals with a copy of the informed consent to review. Signed informed consent was not required, but I did give the participants 24 hours before scheduled focus group interviews to review the consent.

While I anticipated that the number of women who fit these criteria would be limited, I was surprised that I had seven principals and six aspiring principals participate in this study. I was prepared to seek additional sampling methods. For example, I considered snowball sampling as an alternative method for identifying research participants, but this was not needed. Recognizing that this research was limited to participant availability and willingness to participate (also known as convenience sampling.), I considered the questions Mertens (2009) raises for conducting research: 1) Who needs to be included? 2) How should they be included? 3) How can they be invited in a way that they feel truly welcome and able to represent their own concerns accurately? 4) What kinds of support are necessary to provide an appropriate venue for people with less privilege to share their experiences to improve teaching and learning? This study took 4 weeks to complete, although I had anticipated 8 weeks. There were two focus

groups: one for current principals and one for aspiring principals. Each focus group was estimated to take approximately 90 minutes, although the aspiring principals focus group went longer. Participants were expected to spend a total of 120 minutes from initial consent to member checking. However, the actual time was closer to 180 minutes. The groups ended up resembling a support group, as participants would respond to each other's stories as they answered the interview questions.

Given my unique population, I held a small professional learning community meeting as a recruitment strategy to explain the purpose of my research. Since I planned to implement my action plan in the district where I work, I solicited participation from members of my district who fit my desired criteria. When I considered Mertens's (2009) notion that "transformative paradigm is rooted in issues of diversity, privilege, and power, recognizing the intersection of relevant dimensions of diversity" (p. 200), I recognized that establishing the proper context is critical for the initial recruitment of participants. This was important because of the sensitivity of my research and my desire to maintain respect for the individuals who decide to participate.

As I mentioned earlier, I reached out to my district's Human Resources Department to identify potential candidates. I recognized that this was an extremely sensitive process, as some women had never shared their stories in this type of setting. Therefore, ethical considerations of respect—beneficence—as determined by the Belmont Report, needed to be followed (Mertens, 2009, p. 220). Upon determining candidates who fit my criteria, I contacted the individuals personally and introduced myself. I emailed to tell them who I am, what my scope of work has been, and my purpose for contacting them. I recognized that all information (names, contacts, and emails) was confidential, even at the beginning when I recruited participants. For this reason, confidentiality and anonymity were also important to consider when I collected information from

49

participants. I particularly liked using Dodd's (2009) strategy of using an additional layer of confidentiality protection by obtaining certificates of confidentiality, which protects against any potential disclosure of identifying information.

Focus Groups

The first focus group explored the perceived needs of aspiring African American women principals who are currently credentialed but have not obtained a principalship yet. The second focus group will engage current African American women principals in reflection on their past experiences with support provided, or the lack thereof, during their preparation journey to the principalship. While the interviews were group-based, I used an interview guide to help structure the conversation with the participants. Unlike informal, conversational interviews, which are usually "on the spot," using a semi-structured interview guide offered the opportunity to prepare questions/topics ahead of time and also schedule interviewers based on an appropriate time (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 111). I used this approach for focus groups. By utilizing the focus group, I anticipated that the participants would remind each other of their shared experiences. This format seemed more conducive to relationship-building and trust, and I had hoped that participants would feel more comfortable in an environment where they are together with others who share similar interests. I did find that this was the case. I found the focus groups to be useful in minimizing intimidation and allowing participants to become more vulnerable. One major benefit of this method was that focus groups could be offered at different times, with different people, and would also yield trends about the overall thoughts being expressed (Kruegar & Casey, 2008). Ultimately, I believed that focus groups would yield the best options for the most transparency based on the topic.

Participant Introductions

I asked participants to discuss their educational experiences, including their background in education, the rationale for becoming an educator, length of time in their roles, and educational status. Several participants in each group were familiar with each other because they either worked in previous districts or they had previous experiences at the same school. Both focus groups were conducted online via Zoom, and because of this method, there were some technical difficulties and minor interruptions. Some of the technical difficulties included Internet glitches due to Wi-fi clarity, background noise due to some participants signing on while they were still at their school building, and mildly distorted sound, which sometimes caused a break in a few phrases of their responses. One focus group consisted of current principals who are already serving in Agape County Schools. The other consisted of current educators who serve within the district in various roles, such as assistant principal, instructional coach, Exceptional Children's program facilitator, teacher, etc. On average, the principal focus group consisted of participants who were around the same age (late 40s to early 50s), and they were older than the aspiring principals focus group. The aspiring principals, on the other hand, were mostly in their mid-to-late 30s. Many of the participants showed agreement with each other, which was often indicated by their frequent use of the words "I agree with _____," "just to piggyback off of." Sometimes, participants simply wanted to add to what a previous participant said without using specific terms of agreement. Table 1 outlines more detailed information about the composition of each focus group. Table 2 and Table 3 provide more detailed information about the demographics of the participants in each focus group, including their age, years of experience in education, and current educational status.

Table 1. Focus Group Composition

Focus Group 1: Current Principals (2021-2022 school year)
- Seven principals in the focus group who were all African American women
- Names- Ann, Olivia, Cardi P, Slikk, Essence, Cori, & Angela
- All participants work in the same district
- Four of the seven principal participants knew each other from previous districts
- Discussion was relatively continuous and fluid
- Met with participants once

Focus Group 2: Aspiring Principals (2021-2022 school year)
- Six educators in the focus groups, who were all African American women
- Names—Juanita, Justice, Brooklyn, Elizabeth Ann, Freedom, and Hattie
- All participants work in the same district
- Five of the six participants knew each other from previous districts
- The discussion was continuous and fluid from the beginning
- Met with participants once.

Table 2. Demographics of Principal Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	Years of Experience	Educational Status
Ann	African American	Female	50	24	Masters
Olivia	African American	Female	55	19	Masters
Cardi P	African American	Female	49	26	Currently in Doctoral Program
Slikk	African American	Female	46	23	Currently in Doctoral Program
Essence	African American	Female	46	24	Masters
Cori	African American	Female	52	23	Masters
Angela	African American	Female	49	26	Masters

Table 3. Demographics of Aspiring Principals

Participant Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Educational Status
Juanita	African American	Female	39	18	Currently in Doctoral Program
Justice	African American	Female	33	10	Currently in Doctoral Program
Brooklyn	African American	Female	30	8	Currently in Doctoral Program
Elizabeth Ann	African American	Female	51	29	Masters
Hattie	African American	Female	32	10	Currently in Doctoral Program
Freedom	African American	Female	45	23	Currently in Doctoral Program

As indicated in Table 2 and Table 3, both focus groups had various years of experience in education and were all different ages. All participants had at least a Master's in school administration or an add-on license; however, most of the participants were enrolled in a doctoral program. In fact, all but one of the participants in the aspiring principals group were enrolled in a doctoral program. Additionally, the one participant who was not currently enrolled in a doctoral program did share that she had enrolled in previous years but did not finish.

Alternatives

I considered conducting individual interviews to gather the data. However, it was powerful to see the way participants responded to the focus group structure. Initially, my thoughts were to transcribe the interviews and code them to determine commonalities. I still did this with the focus interview groups. Given the topics, the process required careful consideration and effort, regardless of what alternative I considered. Checking the validity and sharing the

information back out with the participants to ensure that it was accurate was important. Regardless of the method, my plan to compare the perceived needs from the aspiring principals focus group and the shared experiences with support from the principal group remained the same. This allowed me to focus more on African American women perceptions of their needs, and I was able to build an understanding participants deemed important to their preparation for success in the principalship.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

My process of data analysis and interpretation went together with the process of data collection during my research process. While Mertler (2020) recognizes that the analysis of data can happen after the data has been collected, as is the case with most quantitative research studies, I chose to analyze the data throughout the data collection process to see if I could make sense of the data throughout the process of interviews. According to Patton (2002), qualitative researchers seek to "understand interrelationships among the dimensions that emerge from the data without prior making assumptions or specifying hypotheses about the linear or correlative relationships among the narrowly defined, operationalized variables" (p. 122). The benefits of this process of data analysis were that the understanding of and meaning for needed career development support for Black women aspiring to the principalship come from the lived experiences that they share and not something that has been theorized from past research. Mertler suggests that "decisions about which type of data analysis to use are based initially on whether the data are qualitative or quantitative" (Mertler, 2020, p. 43). Since I chose to do a qualitative research study with practitioner inquiry, I used Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) to analyze the data on the women while I looked for emergent themes, patterns of thought, and common topics (or categories) that could be explored from participant responses during the focus

group interviews (Mertler, 2020, p. 42). It was my intent to ensure that the data represented what participants said in the focus group, especially since I described the data in my findings. It is important to note that the nature of qualitative research is iterative. That is, the process of data analysis is recursive. Wolcott (1994) makes it clear that there is no such thing as pure data because "in the very act of constructing data out of experience, the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background" (p. 13). In the recursive process of data analysis, the researcher finds new themes that did not seem as noteworthy in the previous analysis. Undoubtedly, the researcher's perceptions are interwoven into the research strategies for data analysis and interpretation, even when the researcher tries to be objective for the sake of reliability. In fact, Patton (2002) purports that the perspective that the researcher brings to the qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings. Regardless of what data analysis strategy is used, the nature of qualitative research is that no strategy is absolute or universal. Rather, each core strategy used in the qualitative research process, as outlined in Chapter 2 of Patton's *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods,* is "interrelated, interdependent, and interactive" (Patton, 2002, p. 137).

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory (BFT) was the lens that I employed when I examined the data. Critical Race Theory explores racism as the structural norm but using Black Feminist Theory as a lens for analysis and interpretation allowed me to explore how African American women view their experiences and circumstances when both race and gender are linked together (Collins, 2000; Grant, 2012; Lomotey, 2019). Additionally, I used BFT to analyze themes of intersectionality within the research. Because of the unique experiences that aspiring African American women principals face in public schools and the standpoint created from their

intersecting identities within that space, this research didn't include participants who do not have a principal's license or who didn't aspire to become principals. I recognized that this was a limitation of my research, and therefore my research may not be applicable to every district or every group of aspiring leaders. Although districts can utilize this research to tailor their leadership programs, additional research in this area may help them to broaden their work for aspiring principals in other school districts.

My Process and How it Relates to Black Feminist Theory

Initially, I organized the data by pointing out similarities and differences between what each of the participants shared during interview discussions. This was important when applying BFT because common themes from participants' responses to the focus group interview questions, as Collins (2000) suggests, do not mean that the experiences are universal to all Black women aspiring to the principalship. That is, each participant's perspective is unique, even if there are common themes that emerge from their stories. However, I could not stop at identifying the similarities and differences because "we can never know everything" there is to know about the data, as "there is never one complete Truth" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 220). This was the case with my findings. When I thought I had reached an understanding of the data, I would recognize something else that was different from the perspective before. Therefore, Truth can steadily evolve from participant dialogues about their experiences. In essence, BFT was instrumental in the making of the data. By consistently analyzing the data, I considered how the data answers my research questions about the current supports and unmet needs of African American women who aspire to become principals. Moreover, I considered how the responses yield opportunities for transforming practices that would disrupt social and economic injustices. Researchers agree (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Mertler, 2020) that data analysis can be quite

overwhelming at first. Bearing this in mind, I used a process for organizing the data into manageable chunks and separated them into possible categories that could aid in making sense of the data for the reader. This process developed over time because I did not want to force the data to fit into categories that did not fully represent the participants' responses and actions. This is why member checking was essential to my work—giving summaries to the participants and "asking for their reactions, corrections, and further insights" to ensure that I 'got it right' (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 221). One specific method that was useful in analyzing the data was to make some initial assessments of what seemed to emerge as group knowledge or standpoints within the focus groups. Given the various perspectives that were represented, member checking was one of the ways that I hoped to increase the credibility and reliability of the data.

Since my data collection, analysis, and interpretation happened in phases, I was able to consider what Marshall and Rossman (2011) call "soundness, usefulness, and ethical conduct of the qualitative research study" (p. 222). Phase one of my research focused on conducting a needs assessment based on the perceived needs that African American women aspiring to become principals in my school district have, and I utilized focus group interviews to explore the current supports that exist for these credentialed participants. Because my participant selection included criterion sampling, I assumed that the participant's experiences would be different from that of others who have the same credentials. Therefore, I recorded the sessions for playback purposes to ensure that I captured any and all data related to their perceived unique experiences. My data recording strategy via Zoom was determined based on the features of the platform, but I considered the setting and "participants' sensitivities" should there have been some (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 206). Since focus groups were virtual, I did not use an audio recording device.

However, I did use the audio program feature in Zoom to capture the participants' thoughts. Before each session, I reiterated to participants that the audio recording from Zoom would only be used to collect the data, and I shared that confidentiality and ethical considerations for the specific population would be maintained. Following the interviews, I labeled the recordings by focus group, date of the activity, type of interview or activity, and setting. As anticipated, I did use a chart to organize these data easily. I considered other methods of data collection, but focus group interviews was the primary source of my data. No other methods of data collection were needed.

It was beneficial to retreat to a quiet place to type up my field notes that reflected what happened during the interviews to capture any common themes. This was beneficial to the continual process and development of collecting and analyzing based on how the intersecting themes related to BFT. Marshall and Rossman (2011) refer to this process as writing analytic memos, where "the researcher writes his thoughts about how the data are coming together in clusters or patterns or themes he sees as the data accumulate" (p. 213). Mertens (2009) gives a perspective on applying a transformative lens to data analysis and interpretation. She argues that using a theoretical framework (i.e., BFT) to approach this process can aid the researcher in filtering data and foreground issues of "discrimination, oppression, and social justice" (p. 282). This was one of the outcomes that I anticipated would be a part of my study. According to Mertens's interpretation of Madison (2005), feminist theories "lead to questioning the data about the domains of race and gender and what effect the intersection of these variables would have on social relations, analysis of discrimination" of the intersectionality of race and gender, and how these components show up in our societal structure (p. 283). For example, I used Black Feminist Theory to analyze the practices that women used to resist oppression in their work and pursue

their autonomy. According to Collins (2000), this is more than the merging of Black women experiences as intellectuals, but it is also the cross examining of perspectives of positionality to disrupt social identities (Collins, 2000).

I explored MAXQDA to build a coding system to distinguish the supports that aspiring African American women principals currently say exist in the district from those that still seem to be unmet needs. My goal was to synthesize, organize, and analyze the data as new information emerged, so I avoided becoming one of those "all-but-dissertation students with piles of scarily unorganized, unlabeled data" that Marshall and Rossman (2011) references in Chapter 8 of *Designing Qualitative Research* (p. 206). For example, current support in place for African American women who aspire to become principals was coded with "Current Supports," and I assigned the transcript data a particular color so that it is clear to me (and eventually the reader) which data fell in which category. Likewise, unmet needs that African American women identified were indicated with "Needed Supports" to show that it is an unmet need. Additionally, since one of my research questions asks how school districts can support the needs of Black women aspiring to the principalship, I created additional codes for responses that specifically referenced district-level support that was needed or being provided. In applying BFT, I coded responses perceived as resistance to oppression and oppositional knowledge.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), the coding strategy or technique must enable the researcher to "organize and make data easily retrievable and manipulatable" (p. 206). To that end, it was helpful for me to utilize the spreadsheet/database function of MAXQDA, where I could easily do open coding by classifying language from the interviews based on "Current Supports" for "Needed Supports" for unmet needs. I found it easier to display information in a colorful chart form, and it allowed the flexibility to go back and sort the information later. Using

MAXQDA was beneficial, especially since Marshall and Rossman (2011) indicate such programs can be useful tools. It is important to note that the process of coding data for me was ongoing, and I adjusted my coding based on additional terminology that emerged during the data collection and analysis process. I also used codes that naturally emerged from the literature as well. Marshall and Rossman (2011) assert that "ideas about codes can happen just about anytime and anywhere" (p. 213). Thus, I anticipated that new codes would always emerge, even if they were from the verbiage that participants used during the interview process. Additionally, Mertens (2009) suggests that developing codes and coding data not only allows for new codes to emerge but it also allows for consistency and stability in the use of the codes.

I also explored clustering as a data strategy. While open coding is an initial step related to conceptual categories, the next step might include clustering codes around "points of intersection, or axes," or axial coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 215). Using a conceptual map that categorizes code themes and captures additional categories that may stem from the overarching themes also seemed to be effective for interpreting the data. For example, I also used BFT to explore data around the intersection of race, gender, and spirituality as points of intersection for possible coding. While Marshall and Rossman (2011) offer generic strategies for analyzing the data, Wolcott (1994) offers different modes for presenting the data. To "stay close to" or intimate with the data, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) and Wolcott suggest, I reread accounts that the participants provided, but I also used direct quotes from the transcripts to allow the participants to tell their own stories and "speak for themselves" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). Therefore, my process of data analysis included both strategies for describing what the data presented about African American women's perspectives. According to Collins's (2000) concept of Black Feminist Theory, this process of data analysis could include the interconnected details

of perceived human struggles from marginalization. However, I think that it is important to note that the lines are not entirely clear during the research process. According to Wolcott (1994), the lines are not "clearly drawn where description ends and analysis begins, or where analysis becomes interpretation" (p. 11). Therefore, I continued to build this section of my research out as a continual part of my research process.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**</div>

Given the nature and sensitivity of a discussion on how African American women feel regarding the current supports they receive from the school district, it was imperative for me to build trust, which could be a limitation of using interview methods. Although the purpose of conducting interviews was to explore issues related to my research topic, I recognized that some participants could have been unwilling or uncomfortable with sharing all that I had hoped to explore through my interview questions. Marshall and Rossman (2011) address these limitations of using interviews and suggest that the researcher listen intently, frame questions carefully, and use gentle probing for elaboration. In addition to considering the participant's comfort with sharing personal experiences, I acknowledged that interviews are time-consuming, yet they yield a lot of information that can impact the quality of the data. Therefore, I established that the purpose of the interviews was to "uncover and describe participants' perspectives on events" or lived experiences surrounding career supports, or the lack thereof (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 145). Considering my interests in the topic, I deemed it important to consider the context of diversity and inclusion for my desired sample population. A major focus of my research design considered the intersectionality of race and gender for Black women participants that I selected for this study. Ethically, I had to consider the "double discrimination" that Black women face in striving to obtain higher positions in school leadership (Mertens, 2009, p. 210). Additionally, I

deemed it essential to consider ways to make research participants feel comfortable enough to share information about their experiences, challenges, and barriers to obtaining a principalship. This will enable me to really focus on collecting data that is specific to their needs, which may or may not be explicit from the conversation. On the one hand, researchers acknowledge that interview methods "yield data in quantity quickly," but on the other hand, researchers must consider the reliability of the data, especially when it comes to conveying the participant's views accurately (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Mertens, 2009). For this reason, checking with the participants to ensure that their thoughts were accurately reflected was helpful. This is also why building trust with participants was so paramount. I recognize that my own positionality as the researcher mattered to participants as well. Part of my ethical considerations for talking to participants included being cognizant of the fact that I am a woman who identifies racially and ethnically with the sample population. However, I also acknowledge that my positionality could have also caused the participants to trust me more.

The dynamics of power and influence are also paramount to discussion on trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Since Phase I consisted of using focus groups, it was important to acknowledge the power dynamic that exists between the researcher and the participant. As the facilitator of discussion, Marshall and Rossman (2011) stress the importance of listening to and observing how participants respond to one another. The researcher is concerned not only with power dynamics between the researcher and the participants but also with the dynamics of the interactions between the participants are important. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), skilled facilitation of focus groups and sensitivity to dynamics within the group discussion includes being able to identify whether a participant is dominating the conversation. Therefore, when focus group interview methods were employed, I wanted to

ensure that a variety of participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and responses to the question prompts. By doing this, I anticipated that the results truly represent a diversity of perspectives, which can improve the reliability of results.

Acknowledging Limitations

The impact of a global pandemic yielded alternatives that may were more appropriate for this study. For example, I needed to use a virtual platform, although I was open to doing this in person. However, the use of Zoom allowed me to maximize participation from as many as wanted to attend. It was evident through participant responses that power and privilege impact the number of participants who are willing to participate. Still, I recognize that an "assumption of solidarity and harmony in a community could have led to challenges with recruitment" (Mertens, 2009, p. 219). However, I addressed these limitations of my preferred data collection methods by making accommodations for participants to show flexibility and reciprocity between the researcher and the researcher.

Although my action research planning involves collecting and analyzing data based on the participants and methods that I have described earlier, I used the caution that Mertler (2020) gives to the researcher to acknowledge that there is "no such thing as a perfect research study" (p. 22). The need to be flexible was critical to reevaluation and readjusting my approach and strategy in response to potential problems as they came up. However, as a practitioner researcher, I was able to frame my actions within the context of continuous school improvement, which has yielded additional opportunities to continue the process of reflection, analysis, and the development of new strategies.

Conclusion

In summary, I provided an overview of the research design for this study. I have explored the methods for capturing the lived experiences of Black women who aspire to become principals in K-12 schools. I have established a protocol for data collection with an interview guide that has been carefully considered. I have considered alternatives, should my initial data collection plans become insufficient and addressed the limitations of this study. Due to the iterative nature of qualitative research, I have discussed how data analysis and interpretation will be cyclical and somewhat simultaneously done.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to better understand and explore the unique challenges and career needs that aspiring African American women principals face in K-12 schools in order to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. In this this chapter, I share my research findings from focus group interviews that were conducted with seven current principals and six aspiring principals in the Agape County school district. Eight major themes emerged from the data, including:

1. The Influence of Lived Experience on Career Aspirations

2. The Need for Support

3. Constant Denial Leads to Lack of Confidence and Containment

4. The Desire for Mentorship

5. The Impact of the Intersectionality of Race and Gender

6. Barriers to Promotion

7. Difficulties with Work-Life Balance

8. The Importance of Faith and Spirituality

I begin by discussing some of the lived educational experiences participants shared, including their journey in education and their rationale for pursuing a career in school administration. After which, I discuss what areas of support participants deemed necessary for advancement in their field, categorizing these supports based on various types (e.g., district, peer, and principal support). Next, I describe the impact of rejection experiences on participants' confidence. I then briefly explore the topic of containment within schools and describe some ways in which participants felt contained by their principal supervisors and other central office administrators.

In the subsequent section, I transition to a discussion on some of the participants' mentorship experiences. I also include their rationale for why mentorship is important for their career development. Because participants considered race and gender to have a significant impact on their lived experiences, I dedicate the next few sections to a discussion on the impact of intersectionality on race and gender for aspiring principals and principals. Each section on intersectionality has two subsections, which further expound on experiences related being African American women in K-12 schools. For example, in one subsection I describe the connection between politics and intersectionality, and I include specific instances where politics were used to keep participants from advancing in their administrative careers. In the other subsection on intersectionality, I share specific instances where participants were questioned about their decisions, and as a result, they felt the need to prove themselves. Next, I turn to a discussion on barriers to promotion. In the penultimate section, I draw from participant experiences to discuss the difficulty of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Finally, I end the chapter with a discussion on the importance of faith and spirituality. Participant responses are categorized into four subthemes:

1. God As One Who Intervenes
2. Faith As Connection and Dialogue
3. Prioritizing Faith to Become a Servant Leader
4. Descriptions of Faith and Its Importance

Each of the four topics captures the specific way in which participants expressed their faith experiences during the focus group interviews. Now, I turn to a discussion on participants' lived experiences and their rationale for aspiring to the principalship.

Theme 1: The Influence of Lived Experiences on Career Aspirations

All of the participants talked about their unique journey toward aspiring to become a principal. Some aspired for the principalship earlier in their careers while others had no desire to be in education at all. Though most participants did end up in the field of education, many of them had unconventional experiences, which ultimately catapulted their career to where they are today and gave them a rationale for their work.

Aspiring Principals

The aspiring principals focus group consisted of six participants who shared their journey in education and their rationale for their pursuit of school administration. Juanita's journey was unconventional in that she originally started her career working in charter schools, where she taught for ten years. Unlike many of colleagues, public schools were not where she started her work in the field. However, after working in the charter school, she began to feel that she wasn't developing in the way that she wanted, so she started working in a Title 1 public school. She felt that by making this transition, she would have more impact on students and the community. Ultimately, she spoke about how her disagreement with the administrative decisions at previous schools led to her desire to pursue a career in administration. During the focus group, she shared:

> I knew even while I was at the private school that administration would be where I was going next. But I just hadn't taken the steps and wanted to make sure that I felt like I was actually doing what I need to as a teacher in my community first. And so, um, some things happened at that particular school. The leadership, I-I did not, I did not agree with some things. Um, my own philosophy of education, there were some things that were happening that I did not agree with. And so, I actually transitioned from there, um and I

feel like, I truly feel like through my spirituality that-that God lined things up because everything was telling me to come to a particular school.

Juanita's journey was indicative of the natural progression of one thing happening after the next in her life, to the point that she believed everything was falling into perfect alignment for a pursuit in administration.

Elizabeth Ann's journey was different as well. She did not initially pursue education upon graduation from undergraduate school. She took a year off find herself, and at the end of that year, she told herself, "OK, you've enjoyed your year. Let's go into the career field that you want to go into." Elizabeth began working in a public school, and because others kept telling her, "You should be an administrator," she pursued a Masters in School Administration. However, she didn't feel that administration was for her at first. Her spirituality and belief that God spoke to her through other people is what ultimately led her to pursue a career in school administration. She also indicated she wanted to have a "greater impact and greater reach." She described her journey to administration as "unconventional." For example, she "took the test before taking the coursework" for her master's program because she had the financial means to do so and she anticipated a shift in her family structure from a two-parent to a single-parent household. Ultimately her family's circumstances and unconventional pathways impacted her approach to education and led to her determination to do whatever it takes to finish, even if her actions seem a bit farfetched. She shared:

> All of the things that we wanna see in our students and encourage, the out of the box, and
> just being a go-getter, can't really say that was um (pauses) viewed as favorably. Maybe
> looked at as like a little bit crazy. And so, but I knew what I needed to do for me and for

my family. And so, just really um, buckling down and tryna finish that coursework as soon as possible. No regrets about that.

Elizabeth Ann's personal journey encouraged her to consider other students whose journey may be different from the typical. Her personal background represented not just her story, but she felt it could represent others. Thus, her rationale for her administrative journey also was rooted in her desire to impact "he children who are struggling …, the children being raised in multigenerational homes, as well as the students who are um, academically gifted." These are the students that she found herself doing great work for during her educational journey, so she spoke about her wanting to be able to continue to have greater reach and greater impact on in the community.

Unlike the other stories, Brooklyn's journey in education was marked by her early childhood aspirations of wanting to become a teacher. She always wanted to be a teacher. She began her career in education because she really wanted to "give back" and "be the change [she] wished to see in the world." After her graduation from college, she immediately landed a job at a Title 1 school. While she was excited about having a job, she became quickly disturbed by the access disparity between children and teachers. During the conversation, she emphasized the experiences that she observed with teachers because of "drama" that she saw between teachers and administration. She described it as "he said, she said, just a lot a lot of drama." However, this experience did not deter her from her lifelong aspirations of being an educator. She eventually transferred to teach at another school and enrolled in a full-time masters to begin her career in school administration. She has pursued administration ever since.

Like Brooklyn, Justice's desire to pursue education and school administration was also a "no brainer," she added. She began her journey as a long-term substitute in 3rd grade because

she graduated in December (not May), which is typical for some graduates. After two long-term substitute teacher positions, she was offered a full-time teaching position the next summer post her graduation. After five years of teaching in 4th grade, she pursued a master's degree in special education, which allowed her to begin the next step in her career. She liked special education. However, after a couple of years, Justice wanted to do something more. She was ready to "spread [her] wings, and try new things," so she began to pursue her doctoral degree, even while she was still serving in schools. Justice continued her academic and professional career, as administration became more aligned with her pursuit.

Freedom's journey began in a private daycare facility, but she always knew that this was not what she wanted to do for life. Although her degree from college was in child development and relations, her pursuit of this degree stemmed from her desire to rebel against being a teacher. Since everyone always told her that she would be a teacher, she intentionally pursued a career in family services in order to get away from being a teacher. During the discussion, she shared:

> I originally graduated with my degree in um, child development and family relations. Um, I did not choose the BK strand because all of my life I had been told I was gonna be a teacher when I grew up and I just wanted to defy the odds and I was like "No, I'm not gonna be a teacher." So, um instead of picking the BK strand, I chose the family community services strand which practically landed me exactly right back where I didn't wanna be. Um, and working in a private facility, I realized that I wanted to be in the public school.

After fifteen years of working with children and families but not teaching, Freedom enrolled in a master's program to finish her certification to become a teacher. She became a Kindergarten teacher for three years, but because she wanted more, she asked her principal to transition to

upper grade levels, which she described as a "testing grade." These grade levels were higher stakes for her. She shared, "I want to have an array of experiences so I just will not be um, confined to just Kindergarten." She also decided to go back to school to get her master's degree, and with her ambition and determination on doing more, she went for her National Boards. After failing the National Boards exam by two points on two occasions, she was devastated. As a result, she started to pursue something different. This led to her aspirations to become a principal. She felt like she "had so much to offer kids," but she also believed that she could impart what she knew to help teachers "become better teachers." Ultimately, it was her mother's influence of asking her why she didn't want to become a principal that ultimately made Freedom consider a career in school administration. She shared:

> I aspire to …help um teachers become good at their, you know, become better and to be able to-to craft their skills and give their kids whatever they need because I knew that I was I-I-I could do that for my kids. I can also at the same time be a good leader to other teachers. So, if I could do that on an administrative level where I would, where, where I'm able to reach more teachers, that's why I felt like I wanted to be an administrator, um, for that reason.

Although Freedom experienced disappointment in her career, she did not give up on her desire for greater impact on children and adults.

Hattie began her career in education as a P.E. teacher. Her rationale was rooted in her experiences with her P.E in public school and college. Since she went to college on a sports scholarship, she stated that she decided to pursue a degree in elementary education. Upon graduation, she became a teacher assistant. However, her career pivoted because she did not complete all the necessary requirements to be licensed as a teacher. In the meantime, she became

a cosmetologist while she continued to complete all the necessary components of a teacher's license. She shared that she passed the Praxis, but she "did not have the pedagogy classes," and thus, she "was not able to obtain a job …" However, she eventually got hired as a physical education teacher and was able to take her pedagogy classes to complete her certification. After working for her principal for several years, she shared that the principal began to "push [her] to get into leadership roles." She enjoyed leadership, so she became a district facilitator, but she still did not think about becoming a principal. Her motivation and rationale behind her pursuit in school administration came from her mentor, who was located at her school, who encouraged her and worked with her to pursue a career in administration.

All the participants from the aspiring principals focus group had unique ways in which they came into the education field. Most of the aspiring principal educators had unconventional experiences where they did not see themselves pursuing administration, or they intentionally tried something else to avoid the field altogether. However, with leadership opportunities, or even with other opportunities that deviated from the field, participants still ended up finding themselves loving the field and wanting to do more in education.

Current Principals

There were seven principal participants who shared their career experiences and rationale for aspiring to the principalship. Like the aspiring principals, many of the current principals did not originally see themselves as principals. However, their aspirations developed over time as they had life changing experiences that altered their path toward administration. Like the aspiring principals, their journey to administration was marked by nuances of their own experiences and their desire to make a difference in the world.

Angela began this segment of the discussion with her experience as an educator. She shared that her school experience as an African American girl growing up in a rural area was marked by unfair treatment. She shared the realization that she knew "people could be taught and treated differently." She went into education as a teaching fellow, but she realized that there were other students who didn't have an advocate. She noted:

I feel like a champion of silenced voices. Those people who don't feel like, those families that don't feel like they have a voice that can be heard. Um and that has been one of the there are lots of reasons, but that is the undergirding kind of why that speaks to my core.

One of the reasons why advocacy was important for Angela was because of her own experiences as a teacher. She added:

Um, definitely that, and then I would also have to say my experience as a teacher. And a-and experiencing some of those things and knowing how it felt um, to not be seen or heard, but to be used when it's time. Uh, to not have your input valued, but then you're the backup, and you're the go to when things are like "I don't know what to do." So, having those kinds of experiences and um choosing to …kinda for your, for your benefit, for your good, um, to use them to grow.

Angela's goal was not just her own personal growth and development, but it was also the disruption of the perpetual cycles that she had experienced as a child and had seen students experience during her teaching career.

Essence began her career as a teacher in a Title 1 school where she spent the majority of her teaching career. However, she never thought that she would be a principal. She shared, "I wanted to be an assistant principal and I thought that's where I'd stay for my career." Essence became an assistant principal in a Title 1 school for three years before obtaining her first

principalship. Upon reflection, she found her rationale for pursuing her career in school administration to be centered on making a difference in the lives of others. She had been given opportunities where she felt like God was speaking to her and saying:

> You need to be a principal so that you can be in more of a position to impact change for these kids that look like you that are struggling academically, not just in one spot, but at a, on a, on a larger scale. So, you need to be able to be an advocate but, in a position, where you can impact change in a greater way.

After sharing her thought process for acknowledging her desire to do more in education, she confirmed, "That's why I became a principal initially 'cause I never thought that I wanted to be one." Although she did not desire to be a principal, she felt that she was called to lead and impact lives, so she couldn't resist doing that on a greater scale.

Anne's journey began as a middle school teacher at what she describes as a "high needs magnet school." She spent three years at the high school and three years at a magnet school. After getting married, she took some time off from the school and decided to teach at another school with less needs. After having her second baby, she decided to go back to school to get her masters. She also became an academic coach. Anne had no desire to become a principal at first. However, during her teaching career, she got involved with leading high school initiatives and producing new programs to turn schools around. Because she loved helping with new initiatives, her assistant principal came to her and said, "Hey, you know, you should really go into administration." She did not consider the assistant principal's words at first. There were district members who tried to encourage her to pursue a principalship. She continued to say no until her principal left, and she felt like this was her sign to apply. This decision was what she described as "one of the best decisions that [she'd] ever made."

Cardi P's journey in administration began after having served as a long-time teacher and interventionist. She began her teaching career in 2009 at Essence's current school. (This was an example of a connection that participants had with each other.) She spent 9 years in elementary education and then she left to pursue administration. She landed her first job at what she described as her "original stomping ground for teaching." She toggled between counties as she continued to search for the right opportunity. Ultimately, she believed that experience was similar to other participants who described their decision as a "God move." For example, she added:

> I'll say just like Essence and several of you, this is absolutely a God move. I started my career, the majority of my career has been elementary, and God put things, um (pauses) you know, we wanna know our path a head of time and there were thing, you know, things put in my path that I had no control over, but because of that, I am here, um, today. And so, I am grateful. I-I always aspired to um be in some sort of leadership and I've been a lifelong teacher, I'm still a lifelong teacher, um but I, you know I had um lots of experience with uh various leadership roles as I um, did my work as a classroom teacher, an interventionist, and I was encouraged to pursue administration.

Cardi P always knew that she wanted greater impact and involvement for students and staff. Ultimately, she noted that a performance at a black history celebration for an affinity group that she led that compelled and motivated her to take the next steps toward administration.

For Olivia, education is a second career. She began her career in the district that she serves in now. She has been in five schools, and while she did not mention her previous work, she did mention that she "felt people um in along [her] journey um to this point." Like others, she never thought she wanted to be in education. However, she mentioned the power of the

saying: "To much is given, much is expected." Because she worked in the classroom, she wanted a way to "impart some of the lessons that [she] had learned in the classroom" to others. During the discussion, she wanted to add on to Essence's commentary, which she felt represented her experience as well. She stated:

> I had just sort of uh what Essence is saying and spread it to others. And think about how I can also share those gifts and talents that were imparted upon me to others in even a small way, um if anything I had to learn. And again, I felt that it was a continual learning process for me, right. I wanted to continue to grow myself, grow my pedagogy, and I wanted to continue to um expand my toolbox um by being a leader and bring other practices back to others so that um we could continue to grow together in the school setting. So, I felt a sense of responsibility and duty.

Olivia felt responsible for passing on the knowledge that she learned to not only teachers but also to children. She reflected on her own experience as she continued:

> Like I felt like often underserved as a child….I didn't have an education that I thought, I didn't see a lot of people looking like, looked like me teaching me and I felt like that was not a an area that I had witnessed to be um also contributing to the education system in a way that was allowing brown girls like myself to see powerful leaders, um powerful black leaders that looked like them.

Olivia's responsibility to helping other girls who look like her become powerful leaders seemed to be her ultimate drive for her pursuit as principal.

Cori's story of how she became a principal was also interesting. She had several roles in her district: teacher, interventionist, gifted education specialist, etc. She taught for six years initially, but after doing some of the other roles, her principal actually brought her paperwork

and told her that she needed to consider being a principal fellow. In Cori's disbelief that she would be a principal, she stated that she "threw the papers in a drawer in her desk, closed the drawer, and said [she] ain't hardly interested." The group could see the emotion as Cori shared this. However, the turning point was what she described as "wisdom" speaking, to which she had to be "obedient." At this moment, Cori had attributed her journey to God. She stated, "it was a God move. I thought I would be wheeled out of the classroom actually in a wheelchair." Everyone chuckled at her comment as Cori went on to tell us that she had served as a principal for almost seven years. It was evident that Cori's principal motivated her and pushed her to consider becoming a principal.

Slikk's experience was interesting because it deviated from the other principal experiences. She always wanted to be a principal. Her only question was what school level she would serve. She spent the beginning of her career as a school counselor and then became an assistant principal. While she always wanted to be a principal, she would always hear people say, "you know um, it's stressful regardless of what it is that you choose, rather that's an assistant principal versus a principal, but the stresses are different." She decided to try the principalship experience, despite what people had told her along the way. Slikk told the group, "I wanted to kinda see how all those other things worked." She felt that her experience as a counselor prepared her for the principalship and spoke about how her principalship experiences have been more about counseling than being a principal. As she continued to share and reflect on her previous experiences, she spoke about doing a "hall sweep" as a counselor. She told a story that she stated she often tells:

> I tell this story all the time. And um in that hall sweep once we sweep the kids in, we
>
> write them the note and send them to class. And my line would always be the longest line

77

because I wanted to know why they were late. And so, I think that's just the counselor in me, and I feel like that has helped me and mold me into the principal and administrator that I am today…. I was determined that you could be an administrator and don't have to always play the bad cop kinda situation. So, um, it's worked out and I mean even in loving on the kids I say, "You know I gotta send you home." You know, but it's still a good relationship and I because I pride myself in building relationships….so, um that's why I chose to be one.

Slikk's experience as a counselor who had to constantly perform hall sweeps when students were late ultimately motivated her to think of ways to build relationships with students and reframe administration in a more positive way. Instead of being a "bad cop," Slikk saw her role as wanting to love on kids, even when she had to make difficult decisions to send students home.

Both principals and aspiring principals shared their unique experiences that led them to pursue the principalship. Many of their experiences stem from their own childhood or from their early years as an educator. Collectively, they believed that greater change was needed and they could be the change they wanted to see in the world. For some, being an African American woman in the field would help students see themselves as leaders. For others, advocating for families who may not have a voice was important. However, some of the participants benefited from having other principals or leaders of influence in their lives that saw that they had potential to become an administrator. This recognition often led the participants to pursue a career in administration, even if they were not originally considering the field.

Theme 2: The Need for Support

It was evident through participant responses that strong, authentic, and supportive relationships with district, peers, and principals are significant to African American women

aspiring to become principals. Throughout my conversation with this focus group, each of the participants had at least one thing to elaborate on regarding the need for district support, peer support, and principal support. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the need for these supports and the impact that these supports could have on African American women who aspire to become principals.

District Support

Aspiring principal participants spoke about the need to have a safe space where like-minded African American women can come together to share and learn from each other. Brooklyn noted that a "beginner leader" or "beginner administrator" program would be helpful. However, Brooklyn also indicated that the opportunity to socialize with others outside of school was also important:

> Um, just, whether it's uh, fun outside of school or we hang out once a month, or just a check in. and then something that's personable. Like, you know that you're talking to Brooklyn, and what she's doing at (names middle school) and not just a blanket statement. And, so, um, something that, that's just more personable.

The need for affinity spaces was prevalent amongst the participant's responses. Justice and Elizabeth Ann both spoke to the need to have a similar group to the focus group that was organized for this research where they have a safe space to share their experiences. When the focus group was asked to identify some additional supports that they felt were needed as an aspiring principal. Justice responded:

> I'll be honest, something like this. I know that this is a part of your, you know, dissertation…You know, as a woman of, or as an educator of color, but if we were to start some type of group like this, and it would, I think it could be helpful for a number of

reasons. You know, when there are openings, people already know. You know, "Oh we have this pool of people who are interested." Versus, you know, that awkward moment when you apply for a position, you go into the interview, it's the first time, you know, some people are learning of your interests. And then, you know (smacks teeth), I think that, you know, some-some type of group like this would just be awesome.

In addition to having a group that African American women who aspire to be principals can be a part of, Justice also discussed how an affinity group could serve as an interest group to reference when there are open positions. Rather than show up for an interview and it be the first time that district leaders know that participants are interested in an administrative position, Brooklyn saw the need for an affinity group to serve as an applicant pool that districts could reference based on their understanding that group members already have a similar interest in administration. Juanita reiterated the need for an affinity space "for people to be able to let it be known" that they have the same interest in administration, while Elizabeth Ann agreed with Justice's and Juanita's perspective on the need for affinity groups and spaces. She also pointed out that these groups could be found online. She added:

It's always a-a push to buy this program, buy this journal, buy this, buy that. And again, if it's worthy, I don't mind buying it if I'm interested in it, and if I'm not interested in I don't wanna feel um, obligated if that makes sense to buy something to still have the (pauses) opportunity to be a part of your group and I would like for it to be organic and authentic kind of how like (internet glitches) this feels. And just and opportunity, going back to what Brooklyn said to interact and engage with likeminded people with likeminded goals who aren't threatened or, this is my mindset, the sun is big enough to shine on us all. What's for you is for you, and what's for me is for me.

Other perspectives on the need for support/affinity groups were centered on networking opportunities, hands-on job shadowing experiences, and relevant strengths-based professional development. Elizabeth Ann deemed it important to create leadership opportunities for African American women to "get up and lead." As she unpacked this thought, she mentioned the need for African American women to be supported with identifying the following:

> What's your strength? What's your talent? What's your skillset? What's your ministry? What do you bring to the table? And letting you um craft a presentation on that for a specific target group. Of course, keeping it authentic because I don't think anything should be something just to do something. That's a waste of everybody's time.

Along with the opportunity to present to other like-minded people, Freedom indicated that by having hands-on experience, "even if it's just going and shadowing a principal a day" aspiring principals would be able to reference these opportunities in their interviews, despite not having formal administrative experience.

In their responses, the principal focus group indicated a need for districts to focus on supporting aspiring principals with feedback. Essence and Oliva, two principals who currently work in Agape School District shared about the importance of district training and feedback to aspiring principals to help mold them and make them better for competitive positions. Essence shared the following thoughts on the need for district feedback:

> I feel like particularly um principalships to other roles, district level leaders, I think like…to have somebody provide you feedback to me is helpful. Um, not to (pauses) I don't wanna say get a job, but …getting feedback about what people may have interpreted or perceived, um based on what your responses. To me, that' always helpful, and I don't know that everybody does that. Sometimes you reach out, if you get 'em they

81

don't say "You did great on this." Even if you get the job, "You did great on this, you did great on that. Let's remember to keep this central." Or if you don't get it um, the why behind it would be helpful from my—from my perspective.

Essence's response reflects the power of feedback and how it can help individuals grow in their leadership preparation, even if they did a great job in certain areas. Additionally, Olivia spoke to the need for investment in aspiring leaders via advancement classes. She believes that it is "our job to mold them and make them better," especially when it comes to things that aspiring principals are lacking. Cori, who is another sitting principal in the school district, shared about her convictions regarding checking for biases amongst interview team members. As an African American woman, Cori spoke about the internal conflict and awkward feelings she has experienced when she had to address biases that are revealed during the interview process. As she recounted her lived experiences, she shared:

I've learned not to let it feel awkward to call out what I perceived as someone's bias uh, in interviews. I don't know that that always happens. And so, I think, so I don't know that that would be helpful for the person aspiring…but I think the district as a whole needs it um so that when people of color are aspiring to jobs, that those who are sitting around the table making decisions are able to make decisions that aren't rooted in their own biases.

Cori felt that addressing biases within the interview team was extremely important and has significant implications for people of color aspiring to principal roles. While she felt that checking for biases on the interview team were indirectly related to the district's direct support for aspiring principals, she spoke to the direct implications that this process could have on people of color being given an opportunity to be considered with objectivity and not through one's own biases.

Peer Support

Participant responses indicated a strong connection with each other, which in turn reflected the need for peer support models (i.e., cohorts) in order to persevere through difficult experiences. Hattie shared her experience of how she encouraged Freedom to enroll in a doctoral program with her. She added that the two of them are currently working on their dissertations together. On the one hand, peer support served as a catalyst for Freedom to begin a doctoral program. On the other hand, Brooklyn shared how her cohort helped her through her inner struggle to keep moving to finish her masters amongst many rejections to administrative opportunities. In her recount of her lived experiences, she stated:

> I felt like I wasn't doing enough or like it wasn't for me, and so there was times when I said "You know what, I thought I wanted this, but this is not what I wanted. Like I'll be fine going back to the classroom. Go back to what I know." Um, just like, I'm like "My voice is not gonna be heard. I'm not gonna get a job. It's-it's not gonna go well for me." So, thankfully having a good cohort, I finished the program.

Ultimately, Brooklyn noted that her Master in School Administration (MSA) cohort became a very personal network of people who motivated and pushed her to finish her goals. Hattie also Although it was not expected that participants feel the need to respond to each other's experiences, there were several moments during the focus group when other participants would interject and encourage another participant in response to some of their lived experiences, which may have been difficult. It was as if the participants were empathizing with one another, only to help them see the value in themselves. For example, there was a moment during the focus group interview when Juanita responded to the group. Having known Brooklyn's experience before the interview, Janita responded:

I feel like again that was God showing up in both of our um lives because I think we were great to be there for each other. And I saw how that experience really hampered her and her confidence. But I needed her to know that they were the lucky ones to receive her. Even an assistant principal who was there who I spoke to said, "She is exactly what we need." And I think that's another thing that I, that I believe you having us together will help us see, sometimes we do have that impostor syndrome and not realize what we bring to the table.

Juanita's response to Brooklyn during the interview represents the power of African American women being in safe spaces to share experiences and lift each other up in the process–something that several participants indicated as a need for support. In fact, Juanita mentioned that she had no doubt that there would be things in our lives that "allow us to doubt ourselves especially as women of color" and thus, women of color have to " be able to have each other's back to help build [themselves] up when things occur." Having a similar response to Brooklyn as Juanita did, Justice also interjected during the interview and spoke about how amazing Brooklyn was as a current administrator. Justice, having worked with Brooklyn in her current new role, stated that "[Brooklyn] is just what the team needed…It was a no-brainer." Justice's commentary on Brooklyn's performance was another indication that peer support, even in the words that one speaks about another, is very powerful and important to how African American women persevere in their aspirations to the principalship.

Principal Support

Principal willingness to offer aspiring principals an opportunity to take the lead on projects is a significant indicator of their support for new up and coming leaders. During my conversation with aspiring principal participants, many of them spoke about the verbal

84

affirmation from principal leaders as a form of support and motivation toward pursuit of the principalship role. For example, Elizabeth Ann recounted that she was "very-very fortunate to work with different administrators over the years who still saw the leader in [her]" and gave her opportunities to continue to lead and/or pushed [her] to lead even when I didn't want to lead. Similarly, Juanita said, "I believe my principal was a great support." However, Juanita added that she "[doesn't] mind talking to anybody" because she can "learn from anybody no matter what space they are in." The way in which Juanita approached her comment indicated that aspiring principals could view principal support in a variety of ways–even if the principal isn't directly doing something tangible like a task. Juanita's response showed that even the opportunity to sit down and ask questions of the principals can be perceived as a form of principal support.

All of the participants deemed it necessary to have some level of support during their career development. While I focus on district, peer, and principal support, there are many others that could have been considered. Most of the participant responses fell within these three categories, and thus the findings are presented as such.

Theme 3: Constant Denial Leads to Lack of Confidence and Containment

During our conversation, Brooklyn recounted her experiences of wanting to become a teacher since she was a little girl. However, this changed for her after she did not get support from administration and realized that "there were some things that teachers did not have access to" in the school. Brooklyn described these experiences as "one-sided, or …just a lot of drama." She decided to stay at her school because being in school was what she wanted to do. However, the denial of resources caused her to feel stuck after fulfilling her beginner teacher program requirements. She stated, "I didn't think that I could go to a different school. I didn't think that I could change… I just thought, "OK, this is it, and it's great, because this is all I knew." She felt

this way despite the fact that as a teacher she could ask for a transfer. It was not until she overheard some teachers talking about "going downtown on the principal" that she was informed of the right and ability that she had to transfer to a different school. However, for Brooklyn, the access disparities had an even greater impact: she felt like she wasn't fit for a job in education.

Two participants, including Brooklyn, shared their experiences with going back to graduate school to further their careers as aspiring principals. Brooklyn decided to go to school full time and also teach full time. About halfway through her program, Brooklyn started to feel as if she wasn't doing enough and wanted to revert back to the classroom. She said:

> I felt like I wasn't doing enough or like it wasn't for me, and so there was times when I said "You know what, I thought I wanted this, but this is not what I wanted. Like I'll be fine going back to the classroom. Go back to what I know." Um, just like, I'm like "My voice is not gonna be heard. I'm not gonna get a job. It's-it's not gonna go well for me."

While Brooklyn did not attribute her lack of confidence to one specific thing, she did allude to her anticipation of her struggle to get a job, even with her having the right credentials. Later in her discussion on her experiences as an educator, she shared that she felt the school "took a chance" on her when she finally did get a job as an administrator. In her words below, she describes the impact that her previous work experiences had on her in addition to her long wait for her next job opportunity. She stated:

> I think because of being there for so long, and they knew what I had and I still couldn't land a job, I felt like I wasn't worthy of a job or maybe my skill set wasn't good. And so um, and even going to different interviews too and them knowing that I never had an assistant principalship, I'm a first year, I feel like that's taking a chance. Um, and even the words from the principal...she told everybody that she did not hire me because I did

not have assistant principal um, experience. And so, I think, having that mindset, I just felt like my team, OK, well somebody with no experience, you're taking a chance on me 'cause I'm-I'm-I don't know what I'm bringing to the table. That's how I felt.

Justice lack of confidence seemed to be prevalent in her experience of attending her first information session for a doctoral program. She realized that she didn't see people who looked like her or who were in the same stage of their educational journey. She shared:

I looked around the room and I'm like "Oh my gosh there are so many people here from central office. There are so many principals and assistant principals. What am I doing here?" Impostor syndrome of course.

Responses from the aspiring principals focus group revealed that constant rejection from administrative opportunities caused them to doubt themselves and feel defeated, which they in turn, described as Impostor syndrome. Participants did not think that they were suitable for a job in administration, nor did they see themselves as worthy of becoming an administrator.

Some participants did not share specific experiences of having Imposter syndrome, but they agreed that it is something that African American women experience in their pursuit of administrative roles. Brooklyn and Jauanita shared that they were in the same cohort in grad school, and immediately after Brooklyn shared about her experiences in graduate school, Jaunita responded with:

I feel like again that was God showing up in both of our um lives because I think we were great to be there for each other. And I saw how that experience really hampered her and her confidence. But I needed her to know that they were the lucky ones to receive her. Even an assistant principal who was there who I spoke to said, "She is exactly what we need." And I think that's another thing that I ho, that I believe you having us together will

help us see, sometimes we do have that impostor syndrome and not realize what we bring

to the table. She brought exactly what they needed. The team was blessed to be able to

find exactly what they needed in her. And so, um she took a chance on them.

Juanita's comment demonstrates the way in which African American women in this group

listened to others' experiences and offered support and encouragement to them even while they

were a part of the research discussion. Justice, like Juanita, interjected and said:

As I talk about my journey, I also just want to echo, Brooklyn is amazing. Um, I get work

with Brooklyn as the EC program facilitator at um the school that she's the assistant

principal, and um she's great. She's just what the team needed, and I know that first-

hand. It was a no-brainer…

Justice shared in the experience with Brooklyn and Juanita, and her response served as additional

affirmation to Brooklyn that she was the right person for the assistant principal role, despite the

feelings of doubt that she had about her ability to do the job.

Freedom also shared her sentiments of being unsure at times of whether she wants to

become an administrator. She stated:

Sometimes, I feel like I do want to be an administrator, sometimes I'm not sure. Um, and

I think, I think the reason why I-I'm unsure is because-because I haven't um 'cause I

haven't been hired. I've applied, but I haven't been hired anywhere. So, it's me second

guessing myself, you know, "Well I don't know if this is what I really wanna do." You

know, um, "Maybe this is not for me." Um, but I've applied for other leadership roles as

well.

When their experiences are taken together, Brooklyn and Freedom's responses indicated that

they both felt the impact of what it means to be constantly denied the job that they desired.

Although Freedom did not mention anything about having Imposter Syndrome, she did speak about her constantly second guessing herself to the point where she considered the thought that a career in school administration was not for her. Even when she applied for other leadership positions in the district, she faced the same rejection.

Participants who faced constant rejection as they pursued different job opportunities indicated that they were greatly affected in a negative way. Most continued to pursue other roles, but many felt defeated and contemplated stopping their pursuit altogether. While some participants shared that they haven't obtained a job in administration, most have pushed past their disappointment and have waited for the right opportunity to become an administrator in a school district. Some participants even indicated that they had to leave the district and come back before they could obtain a role as an administrator.

Theme 4: The Desire for Mentorship

Both the principal and aspiring principals focus groups determined that mentorship is extremely important for preparation and transition to the principal role. Many participants placed special emphasis on mentorship support coming from the district. They also indicated that the lack of mentorship was somewhat of a barrier for them. When asked to identify some barriers to aspiring to the principalship and to identify what additional support they felt they needed, Brooklyn indicated mentorship and networking, especially when it comes to a transition to a new district. Even after spending some time in the district, she said, "I feel like I don't know anybody." The desire to have someone to share in their career journey and consult when needed was also evident in participant responses. Unlike the others, Juanita felt that she had good mentorship, and while her story was different from the others, she did agree with the need for

good mentorship and the purpose that she felt that it had for aspiring administrators. For example, Juanita shared:

> Because if I hadn't, if I haven't seen good leadership, if I hadn't had a chance to um, be mentored or ask questions, or pick a brain, you know what I'm saying … Sometimes we think "I'm not ready. I gotta do this or that or be here," and a mentor is the one that tells you … you are never ready in your head. You have to just do it; you know what I'm saying. And so … maybe helping me get there better by having those mentors who let you know um, what they see in you … and even willing to share their own experience. I-I believe mentorship is huge … mentorship plays a part and just helping us really be able to put the mirror on ourselves and-and trust and believe what we already have in us to step into um the next uh, phase of our—our journey.

Brooklyn's response illustrates the different perceived benefits of mentorship. She described mentorship as her opportunity to share ideas with someone who will allow her to ask questions, but she also defined it by having someone to simply affirm that she could do the job. Brooklyn also referenced how mentorship allows participants to hear other people share their experiences from the fieldwork. Cardi P and Cori's responses reflected their sentiment about mentorship, including the people who served as mentors in their lives. For example, Cori described mentorship as a "luxury" and was able to name the mentor who had a significant impact on her life. Meanwhile, Cardi P talked about her experience with having good mentors when she faced rejection. She stated:

> I've had great um mentorships and … listen, um what God has for you, it is for you. And that's hard to-to process and receive when you're in it 'cause no hurts. You know, and no so many times. And …in my experience watching people get positions and I'm like "Oh

90

my goodness." Um, you know, "What am I not doing?" But what God has for me it is for me.

Cardi P's responses regarded mentorship as an agent to help her navigate her painful experiences of rejection while seeing others be promoted. For her, mentorship also helped her to tap into her faith and spirituality.

Other principals described mentorship as a "necessity" for the principalship role. In her response regarding the topic, Anne stated that she "had some very good ones as well." In fact, Anne believes in the power of mentorship so much that she reiterated the point again. She added, "if it's someone that looks like you and in the same type of field and same, similar environment or something like that it's really helpful." Later on in the conversation, Anne shared a particular experience that she had as an assistant principal with a specific mentor who "planted seed[s]" of confidence in her and pushed her out of her comfort zone. When Anne was faced with the dual responsibilities of working and being a mother, she shared that she had a couple of principal mentors who pushed her past her circumstances. She further noted that mentorship is important because "you can't do this job without having someone that's gonna tell you when you're right, but also tell you when you're wrong, and then help you correct yourself." For Anne and a few others, mentorship serves as a need and desire for checks and balances in the workplace.

Theme 5: The Impact of the Intersectionality of Race and Gender

Many experiences surrounding race, gender, and the intersectionality between the two were raised by both focus groups. However, the ways identity intersectionalities impacted participants varied whether they were aspiring to the principalship or had become school administrators. Aspiring principals shared experiences that impacted their pursuit of administrative roles. Many of them used factors surrounding their own race and gender to

determine how they would move forward in their careers. Sitting principals often shared about the emotional trauma that they suffered as others questioned their authority and decision-making. As a result, principals often felt the need to prove themselves.

Intersectionality and Aspiring Principals

One of the ways in which this theme emerged was with a participant who was perceived by staff to be responsible for addressing issues with her supervisor because they were both African American. In her experiences of working with a Black administrator, Elizabeth Ann reflected upon how staff would come to her as an assistant principal and ask her to speak with her principal about challenging matters instead of going to the principal for themselves. Elizabeth Ann stated:

> Some staff members came to me, "You should go talk to her. You need to tell her." I was like "What? Um, no! Who appointed you to come tell me to go talk to her? Just like you came to me, to tell me to go talk to her, why don't you go talk to her?" And looking back later I realized it was because, probably because she was a woman of color, and I was a woman of color. And so, they wanted to look out for her, the particular people who came to me. But I still felt um, that's not my place, for one, I don't know her.

Elizabeth Ann did not desire to be the person that other staff relied on to communicate their concerns to the principal. She felt it was not her place to address other people's issues, yet she saw that people were challenged by the principal's action. Whereas Elizabeth Ann and her principal did not have the type of relationship where she felt like she really knew her, other staff deemed it appropriate for her to represent them in addressing their concerns so they did not have to do so. In this example, the impact of race and gender for Elizabeth Ann meant that she served as a spokesperson for other people, which meant that she was the voice of many.

Politics and Intersectionality

Politics also influenced Elizabeth Ann's experiences with gender and race. She recounted another time when she was offended by the district's decision to place her at a school with a white administrator so that she could be the token child as an African American woman assistant principal. Elizabeth Ann following shared the following regarding what the district told her:

> We're putting you with the principal, we're placing you there because we can't have um, two people leading that school, a historically black school, we can't have 2 white people leading that school. She's new to the district. She's smart. She's smart. She's smart. And in my mind as this is being presented to me, I'm thinking "I'm smart too (chuckles). What the heck? What did, what do you mean by that? She's smart? So am I." And that's not to take away from anyone else's intellectual um, you know, level, yeah, she's smart, but again I stand by in the fact that, so am I. Everybody's smart. We're all smart in different ways.

Elizabeth's response represents her feeling of being undermined by the district seemingly placing her just to check off the fact that they had a Black female administrator at a school where there were predominantly Black students. While Elizabeth Ann was placed at this school to represent her race, her responses indicated that the district's decision was focused solely on politics, not on what the students needed. Furthermore, she felt that the decision was made under the guise that the new principal was "smart" but somehow needed someone who was African American and inferior to help her be successful. Elizabeth Ann's response and reflection indicated that she was insulted by the use of the word "smart" to reference the new principal, yet the district failed to use "smart" to describe her.

Brooklyn's experience was similar to Elizabeth Ann's in that she also experienced how her intersectionality was impacted by the politics of hiring. In her contribution to the conversation on race and gender, she added:

> I would say for me, hiring, so, um, having summers of applying for certain schools, and knowing "Oh, they have a female principal, so they probably wouldn't want another, a female AP." Or they have a male, so just hiring and trying to think, not even putting myself out there because I'm a female and you can have too many females and the whole admin team is emotional, or like the stereotypes.

Whereas Elizabeth Ann's experience referenced representation for students, Brooklyn's experience is an example of how African American women retreat and therefore don't apply or "put [themselves] out there" to represent students the negative stereotypes associated with race and gender. At times, Brooklyn was consumed by the politics of how she had been oriented to hiring, so she did not apply for jobs because of the fear of an administrative team having too many females or being too emotional–both stereotypes associated with being an African American woman.

Freedom shared that being African American also makes her reluctant about applying to positions. As she shared her experiences, she mentioned that the first thing she does is "look up the school, see who's the principal, if there's a, if it's a African American woman" which then helps her to determine whether or not she applies to the position. If there is an African American female administrator at the school, she counts herself as one too many. She shared, "I automatically know within myself that I'm not gonna get this position because they already have one black female in leadership here." Her awareness of her own intersectionality impacts her decision to apply to positions. Her responses are indicative of a belief that there can be too many

94

Black women represented in a school. Her awareness of her own intersectionality impacts her decision making for job searches, and it signifies that she has to be more concerned with the politics concerning the ratio of black administrators to their counterparts than their qualifications and capacity to lead a school.

Intersectionality Used to Strikeout

Another participant, Freedom, described the intersectionality of her race and gender as having "two things stacked against [her]" or "two strikes" against her as a person aspiring to be in a leadership position. Her description regarded race and gender as negative and dismissive. For her, there was no benefit or advantage to being an African American black woman because one cannot be isolated from the other. During the interview, Juanita agreed with Freedom and added that "we can't say one without the other." In other words, race and gender have to be taken together simultaneously when referencing their experiences. In her words below, Juanita provides examples of Freedom's pontification of how race and gender are like "two strikes" against a person. She stated:

> It's the intersectionality of both of them because um, what comes with wearing the African American hat and the female hat is the angry black woman, the strong black woman, you know the hero, you know what I'm sayin'. So, um, we know what stereotypes we're against when we walk into the room, OK, loud and all this and that, but how do we show up against that? How do we make sure that I'm, like I said earlier, being my full authentic self and not letting anybody else define what that looks like or what that will be …

Juanita's reference to the stereotype of being an angry black woman was juxtaposed with the idea of being a strong black woman. She indicated that what society deems as negative could

95

actually be a failure to recognize cultural identity and authenticity. That is, Juanita questioned how she could "show up" in her authenticity as a Black woman without being called "angry" or without the perception that she has to do everything because of her perceived strength. Her responses reflect a conflict of wanting to be one's "full authentic self," yet it also reflects the pressure of society to define what an African American woman should look like, act like, and be like.

Elizabeth Ann's comments on race and gender is one example of how Black women can be defined or perceived when they stand in their authenticity. She shared that they are either called an "angry black female" or a "B****," which she chose not to say the derogatory name because she felt everyone knew what she meant. However, Elizabeth Ann also pointed out how men are not held to the same standard as men. She stated:

> People don't say that about a male when they are being um, assertive or just leading. Doing something that's associated with their role, if it's a directive, if it's a follow up, um, just whatever situation they might see you in, your staff. They don't ascribe those same statements to our male counterparts, and I think that's terrible. That's awful. That's why I'm very conscious about (pauses) I own my femininity. I gonna wear, I wear pantsuits sometimes, but I also, I'm very conscious about, oh I'm wearing my full-on skirt, African American skirt um, 'cause you need to see this. This is who I am …

Elizabeth's response to derogatory stereotypes was to use them to drive her consciousness as an African American woman, and therefore, she felt it was necessary to own her identity regardless of the circumstance. In this way, she acknowledges societal views on African American women, but unlike the others, she refuses to let those views define how she thinks about herself. Her choice in clothing, for example, serves as a personal statement of awareness and ownership in

her race and gender. She shared that she wears pantsuits sometimes just to counteract the norm that men are usually associated with wearing pants. However, she also talked about wearing skirts and embracing her femininity whenever she desires. When applied to social contexts, Elizabeth Ann shared that she didn't think "you can ever have too many females personally" and saw it as "girl power." She agreed with Juanita's earlier interpretation that there is an intersectionality between race and gender, but that intersectionality should push African American to be themselves. Her choice to exercise ownership of her race and gender, even in her choice of clothing, indicates her ability to stand in her own freedom, despite what others in society believe, say, or do.

Intersectionality and Principals

Principals seemed to have harsher experiences surrounding their race and gender than the focus group of aspiring principals. Whereas the impact of intersectionality caused most aspiring principals to internalize their feelings about their own identity and rethink their desire and ability to apply for positions and be successful, sitting principals had very public experiences that were dehumanizing to them and the black population that they serve. Many of the experiences below deal with access to resources that some families disagreed with because they felt that some form of access had been taken from them as white families. As a result, the experiences were offensive and difficult to navigate because of the extremity of emotion that they evoked for the participants.

Questioning of Authority and Decision-Making

In her retelling of her experiences with race and gender, Angela described how both were pronounced "quite loudly in [her] first administrative experience um being at a dual language school." She described her many encounters with people who would converse with her and then

say that they were waiting for "the real principal to come so they could talk to them." These families responded as if their conversation with Angela was not enough. More importantly, however, was the notion that people did not really believe that Angela, who is a black woman, was the "real" principal of the school.

In some ways, Olivia's experience was similar to Angela's experiences. However, some of her experiences were targeted specifically to her status as a black woman in leadership. In her story below, Angela describes her interactions with white men and describes how others would respond to her leadership as a black woman working with white male principals:

I will say that having a um, having worked with male principals in the building I would get up um male parents in particular more to wanna talk to the male in the building or and even others wanting to speak to the white man … So, I think that when I think about race and gender, I think that they were more apt to go to the white man for the right answers or for the answers um that they were looking for and wanted to meet um often or think that was the person that was um leading the building … I think it played a role when I had male assistant principals that were, also happen to be white. It played a part where they wanted to again have more dialogue or thought they could have dialogue until he escorted them to my office and's like "No he can't make that decision … I think if they could have gotten away with just talking to the men and not me this community, I think that would've been something that they would've appreciated, but they weren't able to do that.

Whereas Angela's experiences pertained to her leadership as the principal, Olivia's experiences pertained to both her role as an administrator working a white male principal and her role as a principal working with white male assistant principals. Olivia was also questioned about her

decisions, but she placed even more emphasis on the dichotomy between being a black female administrator and being a white male administrator. Her experiences described the preference that people had to talk to someone who was a white male rather than a black female. Moreover, their responses indicated that there was prejudice against black women because they went to the white men for decisions, even if Oliva was the only administrator who could make final decisions. Moreover, Olivia's thought that male parents could have gotten away with not even talking to her in certain situations is disturbing because it indicates a lack in acknowledgement of the presence of black women administrators in schools. Additionally, Olivia's experience describes a silencing of Black women's voices in the field, which I discussed in Chapter II.

In her contribution to the discussion on intersectionality, Essence commented that she, like the other principal participants, felt that it was hard for her to separate race and gender. She described a particular experience where she felt the impact of dehumanization as a father cursed at her in front of his child. She shared:

I had a father storm in the building, it was like 7 o'clock at night. He came around the back um, from afterschool … And was mad about uh something that he heard. One of his children went home and told him that one of the speakers from the (states name of a center), an older black woman had shared her experience how she got sprayed with the firehose by the police when she was marching for civil rights. And, you know, he just went on and on and was going off on me about that. And then … I was facilitating with other parents about some curriculum changes. And he like started yelling and screaming at me around something that was unrelated in front of the whole parent-body. It was just a lot and I had to like really just shut him down.

As Angela continued her story, she noted that the father was really upset about his child having learned Black women experiences during the civil rights movement. Not only did the parent "go off" on her, but he found other ways to continue expressing his anger and aggression toward her in a public manner. She continued to reflect:

> So, I've had lots of encounters like that. With the email things, like trying to make sure I'm watching my tone. Reading it, re-reading it make sure I don't make any grammatical errors that people are going to uh equate to, you know, me being black and all that kinda stuff. So, it-it's a lot. Like walking on the eggshells just tryna make sure you're um crossing every T and dotting every I because wanna make sure I'm being the best representative of you know my people and not making people think um certain things. So, always just being on high alert, particularly here for me has been where race has shown up a lot.

Essence's story reveals how the parent not only chose to display his anger before her, but went on to role model his negative behavior in front of his child. Her reflection on her many encounters led her to share a number of ways that she second guesses and double checks to avoid making errors. For her, making mistakes reflected negatively on being a black woman. Unfortunately, Essence's responses indicate that striving to be a black woman principal who avoids criticism and is always on "high alert" is impossible and too much pressure for a person to handle.

The Need to Prove Oneself

Upon reflection, all of the principals agreed that they felt the need to prove themselves when they were questioned on their decision-making surrounding access for families. Principals also took responsibility for self-imposing this need to prove themselves because of the pressure

that they felt internally and externally. In this section, I share their reflections and provide more examples of stories about questioning.

During Angela's reflection on her first administrative experience at a dual language school, she mentioned her need to alter her communication with parents to be clear and concise, yet politically correct. She stated:

> I imposed some things on myself of "I have to do more to prove." I-I have to, like you might turn it in this way, but I know that I'm going to need to do it this way, so that there's no doubt that I know what I'm talking about, no question about what I'm offering you. And those are things I did to myself right, as a result of other interactions um around uh I could have um a white partner say something after I had already communicated it and it was received.

As a result of her multiple experiences of others questioning her, Angela felt the need to spend time crafting language that was politically correct, even if it meant censoring the way in which she would typically communicate. She found this particularly upsetting because she was sure that the standards were different for her white female counterparts who did not have to alter their message in order to be received. In another experience, Angela told the group about a white parent who made some particularly jarring comments:

> The last one that I'll share was one that was um particularly jarring in that during an open house uh, a white parent accused me of making up the philosophy around um classrooms, multigrade classrooms, and threatened my job, threatened uh to report me for coming up with something uh that he said I had made up uh and not understanding our state ratios and things of that nature, in front of the entire student body uh during open house.

Screaming, um very irate, very angry um in doing that. So that's one, that's been one of

the, that was one of the most jarring.

This experience was publicly humiliating for Angela, and whereas she shared that others usually

call her on the phone, this one was more jarring. However, as Angela wrapped up her retelling of

this experience, although she said it would be her last, another experience came to mind that she

felt the need to share because it was just as jarring to her. She stated,

And then there was, another one that was jarring, in an IEP meeting said "Black people

can't pass any of these tests, so why are we saying that my child needs to pass them? Um,

and they get to go to sch" mm-hmm, yeah. Kinda closed the meeting out after that, no

we, we not talking anymore. But those are some ways that race has shown up.

In her description of this incident, she indicated how blatant and obvious some of her

experiences were with race (and therefore gender) that it was impossible to continue with

conversation. Even in an IEP meeting, which is a legal meeting, she did not feel that she could

continue after such negative comments were made about black people and their perceived

inability to pass tests. Angela did indicate that most of her experiences were "more subtle" and a

lot of times not as "blatant," but these particular stories stood out among others for her and

therefore she needed to share them because they were so painful.

Cori shared an experience that reminded me of how politics can impact administrative

decisions and administrative appointments within a district. Like the aspiring principal focus

group, Cori's experience reflected the way in which having more than one black administrator

within a given school could be perceived as negative. In addition, Cori's experiences were

centered on some form of access, whether that access would benefit people who had privilege or

not. For example, Cori recounted the following experience from four years ago:

I had a district leader ask me at the time, well, I guess it's still this time, just a different black assistant principal ask me who did the white people, "who did my white families have to go to?" Which I was pretty off put and offended as I thought about my colleagues who had 2 white administrators. And so, I wondered was someone asking them "who do the people of color the families of color have to go to?"

Although Cori was offended by the white family questioning her on representation, most of her concern was centered on the inequity of being asked a question that her white colleagues were not likely to be asked. In a political context, Cori noted that her white colleagues would never be asked to think about who black families could go to if there was no black administrator at the school, yet she was being asked to think about white representation. This is an interesting phenomenon of white privilege.

During the interview, Cori shared other instances that have "come to [her] mind quite a bit" when I asked her to reflect on how race and gender impacted her. She told the group about a program that she offered to targeted families in order to improve their access to the public library. There were some families who were upset with her actions, so they told the district that Cori was "was catering to or only serving…kids in the walk zone." Cori could not remember the exact verbiage, but she remembered the overall message that families thought she was only serving a certain population from her school. Cori felt that the parent complaint "was code for um children of color," which she also described as their "ignorance to not knowing the demographics" and the need of the community. Cori indicated that this experience was also disturbing to her particularly because the parent had "said their child had been mistreated because they were white" and was "questioning what had taken place." Cori did mention that she "could give quite a few examples" of how race has shown up for her in her career, but she

decided to pause in an effort to allow others to share their experiences. Overall, Cori and Angela's experiences are indicative of the amount of and degree of questioning that African American female administrators undergo for their decisions surrounding families who are black and who do not have the same privileges as their white counterparts.

During Anne's retelling of her experiences, she used the word "passive aggressive" to describe how she felt families had interacted with her when it came to race and gender. She named a list of things that she was questioned on. For example, she was questioned on things she knew or questioned when she sent something home. She shared that she was questioned more "especially when we were still home with the pandemic." In her story below, Anne gives an example of how she was questioned during the pandemic. She stated:

Parent want the um school to open up and sending an email to the board, the kids aren't doing anything on Wednesday. And you know, where I've seen it like people will put things out there knowing that they're not true. And I think you know, um Olivia mentioned it earlier something about turning 50 that you just know you're not gon say that and you responded, you wrote this to the board so I'm gonna respond to the board, and this is what, this is how often your child was online. But I do think it's more passive aggressive, it's a lot of more asking questions like "well why are you doing this?" And as Angela said, I put, self-imposed a lot of that like trying to be ahead of the curve, trying to anticipate everything. And that's when the long hours were occurring and you know, all of the overthinking. And now it's just like, I tell people "Ima make mistakes, but I'm not gon do anything to your child that I wouldn't do to, for my own child."

Anne's response is an example of how the participants would reflect on the other participant's experiences, even as they were telling their own. For example, Anne referenced both Angela and

Olivia's stories as she told her own. Like Angela, Anne described the way in which she had let

parents question her and threaten to go to the Board of Education to the point that she felt

compelled to respond in a certain way in an effort to defend or prove herself. However, many of

the principals spoke about getting to the place where they got tired of responding in order to

prove that they had not done anything wrong, and as a result, they changed their actions. They

recognized that striving to prove themselves to others was "self-imposed," so they could make

the decision at any time that they weren't going to allow this to continue to happen. In other

words, they made a conscious decision to stop trying to prove themselves and just have peace

with the fact that they will make mistakes, but that they are doing what is in the best interest of

children.

Slikk also shared an experience that affirmed Angela, Cori, and Anne's assertion that

more preference is given to a white man's voice over that of black woman. In her assistant

principalship experience, Slikk noted her experiences of people "bypassing" her as a woman and

wanting to get answers to questions from a white male instead. She explains her feelings about

this treatment below:

> The biggest thing I feel like is when you're sharing information with the parent and it's
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> not what they wanna hear. And so, it's like the real deal comes out as to, "Well certainly
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> you're not the one making this decision so who else can I speak to um, to get a different
>
> answer?" And when you tell 'em "Uh nah, I'm the one that you probably need to talk to
>
> about this." Um, you know, it becomes a whole 'nother issue, and then next thing you
>
> know, you're getting a phone call maybe from the district.

Slikk's experience unveiled the negativity associated with a Black woman being in a position of power to make decisions. She encountered people who were not happy with her capability to make decisions as an administrator. She further added:

> So, even if it means 2 and 3 o 'clock in the morning, you know sending emails or making sure that you're looking at all the emails so no one can't say that you're not. Or also being stigmatized for trying to watch how you say things, because you don't wanna be pegged as the angry black woman. Just all these different things. And it's like you have to constantly be mindful of, even in sending emails ok what is this tone … I know for me I had to kinda have like a sounding board or a voice of reason. I don't wanna say an editor, but someone to proof my emails sometimes because I've just, I didn't want it to ever come across as you know, just being crash or any of those things. And I just feel like um for others that are in leadership, they don't have to do that. And so, it's—it's—it's a lot.

While all of the participants spoke about perceptions of being a black woman, Slikk is one of three participants who actually referenced being stigmatized as the "angry black woman" during their storytelling. Slikk's experience speak both to the idea of being questioned externally by other parents who preferred to hear someone white make decisions and it also reveals the degree of second-guessing that she had to do in her writing in an attempt to avoid being "pegged" or labeled as the "angry Black woman." Whereas others in administration may not have to constantly proof emails, she felt that she didn't have a choice in the matter. Whereas the other stories include how principals felt the need to say things in a particular way, Slikk's need to prove herself was evident in her multiple attempts to proofread her emails or have others proofread them.

During the focus group interview with principals, there was one principal whose story stood out because it was aligned with the other themes that principals noted in their stories, yet her story was more closely aligned with that of aspiring principals. In her discussion, she shared about the numerous rejections that she received during her job search. As the newest principal in the group, Cardi P's responses of being told "no" so many times left her with no choice but to go to another school. She shared how these experiences impacted her because she knew that she was well qualified for the position. She stated:

> You know, when I took my first administrative job in another district so, that's what I had to do. But it led me to where I am now. Um, so, I would say that being told no so many times when I when I felt like I was qualified. Um, and then being, you know, just being hired over. I don't even know if that's fair to say because I don't know. But um, you know, and I chalked that up to being a black woman perhaps. That was a lot of what I felt like um, you know, when I, when I would be, when I would get those no's. But-but it's all good.

Although Cardi P was qualified for job opportunities, she began to internalize her failures and attribute her rejection to the fact that she was a black woman because continued to receive so many "No's" in her job search.

Several of the participant experiences dealing with the intersectionality of race and gender included very devastating accounts of questioning their authority. Many participants, especially principals, reflected on humiliating stories that left them feeling like they needed to prove themselves. These experiences were not only stressful, but it caused participants to second-guess themselves as they made decisions that were in their power to make. For aspiring principals, the impact was mostly internal, in that participants questioned whether this field is the

right fit for them. Many spoke about the experience of feeling like they had done everything within their power to prepare themselves, yet they did not see the results.

Theme 6: Barriers to Promotion

All of the current and aspiring principals reflected on their feelings about having the required credentials to become a principal, yet they were never promoted in their school district. Most of the participants referenced needing to leave the district after waiting for too long. For example, Brooklyn talked about feeling stuck after graduate school. Because she was not able to move up from a teacher to the assistant principal role, even with the right degree, she still felt defeated. In her commentary on feeling trapped at the same school for so long, she shares the extremity of her rejection and its impact on her identity: "I think because of being there for so long, and they knew what I had and I still couldn't land a job, I felt like I wasn't worthy of a job or maybe my skill set wasn't good."

Freedom had a similar experience, but she continued to stay in her same position as a teacher, hoping that she would get a job opportunity that never came. In her own words, she defines what containment looked like for her in her previous district:

> I had a principal that uh she was very well known, but she also um wanted me to stay in the classroom because of my grades. My, my grades were, you know, always really good grades and she-she wanted me to stay in the classroom to keep getting the grades. And so, I kinda got stuck with being in the classroom and not really having anybody to, to vouch for me or speak for me or say, you know, "Yeah, she's ready, or she's not ready." So, so I kinda felt like I was stuck for—for a long time.

Freedom's experience reflected how her principal placed more significance on her ability to maintain high grades than she placed on investing in Freedom's desired future as an

administrator. Unfortunately, Freedom did not have an advocate at the time to support her

readiness for school administrator, so she ended up being "stuck" in the same place and same

positions for a long time. Freedom continued to share how she had made the choice to stay in her

same district, hoping for a change in career opportunity that never came:

> I was promised a position, you know, the following year. You know, you're gonna, we're
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> gonna, you know, we're gonna have you first on the list. You know that type of thing.
>
> And still just doing my job, and, you know, being faithful, and doing everything that I
>
> could do.

She described her actions as "faithful" and did "everything that she could do" until she could not

do anymore and ultimately had to switch school districts. It was as if her long-term investment in

the same school district did not pay off for her. Because of this experience, which really affected

her confidence, Freedom stated:

> Sometimes, I feel like I do want to be an administrator, sometimes I'm not sure. Um, and
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> I think, I think the reason why I-I'm unsure is because-because I haven't um 'cause I
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> haven't been hired. I've applied, but I haven't been hired anywhere. So, it's me second
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> guessing myself, you know, "Well I don't know if this is what I really wanna do." You
>
> know, um, "Maybe this is not for me."

Not only did Freedom second guess herself about being able to get hired, but she doubted that

being an administrator was a true desire for her. Her responses reveal her uncertainty and lack of

clarity or doubt in herself, which ultimately manifested itself in other ways: reluctance in

applying to future positions because of her identity as a black woman. For example, she

continued to think to herself: "I'm not gonna get this position because they already have one

black female in leadership here. So, I already know I'm not gonna get hired." In other words, she would count herself out before even trying.

Slikk described the same feeling of inadequacy as Freedom but in a different way. After hearing "like, the 50 million no's before the yes," she continued to describe the confusion that she faced when she would see other people get principal positions that she felt she should have gotten. She added:

And you find out and you see other people in those positions that you applied for, and you be like "How in the world did they get this position?" And so, for me it's always been every principalship that I applied for I made it to the finalist and was up, me and somebody else. And I'm like "Why am I not sealing the deal?" So, I too had to leave the district um you know, to-to get a principalship.

Cardi P's response to being rejected from the principalship was similar to Slikk's response. In a similar manner, Cardi P began to question herself when she saw others keep being promoted over her. She described her experiences as "hard to-to process and receive" because "no hurts." However, she noted that in her experience of watching people get positions, she would think to herself, "Oh my goodness…What am I not doing?" Cardi P and Slikk's inability to obtain a job meant that they would blame themselves for the lack of promotion because they are black women. They did not consider external factors as a barrier to their promotion, even though they continued to see patterns of what Cardi P described as being "hired over."

In summary, containment was a barrier that participants spoke about in their experiences. Many of them felt stuck in their careers, especially when they did not obtain positions as assistant principals or principals. In particular, their stories included accounts of being overlooked by others who seemed more qualified, but had the same degrees/experiences, if not

110

less than they did. As a result, those who aspired to become principals seemed to internalize their failures and felt defeated to the point where they did not know if promotion was an option for them.

Theme 7: Difficulty with Work-Life Balance

All of the principals and at least one of the aspiring principals spoke about the sacrifices that they made in order to pursue their administrative career. Each participant had a different story, but all of the stories reflected their need to let something go so that they could attend to what was important to them in the moment. Sometimes their interest caused personal conflict and competed against one another.

Justice was the only aspiring principal that became a mother at the same time that she "walked across the stage to get her master's degree." She was transparent with the group about being unmarried, something that she got emotional about during the discussion. As her voice began to shake, she shared her experiences of also applying for doctoral programs and thinking that she was "doing too much," especially because she was pregnant and seemed to be aware of societal views on her situation as a single mother. She described her relationship with her child's father as "rocky" and ultimately had to finish the program doing "all things on [her] own." Juggling her responsibility as a mother, a student, and a partner was not easy, she stated. In fact, Justice had to pause during the meeting to attend to her child, who was literally throwing up while she was speaking. Justice's life didn't balance well with her work, as she shared that "there's a huge demand on doing paperwork and compliance" as an Exceptional Children's program facilitator. Despite the hardship that she faced with several responsibilities, Justice seemed to see value in her experience when she stated:

I know that I bring something to the table. But I know that um I feel like I've let myself get comfortable in this space and, but I'm inspired to continue growing. And being in this room right now with other women who are, um, who have overcome and been resilient and persevered through it all is inspirational.

Justice's responses indicate that she found strength and encouragement from being a part of this discussion, and she seemed to experience comfort from hearing other stories of how women persevered through their own hardships.

Both Anne and Cori described their need to focus on their own kids as a personal conflict that affected their work-life balance. Anne's description included:

Making sure that you know um, I'm not giving other people's kids more time, but then also recognizing that I am responsible for a lot of kids. So, you know, we came up with things in my house um, you know like if your kids are involved in dance, they're going to the same recital several times. So, there were things I never missed, an only event and I never missed a first event.

Despite her commitment to her students at school, Anne felt that it was important to make time for her own kids. Cori's conflict was similar in that she too shared her need to ensure that what she was "giving to others" she gave "to the ones within [her] care." Anne gave a specific personal example of how she was determined to show up for her kids' recitals and how important it was for her to never miss an event. While she was able to commit to her children, she did mention that she "started off married" and is now divorced. She didn't attribute the cause of her divorce to the principalship, but she did indicate that being a principal was "just a different dynamic." As a result, her family structure changed from a two-parent household to a single parent household.

Anne and Cori's commitment to their family is significant, yet their need to mention work-life balance with their kids and family as something of personal conflict represents the high demands of the principalship and its strain on family units. Cardi P agreed with the other principals about work-life balance being an issue, but she talked about balance with regard to taking care of her own social-emotional needs. Unlike the other Anne and Cori, Cardi P shared that her children were all grown. She also mentioned how she would tell everyone else to take care of themselves, yet she would not take care of herself. Slikk shared a similar perspective to Cardi P's, but she focused on the desire that Black women often have to "do well," especially in a new position. Although anyone can desire to do well on a new job, both Cardi P and Slikk's responses suggest a link between the concern about how others perceive their performance and their own personal and family needs.

Essence shared that she still struggles with work-life balance because "the role doesn't end" and it is "so involved." She went on to tell the group:

> You know I think about how teacher particularly here say, "Well I don't want anybody contacting me after contract hours." Like we, we don't have that. Like it's, it's nonstop. Um so, it's—it's tough. It's tough because you can't just go home and be like "Ok I'm done until tomorrow." It's always something left undone. So, I know like for me, I—I that's something for my entire career, and I'm toward the end of it, that I haven't mastered. I haven't mastered the life, and every year I try to do a little bit better.

Essence's discussion of the nature of the principalship as a high demanding job was paramount. Moreover, she suggested that though she may attempt to do better in this area, she has dealt with this for her entire career and still has not mastered it.

Having a strong commitment to school leadership roles is important; however, participant responses indicated family and personal needs matter more. While principals were dedicated to their roles in serving students and staff, many of them realized that it was not worth it to them to sacrifice their families. Some of the participants recognized that they did make decisions that affected their families, but most kept returning to their need to ensure that their own family (or personal needs) were taken care of before they could serve anyone else.

Theme 8: The Importance of Faith and Spirituality

One of the most powerful findings of this research was the number of times that participants referenced their faith and spirituality as a significant part of their experiences. All of the participants made a reference to "God" as the source by which they live and make decisions. Some referenced prayer as a spiritual practice to engage in when they needed direction or clarity on a decision. While there were some participants that spoke directly about how faith and spirituality play a role in their experiences as current or aspiring principals, others were indirect about how their faith led them throughout their career journey.

God As One Who Intervenes

One example of how faith and spirituality were a part of participant experiences was during periods of transition from one stage in their career to another. For example, Juanita shared that throughout her transition between different schools, "God lined things up because everything was telling [her] to go to a particular school." She used the alignment of her experiences to each phase of life to signify that God was leading her to particular opportunities. In a similar way, Justice described how she "stepped out on faith" to apply to programs and was accepted. She felt that the acceptance was God's way of intervening on her behalf.

Many of the women recounted times where they felt like God was intervening in their midst to bring about a particular outcome for their good. They used specific language to connect their faith to their journey toward the principalship. For example, Cori and Cardi P described their pursuit of the principalship as a "God move" because they did not originally have intentions to become a principal. Cori stated, "I thought I would be wheeled out of the classroom actually in a wheelchair. I originally said." In other words, Cori thought that she would teach for her entire career. Cardi P agreed and said:

> This is absolutely a God move. I started my career, the majority of my career has been elementary, and God put things, um you know, we wanna know our path a head of time and there were thing, you know, things put in my path that I had no control over, but because of that, I am here, um, today.

Both Cardi P and Cori had a change in their own plans, which indicated that God's plan for their life was different from her own plans. Freedom shared an analogy that visually represented how she thought God was intervening in her life. She stated:

> So, for me, it was, it was like, it was like I was like that little baby bird in the nest that didn't wanna leave. And like, God had to make it so uncomfortable for me, just push me out. Just threw me out and said "Leave. Go. Goodbye."

Freedom's analogy of God to a mother bird that kicked her out of the nest was indicative of the power that she felt like God had in her life. Whereas she might not have decided to move to another district on her own, she felt like God intervened and made her leave for her own good. Whether these women perceived God to intervene on their behalf and change their circumstance, or whether they felt God leading them to take action, their experiences unveil the power of their faith and the value of their spirituality being intact.

Faith As Connection and Dialogue

Sometimes women spoke about using prayer to connect with God. In Elizabeth Ann's discussion, referenced the need to "go into prayer" about her life decisions and thinking of decisions as "part of his plan" for her. Justice also used prayer to "pray a lot for [her] vision to continue to be clarified," and her way of responding was to actually stick to the vision that she felt was being revealed to her as she took steps. For example, Justice continued to share about the difficulty of being a mother and a student at the same time. However, she was determined to stick to the vision that she felt God gave her. Brooklyn also spoke about turning to her faith as a means to have dialogue and process her disappointments. In one of her conversations with God about her reaction to experiencing so much rejection from job opportunities, she shared:

> It was kinda like "OK God, I-I'm just gonna go back to the classroom. 'Cause I told, I told you. Like this just not gonna work. I told you. I've been trying to tell you. I'm not going into leadership 'cause it's just not for me." Um, and then just something, not something God told me "Just-just quit then." Like, mm-k. So, I put in my 2 weeks, really like 2 days. It was June 7th, and the last day was June 9th. I said "I'm not doing this no more.

On the one hand, Brooklyn saw her experiences as a way for God to speak to her, but she also saw her circumstances as a means to gather more understanding around God's leadership in her decision making. That is, she felt God leading her to quit her job, so she did.

Essence also faced a transition in her career that she felt like God was "telling" her to become more than what she was doing. She told the group that during her internship, a principal called her to come back to serve at the school where she had previously taught because the

116

students were "struggling academically." While she was already serving the school in a tutoring capacity, she stated:

> I felt like God was telling me, "You need to be more than an assistant principal," and this was even before I was an assistant principal. "You need to be a principal so that you can be in more of a position to impact change for these kids that look like you that are struggling academically, not just in one spot, but at a, on a, on a larger scale. So, you need to be able to be an advocate but, in a position, where you can impact change in a greater way." So that's why I became a principal initially 'cause I never thought that I wanted to be one.

Essence's rationale for wanting to become a principal stemmed from what seemed to be a dialogue between her and God, which ultimately led to her pursuing the principalship.

Prioritizing Faith to Become a Servant Leader

Since the participants were asked to reflect on work-life balance, I thought it was interesting that the women described how they prioritized their faith. For example, Elizabeth Ann described some of the quotes that she collected, one of which helped her in depressing times. She described it as J.O.Y., which stands for "Jesus, others, and you." This statement served as a motto by which she lives her life. She continued to explain her reasoning behind the quote:

> And the belief behind that is that if we just stop focusing on ourselves so much. You know, focus on Jesus. What is his purpose for you? You know, servant leader. Serving others. And then you. Things will, you know, they, they're gonna work. There's always gonna be something at work, something contentious, whether it's a student, staff member, parent. But I stay centered in JOY, 'cause at the end of the day, the work is not about me,

I look at it as (pauses) "I'm doing, this your work. I'm doing this for you (chuckles).

You're with me. Let's roll. Let's do this.

Ultimately, Elizabeth Ann saw her faith as the driving force for all other things. Her motto of JOY, which started with Jesus, kept her grounded despite what she faced. Her description of her work as servant leadership really spoke to the principles of her engagement with the people that she encountered.

Hattie was able to connect her faith to the fulfillment of purpose. Like Elizabeth Ann she had a guiding principle to govern her day. In her discussion she stated:

So, when it comes to my faith um, I feel like, it's all about your purpose. When I look at what I do throughout the day, it's all about "Am I fulfilling my purpose?" Um, so that's what I like to reevaluate at the end of the day. Am I fulfilling my purpose? And when it comes to leadership roles and why am I not getting them, I feel like that means I need to grow in some type of area. So, just making sure I'm reevaluating and making sure I'm growing in areas that he want me to grow in before he gives me something else.

For Hattie, faith is the driving force for her purpose. If she has fulfilled purpose at the end of each day and grown in the areas that "he" wanted her to grow in, then she feels accomplished. In fact, she described this as the most important thing before God gives her something else.

Brooklyn also referenced her servant leadership as a way to demonstrate her faith. She described herself as a "light" when she is around staff and students because she has to constantly remind herself that everyone does not have "positivity when they go home." During the discussion on how she relies on her faith to help her be a servant leader, she added:

Echoing to what everyone else is saying, leaning more into God because this is a new level, a new area. And it's like "OK, you brought me here, so I'm just gonna trust you.

Um, if I need to stop and talk to you, or stop before I make a decision, or just ask you to

speak through me, then I'll do that, um, because I don't have any words right now, or I

don't know how to um, approach this situation, I just need you to talk." And so, um,

that's my main focus this year, just being very, having that servant heart, serving others,

being a light, and then just letting God work though me.

Brooklyn's response illustrated several points: Leaning more into, or prioritizing God was

important to her in order to become a servant leader. She saw God as one who orchestrated her

journey, and therefore her faith and trust in him was significant to her. Her servant heart was her

way to model her faith and show positivity to others.

Descriptions of Faith and Its Importance

During the focus group discussion, participants made other references to their faith or

used language to convey their spirituality. While these descriptions were not linked to any

specific story or experience, I did note that the language referenced their faith. For example,

participants used phrases such as "what God has for you, it is for you" or "God is good, not

sometime but all the time." Participants used these phrases as they recalled their experiences

related to their career journeys. Olivia's phrases were particularly interesting because they

revealed the degree to which she relied on her faith throughout her journey. She stated, "I think

that without my faith … I don't know where I would be. It's played a huge part every, every day.

And I lean into even more. So, it's my core as well." Her use of the word "core" describes her

faith resonated with other ladies as they began to use it to reference their sentiments as well.

Angela referenced that her faith has been her "compass" and "center" for everything that she

does. She stated that she would be "out of sorts, not having direction." Anne agreed with Angela

and extended the conversation on the topic:

Being in this role, you're praying a lot. I pray before I get out of bed. You know, because

not only are you dealing with just different personalities and-and different needs of

people, you're also taking on everybody's, everybody's life. … So, you're taking on all

this extra, all this extra weight from other people. So, you know, prayer, and reading, and

fasting, and praying, and you know, reaching out. And knowing that I have a whole

network of family, my—my personal family. My sisters and my mom that are lifting me

up is the only way to just stay calm through all of it. It's the only way.

Anne's quote suggests that faith was not only vital in her everyday life, but it was the only way

to remain calm and intact when she was carrying the weight of so much responsibility for others.

Slikk agreed with Anne and added on by saying:

I agree. I mean, it's absolutely necessary. And I'm not, I have just made a decision that if

it doesn't align with him and what and-and-and all of those things then I'm spinning a

wheel on a hamster on a hamster wheel anyway. So, I've learned that the hard way. So,

definitely um, in every decision, every aspect, as she said, praying, fasting, all those

things, and having that family support to just kinda, you know, guide you and-and help

you and support you in that. So, for sure, has played a huge role um, for me.

Overall, participants believed that faith and spirituality go hand-in-hand with their career

journeys and aspirations, almost like race and gender. Many of the participants indicated that

their unique experiences as being black female women in pursuit of administration were linked

to both race and gender: the two were inseparable. Similarly, the participants focused on faith

and spirituality as a vital part of their growth and development as a leader. Without their faith,

they did not see direction for their life or clarity for their life's vision. Without their faith, they

did not see a way to overcome their adversities. Without their faith, they could not pursue a

career in administration as an African American woman principal.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this action research was to explore the career development needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 schools and to develop a potential pilot program that adequately meets those needs. I also wanted to better understand the lived experiences of current African American women principals to see whether those experiences aligned with the career development needs indicated by aspiring principals. Participants were diverse in age, educational status, years of classroom experience, and personal educational backgrounds. Most of the participants in this study were either principals or assistant principals; however, some participants were in other teacher leadership roles (i.e., instructional coach or exceptional children's program facilitator). Participants were asked to reflect on their life and work experiences and share them in the focus group.

This chapter discusses in greater depth the importance of meeting the career development needs of aspiring African American women principals and the implications for answering the following research questions:

1. What is the school district currently doing to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

2. What are the perspectives of Black women aspiring to the principalship concerning the career supports they are receiving and/or need to move forward in their careers?

3. What are the perspectives of Black women currently serving as principals concerning the career supports they received and/or needed to receive to move forward in their careers?

4. What else can the school district do to support Black women aspiring to the principalship?

Although this study was focused on a specific school district that is interested in changing discriminatory practices, what I learned from the research can be applied to help other school districts that are interested in combating such practices. Eight major themes emerged from my research findings in Chapter IV which were:

1. The Influence of Lived Experience on Career Aspirations

2. The Need for Support

3. Constant Denial Leads to Lack of Confidence and Containment

4. The Desire for Mentoring

5. The Impact of the Intersectionality of Race and Gender

6. Barriers to Promotion

7. Difficulties with Work-Life Balance

8. The Importance of Faith and Spirituality

In the subsequent sections, I expound on these themes and share my conclusions. I also utilize the findings to make recommendations for a mentoring program overview design that will reflect the needs of African American women in school leadership. As part of the design, I also recommend strategies for implementation that can be extended or further developed to meet the requirements for a full-time pilot mentoring program. Lastly, I give recommendations for future research that is related to my research topic.

Contributions to the Education Field

This study can make several contributions to the growing body of research on exploring and examining the unique lived experiences of African American women in school leadership. Although there is research that explores the progress that women have made in leadership (Kraft et al., 2021; McGregor, 2017), there is limited information that specifies the career experiences

of African American women who aspire to become principals. Thus, this study provides insight and understanding on the career supports that African American women need in order to combat these historical patterns of promotion. This study focuses on what is needed in order for African American women to become principals.

One of the themes that Collins (2000) purports about Black Feminist Theory (BFT) is that intersectionality influences how Black women experience the workplace. Unfortunately, Black women are dehumanized and exploited within their leadership roles. The women in this study shared experiences that represented the oppressive nature of the work environment. Because BFT "centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender," many African American women have lived experiences that reflect district expectations to work under pressure and prove themselves as leaders. Principal participants often shared about the daunting emotions of being questioned on every decision that they made. Meanwhile, they also recounted how these experiences differed from those of their white counterparts. Therefore, the lived experiences of African American women in this study ultimately revealed how black women chose to respond to societal definitions of their identity.

The Power of Self-Definition is another theme from Collins (2000) that embodies the research findings in this study. One participant described the effects of societal norms best when she stated that the intersectionality of her race and gender were like "two strikes" or "two things stacked against [her]." For example, participants were stereotyped as angry black women even when they were leading with authenticity in their work environment. In an effort to own her femininity and disrupt societal norms, one participant discussed her use of personal clothing as an expression of her black womanhood. These two examples from the findings show the validity

and relevance of BFT as a theoretical framework for understanding black women experiences in educational leadership.

Current District Efforts to Support Black Women Aspiring to the Principalship

When participants were asked about current district supports, only two efforts were indicated. Moreover, only one of the two efforts were specific to supporting people of color. One program was designed to help prepare current assistant principals for the principalship. For example, as part of the program, participants have the opportunity to do a mock interview with district leaders. However, because the program is only open to current assistant principals, there were other aspiring leaders, who are not currently assistant principals, who do not have access to this type of support. The second program is a support group for all staff of color. However, participants noted that the group was inconsistent during the Covid pandemic and has not yet resumed. Thus, the staff of color group is not an active resource that aspiring principals can access.

Although the district has made efforts to provide support for staff of color, these efforts are not sufficient for African American women aspiring to the principalship. The findings of my research indicate that Black women need a safe space where they can come together with other like-minded individuals (particularly other Black women) to share their experiences. In addition, they want these support groups to serve as a resource for accessing information on available administrative positions, so that they are better aware and informed on the latest opportunities. As a result of having models and mentors, women are better postured to navigate their leadership journey (Kraft et al., 2021). Participant responses confirmed the need for spaces with the right district modeling and mentoring for their desired positions.

The Desire for Mentorship

Both principals and aspiring principals focus groups referenced that mentorship is extremely important for helping them navigate their career journey. They noted that it was so important that the lack of appropriate district mentorship created a barrier to their transition into administrative roles. Without adequate support from the right district leaders, Black women don't feel seen, heard, or known. Participant responses reflected the influence of both strong, effective mentors and weak, ineffective mentors. For aspiring principals specifically, strong and effective mentorship was defined by a person's ability to share their own experiences and support the readiness and growth of other new leaders. This included participation in Q & A sessions. Aspiring black women leaders indicated an even greater desire for mentorship given their experiences. Furthermore, aspiring principals recognized the deficit in this area, as many indicated that mentorship was an additional support that they needed but did not currently have. Even with access to their own principals or district leaders, participants felt that they did not know the right people. Thus, aspiring principals need designated opportunities where they can have access to other black women who will assist them with networking in their field and serve as consultants when questions arise.

Principal participants also confirmed that having great mentorship from exceptional leaders who "look like you" is a "luxury." This confirms scholars' (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; A. L. Peters, 2011; Tillman, 2001) description of mentorship as a key indicator for academic success and career advancement, especially in higher education. Some Black women principals also desired a mentor who could serve as a "trusted confidant" and "thought partner." This type of mentorship represents what Hayes and Mahfouz (2020) describe as a relational view of mentorship models. Whether formal or informal, traditional or relational, participant responses

126

indicated a need for other trusted black women who could help them "correct" themselves if they were on the wrong track.

Participants desired other black women to help identify what they were missing. With proper mentors in place, Black women may have a healthier perspective on what it means to have true mentorship, something that few participants could describe in their real experiences. As a result, women are able to see themselves as influential leaders who can impact other women's lives (Kraft et al., 2021). Participants indicated the need for affirmation, trust, and the belief that they can serve in the principal role. This means that Black women desire other Black women to see the good in them and highlight their strengths as well as tell them the truth about their weaknesses. This kind of mentorship would address the disconnect between patterns of promotion among men and women as well as initiate the transformation needed to close the gender gap that exists in education (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Kim & Cryss Brunner, 2009; Simmons, 2007). With more Black women leaders mentoring other women who aspire to become principals, there could be an increase in Black women principals and principal mentors. Thus, more African American women may not only obtain a principalship but advance beyond the principalship to even higher senior-level positions. This also would address and potentially disrupt the lack of opportunities to have a seemingly normal track to senior level positions, which Kim and Cryss Brunner (2009) purport to be a barrier to career advancement. Ultimately, participant responses revealed that districts still have room for improvement in the area of career development for aspiring principals.

Barriers to Promotion

Based on participant responses from the aspiring principals group, many Black women have felt stuck in the teacher-to-principal pipeline because they have not been promoted by their

district. Even after they obtain the so-called "right degrees" to meet the qualifications for their desired administrative positions, participants still have found that school and district leaders have kept them in the same instructional role for long periods of time without promoting them (Berry & Reardon, 2021). Consequently, participants felt defeated when they were constantly contained in their positions, deprived of job opportunities, and denied the right resources to help them get ahead. As a result, there has been very little district efforts to stop the delay in promotion for black women who aspire to become principals. Although participants were "faithful" and did "everything" that they could do, they did not find that districts supported them in their growth.

Difficulties with Work Life Balance

Participants who are current principals in this district made several sacrifices in their personal lives so that they could pursue a career in administration. The longer they served in their roles, the more they found themselves having to choose between being dedicated to their job or being present in their family. The focus group interviews revealed that principals still struggle because "the role doesn't end" and it is "so involved" or "nonstop." This means that the district has not put clear parameters around the principal role and black women principals have continued to struggle with work-life balance. While participant responses revealed the desire for continuity between their roles at home and their roles at school, the high work pressure makes it difficult to still be a good wife, mother, and homemaker (Ahmed & Ambreeen, 2021). Some of the participants ended up in "rocky" relationships or marriages, which for one principal resulted in a divorce. Many principals shared their experiences on having to choose between the children at school and their personal children at home. Ultimately, participants set their own boundaries to attempt a more balanced work home life. In other words, they realized that family and personal needs mattered more than their need to seemingly prove themselves as great principals.

Black Women Perspectives on Career Supports Needed to Advance in Their Careers

Black women participants who aspire to become principals need and desire specific support to help them advance to the principalship. While district supports are needed, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, aspiring principals also need support from their peers and from other principals who have experience in the field. Many of the women in this study indicated the need for strong connections with each other in an affinity space where they can find peer support models that look like them. This cohort-like model can be instrumental in helping them navigate their unique career experiences as black women in leadership roles.

Participants indicated a need for both the personal and professional networks in order to help them persevere in their pursuit of the role and to stay in the role once they obtain it. Participants learned a lot from their cohort to support them as they enrolled in advanced degree programs, worked on their dissertations for graduation, and developed resilience after they experienced great rejection. For example, some participants attributed their current successes to the fact that they had someone to push them so that they could keep moving and finish what they started. Having a personal network of people to motivate aspiring principals and push them to finish their goals is even more important for black women who aspire to become principals. The women in this study didn't seem to want pity, but their responses to the interview questions revealed a great need for other black women who could empathize with them in their experiences. Ultimately, this type of peer support could lead to great change in the number of black women who become principals.

Advocacy as Support

Participants' responses revealed the need for advocacy because of the overwhelming pressure and constant rejection they face as black women. One participant put it best when she

described the need to "have each other's back" when things occur. This statement is an example of the expressed need for advocacy, especially given the amount of doubt that Black women face in their pursuit of the principalship. Other participants expressed agreement with the need to advocate for one another, particularly when it came to needing to speak highly of one another in their various roles. According to Kraft et al. (2021), women who see themselves as influential leaders are able to impact others in a way that models how they can be better positioned to navigate their own career paths to leadership. For this reason, Black women aspiring to become principals need mentors who can advocate for them and help change the trajectory of both the literature and experiences of black women in school leadership roles.

Dedicated Time With Other Principals

Aspiring principals also find great benefit from having other principals support them with their leadership journey. Particularly, they want other principals to give them the opportunity to take the lead on projects that may be instrumental to their development as an aspiring principal. Additionally, most participants discussed the need for verbal affirmation and acknowledgement of their skillset and capacity to be great leaders. For many of the participants, verbal affirmation from other principals looked like being able to see and speak about their potential, even when they did not recognize their own potential. Participants even valued the indirect opportunities to learn from principals. That is, even if aspiring principals have the opportunity to shadow and watch current principals while they are on the job, this would be deemed as a great benefit. Lastly, aspiring principals placed great emphasis on the ability to ask questions. Particularly, they want to sit down with other black principals, so that they can freely ask them questions about the role and about their experiences. This further supports the level of influence that women can have in other women's lives (Kraft et al., 2021).

The Desire for Mentorship

Both principals and aspiring principals deem mentorship as one of the most important factors in their transition to and success in the principal role. Aspiring principals desire mentors who can not only support them in the role but also help them get acclimated to the district. While networking is important, aspiring principals didn't seem to want to initiate these opportunities alone. One participant was an outlier in that she felt confident in her mentorship experiences, so networking was not an issue. However, even the outlier participant stressed the need for good mentorship and the need to "prick" somebody else's brain because aspiring principals don't always feel that they are ready for the role. Participant responses indicated that mentors serve as guardrails to lead and guide aspiring principals on timing and opportunity. Whether the mentor serves to encourage participants on the right timing for them to enter the principalship or whether they serve as a "mirror" reflection of the principal journey, aspiring principals want other confidants who can support them on the journey.

Both principals and aspiring principal participants had consensus that mentorship is a "luxury" and a "necessity" that cannot be taken for granted nor can it be excluded from the career development for black women who aspire to become principals. Moreover, mentorship from other black women is very instrumental to building confidence in black women leaders. Sitting principal participants valued mentorship from other black women colleagues. They benefited from someone who could help them stay properly aligned and balanced in their work life. They also deemed it beneficial when colleagues could help them identify when they need to change their perspective or course of action on a particular matter. In fact, the black women principals in this study did not feel that it was possible to do the principalship without having someone who could "tell you when you're right, but also tell you when you are wrong."

Barriers to Promotion

Black women in this study identified several barriers to promotion. Most were seemingly connected to the intersectionality of both their race and gender. In other words, participants recognized that their experiences with promotional delays were not solely impacted by just one or the other. Participant responses revealed that being an African American woman in school leadership often made them vulnerable to certain stereotypes: the angry black woman or the strong woman who can take everything and anything. Unfortunately, these perceptions of black women are still prevalent today, and consequently, they still contribute to the difficulty that women face in their career mobility (Berry & Reardon, 2021). Women become so conflicted about the pressures of society that they question whether to be their "full authentic" selves. Therefore, mentorship is needed to help African American women aspiring principals navigate their careers as their authentic selves. This includes helping other black women to not succumb to societal definitions of her role in school leadership.

Additional Supports Districts Can Provide to Black Women Aspiring to Become Principals

Districts should address Black women's concerns regarding how they are treated in the workplace. The findings of this research indicate a need for improvement regarding the following:

1. Acknowledging and Addressing Barriers to Promotion

2. Acknowledging and Addressing the Burden of Oppression for Black Women

3. Constant Rejection Leading to a Lack of Confidence and Containment

4. Practices that Promote Work-Life Balance

Districts can implement policies or practices that protect African American women from discriminatory practices, especially regarding their intersectionality. While I present three

distinct areas for district improvement, the findings reveal that participants saw these needs as overlapping, not separate.

Participants noted several barriers to career advancement that districts can influence to better support African American women in their careers. For example, many participants shared that they were never promoted within their school district, even though they obtained the appropriate degrees and had several years of experience in the field. After much rejection, participants felt "trapped" and some even noted that they began to accept defeat. One participant described it best when she said that she was "faithful" and did "everything that she could do" to position herself for career advancement, yet she was constantly rejected from administrator roles. In fact, most of the participants in this study faced rejection during their initial pursuit of leadership roles. Consequently, their experiences with rejection represented a pattern of containment that continued to emerge as they progressed in their leadership journey. In order to see more diversity in the principalship, districts need to acknowledge the patterns of containment that block African American women from advancing to leadership positions. This includes the need for districts to effectively communicate desired qualifications for prospective candidates. With effective mentorship models in place, African American women will better understand the expectations for advancement to the principalship.

Although effective mentorship models address a major component of career development for Black women, mentorship alone does not address the full range of issues regarding how they are being treated in the workplace. Participant responses indicated that workplace demands must change for Black women, particularly because their personal experiences reflect a burden of oppression that they did not create. They have been pressured to respond to society's expectations about how women should act rather than embrace their own individuality and

authenticity. Moreover, their responses reflect an expectation to adapt, conform, and respond based on masculine leadership styles, which researchers purport to be a direct "strong, decisive and in charge" (Yep & Chrispeels, 2004, p. 164; see also Weiner et al., 2019). Participants in this study were not only scrutinized for how they made their own decisions in the workplace but they were also scrutinized for how they responded to decisions that they did not make. Thus, they questioned themselves and spent more energy checking behind themselves constantly so that they could present themselves as flawless or without error. For example, some participants shared their experiences of having to proofread their emails for tone constantly. However, they were sure that other colleagues were not required to do this. Black women, like any other group of people, are human and are prone to making mistakes. They are not objects for manipulation or control, despite how society may define their role. Therefore, any system or structure that forces women to succumb to patterns of manipulation and delayed promotion in the workplace must be carefully evaluated.

Districts must address the expectations surrounding work performance. Participant responses indicate that districts are perpetuating a culture of pressure in the workplace that is unrealistic and not sustainable. Regardless of leadership style, Black women continue to have negative work experiences, which aligns with Weiner et al. (2019) and Yep and Chrispeels's (2004) reasoning behind delayed promotion. Black women aspiring to become principals cannot be responsible for transforming systems of oppression, especially when they have not been in positions of power historically. Rather, it is the district's responsibility (and, therefore, those who are in power) to examine their own practices and work to dismantle systemic oppression. This must be in tandem with other district efforts to evaluate how often highly certified individuals are being rejected for senior-level positions.

Several participants also acknowledged that they lacked confidence when they faced constant rejection. Many were confused about not getting the leadership positions that they desired, and because they lacked specific reasoning for the delay in their promotions, they often felt inadequate and overlooked. In order to address this dilemma with containment and lack of confidence, districts can provide candidates with specific feedback regarding areas of improvement. This will give African American women the opportunity to inquire about ways to strengthen their candidacy for senior leadership roles.

Challenges with work-life balance were also emphasized as an area of concern for participants in this study. All of the principals and at least one of the aspiring principals shared about the demanding nature of their jobs. They felt pressured to perform in a certain way and did not feel that there were any district parameters to support them in their need for self-care. Consequently, their behavior had to align with and conform to leadership expectations, which often put them in a jeopardizing position as wives, mothers, and homemakers (Ahmed & Ambreen, 2021; Weiner et al., 2019). Participants indicated that work-life balance was a personal conflict, which revealed the oppressive nature of district expectations. In an effort to self-advocate, many participants chose to enforce boundaries in the workplace so that they could maintain their roles at home. Districts must prioritize wellness as a component of their expectations of current and aspiring leaders. If they do not, many African American women will not be able to sustain themselves in their leadership roles.

Implications for Practice and Professional Development

The research findings may help districts understand the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to become principals. Mentorship is critical for the preparation of African American women in educational leadership, because it helps provide the adequate

support needed to address barriers to career advancement and professional development.

Additionally, current principals have the opportunity to positively impact future Black women

principals in the field (Kraft et al., 2021).

Implications for District

As a result of this study, districts can gain insight on the career development needs and

barriers to promotion for African American women who aspire to become principals. Districts

can also use the findings in this study to develop meaningful programs that will adequately

address barriers to promotion and career development. For example, districts can center

professional development on leadership expectations for aspiring black principals. This includes

the development of affinity spaces where black women can share openly and gain access to

firsthand information on job opportunities. Ultimately, districts will be better equipped to combat

gender gaps in promotion for women and increase black representation in school leadership

roles. Table 4 presents a general overview of mentorship program components for aspiring black

women principals. I also provide a suggested frequency for each strategy/intervention for

implementation.

Table 4. Overview of Aspiring Principal Leaders Program

Mentorship Component	Purpose/Strategy	Suggested Frequency for Implementation
Black Affinity Group	To provide a safe space where black aspiring women principals and current principals can share transparently about their lived experiences and gain insight on next steps.	At least once per month
Job Shadowing	To give black aspiring women principals the opportunity to observe other principals for some on-the-job-training.	At least once per quarter

Mentorship Component	Purpose/Strategy	Suggested Frequency for Implementation
Mock Interview Sessions	To provide black aspiring women principals with explicit practice on and preparation for the principalship interview.	At least once per month
Panel Discussion & Leadership Roundtables	To provide black aspiring women principals an opportunity to ask questions about the principalship and gain specific insight on action steps toward career advancements.	At least once per month
Advocacy Support Sessions	To provide black aspiring women principals and opportunity to solve current challenges that relate to their experiences in the workspace.	Bi-weekly
One-on-One Mentorship Sessions	To provide black aspiring women principals an opportunity for personalized mentorship and coaching.	Weekly
Professional Development	To provide black aspiring women principals with specific guidelines and support on district expectations in the principalship role (e.g., Leadership Toolkit).	At least once per month

Implications for Aspiring Principals

To validate and acknowledge African American women's needs in their current and desired leadership roles, districts can provide safe spaces where they can be transparent about their challenges and unmet needs in the workplace. Not only would they benefit from hearing other Black women's perspectives, but they would gain a network of trusted principals who have had experience in the field and can support them throughout their career journey. Peer support is also a benefit that Black women can gain from networking with other like-minded women who reflect their race and gender. When mentorship is done right, more African American women will have an opportunity to shadow other principals and have firsthand experience on the job. As

a result, they will be better positioned to advance in their careers amidst societal pressures and barriers that have been designed to block them from promotion.

Implications for Current Principals

As a result of this study, current Black principals have an opportunity to positively influence future talent in the education field. In other words, they can model and share their lived experiences so that aspiring principals avoid unnecessary mistakes in the principalship. Black representation is important for African American women who aspire to become principals, and thus, current principals have an opportunity to represent in the field. The more that African American women principals are sustained and retained in the principal role, the more aspiring African American principals can see themselves advancing in their career (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Kraft et al., 2021).

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the research findings presented in this study, career development opportunities and support remain a challenge for black women who aspire to become principals. Literature notes that women have made much progress in leadership, yet there is still a disconnect between patterns of promotion for men and women (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Simmons, 2007). Black women, in particular, face discrimination in their jobs, which significantly impacts their career mobility. This also reflects the preferred tracks that Kim and Cryss Brunner (2009) describe as a part of the journey to senior-level positions. Black women are at an even greater disadvantage when it comes to their experiences on the job. They have to combat societal views and overcome systemic pressure that districts perpetuate to the point that they become dehumanized and objectified (Collins, 2000). While participants in this study had varying responses to this form of

oppression, many of their responses reflected the desire to speak out, advocate, and combat the stereotypes associated with their intersecting identities.

It is important for school districts to recognize the need for increased Black women representation in leadership roles; however, this study revealed the need for specific spaces to cultivate authenticity among this specialized group of women. As a result of acknowledging the need for more efforts to support the career development of African American women who aspire to become principals, districts can begin to take specific steps that will lead them in the right direction of principal retention for Black women in school leadership. Mertler (2020) references the reflecting stage, where researchers share and communicate results as they reflect on the process. In a future study, a pilot could be conducted in the same research setting and utilize components of the action research planning and evaluation process to collect data that hopefully validates my research findings even further. Perhaps, surveys may be appropriate to explore whether the strategic plan from this research study met the participants' needs or if there are additional needs that occur as a result of the program's implementation. An ongoing study on this topic after revisiting the reflection stage of action research will lead to opportunities to make corrections to the pilot program as needed. My research data shows that African American women desire mentorship whether they are sitting principals or aspiring principals. Although there can be various types of mentorship support, aspiring black women principals need dedicated time with women who look like them and who are not afraid to advocate on their behalf.

It is important for districts to take specific efforts in combating cycles that delay, contain, and even overlook prospective African American women principals. Without intentional efforts, these women will continue to face challenges in the profession and have unmet career needs. If

districts are serious about improving the outcomes related to the research on African American women aspiring principals, this study provides a starting point for addressing some of the barriers to career development and mobility. This work cannot just be a matter of speculation, but efforts toward improvement and effectiveness should be intentional. As a result, districts would validate black women's perspectives and show a commitment to dismantling systems of oppression that have been designed to keep Black women from advancing to the principalship and beyond.

While this study focused on the lived experiences of black women within a particular district, replicating this study in other districts would yield more insight on black women perspectives on career mobility across the globe. Moreover, there were several groups of women whose perspectives were not explored in this study. Replicating this research design with other minoritized women groups would yield additional suggestions on career development needs for women of color. These perspectives would allow the researcher to better understand the themes presented in this study to determine whether they are consistent across other racial and gender groups. Since there is literature on patterns of principal promotion for men and women (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Simmons, 2007), additional research on black men perspectives could yield greater insight as well.

This research study utilized BFT as a theoretical framework for analyzing Black women's perspectives. However, replicating this study with Critical Race Theory could yield an additional understanding of the career development needs of African American women who aspire to become principals. I used an action research qualitative approach to understand the lived experiences of Black women; however, a quantitative study could also be helpful in understanding their lived experiences. An overview of a mentorship program was provided in

this study. However, future research might include further development of a pilot program that can be implemented in a certain district context to examine its effectiveness. Additionally, future research might include a plan to conduct a pilot study in various parts of the United States.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of the research was to better understand the career needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. This research topic emerged from my own lived experiences as a Black principal in this particular district. My goal was to highlight and validate Black women's perspectives and ultimately stop the silence about the challenges that these women face in their workplace. Black women principals are underrepresented and undersupported in the education field, and my goal is to change the narrative and stop the perpetuation of delayed cycles in promotion. Moreover, I desire for this research to continue the conversation in literature surrounding black women's perspectives, especially those related to Black women principals and promote a sense of belonging and inclusiveness in their lived school/work experience. There are several final thoughts that my research raises for reflection: 1) Do African American women know how to play the political game surrounding intersectionality and still be their authentic selves? Unfortunately, there has been a shift from finding the right candidate to playing a political game based on race and gender. There is a need to shift the narrative back to the right perspective: qualification. Given the current climate in this district, an awareness of one's own intersectionality as an African American woman can bring about uncertainty unless districts affirm who they are in safe spaces. Black women need to feel supported by those who have the power to hire and fire them, so that they don't fear losing their job or feel like they cannot advance in their careers. There is a delicate balance to recognizing that Black women in school

leadership roles are multifaceted. Many are wives and mothers, so the principalship may only be one portion of their lives.

Black women need districts to implement practices that show their support and affirmation of black leadership. The level of questioning is ridiculous for black women. In order to do this, districts have to give Black women a space to talk. For this reason, surveys do not do this topic justice when it comes to gathering the lived experiences and perspectives of Black women who aspire to become principals. Since many of their experiences are rooted in pain from rejection and the pressure to conform to a certain societal image, women need to be supported by others who can empathize with them. There is a pressure to perform and be perfect, yet no one is perfect. All are human and subject to making mistakes. Unfortunately, women have had to work long and hard to be thought of as worthy or qualified for the principalships, and there is a double standard. It is my hope that this research can help districts acknowledge the need to address leadership confidence for African American women, especially when they have been oriented to second guess themselves after significant delays and failed attempts to job promotion. The ultimate goal for career development for Black women is that districts and leadership preparation programs be proactive about promoting confidence in aspiring Black women leaders. If school districts are able to cultivate and recognize their own African American principal talent, then Black women stay in the principalship role longer and may not feel the need to look for opportunities in other districts.

Finally, I caution readers interested in implementing any of the changes suggested in this document due to the current political climate that includes suspicions of efforts to create race and gender equality in the United States. Since the career development work outlined in this dissertation is potentially transformative, especially for women of color, there could be push

back and falsely labeled, "Critical Race Theory" or "CRT." Much of the reporting on efforts to dismantle discriminatory practices in schools has been inaccurate and consequently, often misunderstood. Thus, I agree with Morgan (2022) that clarifying misconceptions about Critical Race Theory "will help Americans make informed decisions that will benefit students in the education system." That is, dismantling oppressive systems is not only beneficial for districts, principals, and aspiring principals, but this work is beneficial for all citizens; that is, if we as a nation truly wish to see change and better educational outcomes for students.

Given that addressing issues of race and justice can be misunderstood and/or controversial, those wishing to eradicate practices that have contributed to holding back Black women leaders must move forward judiciously. It is important to clearly define the purposes and scope of any new programs, policies, and practices within specific contexts. While this study has implications for change that are anti-bias and anti-racist in nature, some suggestions for district can be taken with respect to CRT. As such, those who choose to implement the changes mentioned in this study will need to have a current understanding of how to navigate the controversy surrounding CRT and how this political lightning rod may or may not be playing out in their communities. With the escalation of this controversy in politics, there have been executive orders put in place to ban trainings that focus on diversity and inclusion, especially if they include concepts that are alleged to be divisive (Morgan, 2022). Therefore, I urge readers to begin with the end goal in mind and think strategically about their process for adopting change for adults and children. Just one step can make all of the difference.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

Greetings Ms. _____,

My name is Tiffany Newsome and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am seeking participants for my dissertation study titled *Meeting the Career Development Needs Black Women Aspiring to Become Principals*. The purpose of this study is to better understand the career needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and to develop a program that adequately meets those needs. In this study, I will explore the unique challenges that aspiring African American women principals face in K-12 schools. I am reaching out because you meet the following criteria for participation in this study:

- currently serve in K-12 schools

- hold either a Masters of School Administration (MSA) or an add-on license in School

  Administration

- identify as African-American/ Black

- identify as female

This study has been approved by the Internal Review Board at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Participation would include attending a 90-minute focus group using Zoom, and the session will be audio recorded. Additionally, the recording will be transcribed, and participants will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy. A follow-up interview may be conducted to ensure that the meaning of your experience was accurately captured. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will receive a $15 electronic Amazon Gift Card upon completion of the focus group. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to sign an informed consent. If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email request. If you have any questions, you may contact me at tanewsom@uncg.edu, or my advisor, Katherine Mansfield, at kcmansfi@uncg.edu.

Follow Up Email:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I am providing you with a copy of the informed consent. Please review, sign, and return within 24 hours of your scheduled focus group. I will send you a follow up email for scheduling. Thank you again for being willing to participate.

APPENDIX B: IRB INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: <u>Meeting the Career Development Needs of Black Women Aspiring</u>
<u>to Become Principals</u>

Principal Investigator: <u>Tiffany Newsome</u>
Faculty Advisor: <u>Kathryn Mansfield</u>

<u>What is this all about?</u>
I am asking you to participate in this research study because I want to better understand the career needs of African American women aspiring to the principalship in K-12 education and develop a program that adequately meets those needs. This research project will only take about 90 minutes and will involve you participating in a focus group using Zoom. The focus group will be audio/video recorded. Additionally, the recording will be transcribed, and you will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy. A follow up interview may be conducted to ensure that the meaning of your experience was accurately captured. Your participation in this research project is voluntary.

<u>How will this negatively affect me?</u>
No, other than the time you spend on this project there are no known or foreseeable risks involved with this study.

<u>What do I get out of this research project?</u>
Society may benefit from your contribution to positive changes in meeting the needs of Black aspiring principals. Your contributions may help districts to adequately address the existing needs of those entering the principalship.

<u>Will I get paid for participating?</u>
You will receive a $15 electronic Amazon Gift Card within 24 hours upon completion of the focus group interview.

<u>What about my confidentiality?</u>
We will do everything possible to make sure that your information is kept confidential. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. We will store all information electronically with password protection and encryption. No participants will be identified by name. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described in this section. Data will be kept for 7 years.

<u>What if I do not want to be in this research study?</u>
You do not have to be part of this project. This project is voluntary, and it is up to you to decide to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate at any time in this project, you may stop participating without penalty.

What if I have questions?
You can ask Tiffany Newsome (tanewsom@uncg.edu) and Kathryn Mansfield
(kcmansfi@uncg.edu) anything about the study. If you have concerns about how you have been
treated in this study, call the Office of Research Integrity Director at 1-855-251-2351.

Updated 1/4/22

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR ASPIRING PRINCIPALS

Focus Group Questions for Aspiring Principals

1. How old are you?

2. How long have you been an educator?

3. Tell me about yourself and your experiences as an educator.

4. Why do you aspire to become a principal?

5. What role, if any, has race played in your experiences as an aspiring principal?

6. What role, if any, has gender played in your experiences as an aspiring principal?

7. What role, if any, has faith or spirituality played in your experiences as an aspiring principal?

8. What barriers, if any, have you encountered as an aspiring principal?

9. What supports, if any, do you currently have that prepare you for the principalship?

10. What are some additional supports that you feel you need as an aspiring principal?

11. What role, if any, does mentorship play in your aspirations to become a principal?

12. What supports, if any, do you feel districts can provide African American women aspiring principals for career advancement?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR CURRENT PRINCIPALS

Focus Group Questions for Current Principals

1. How old are you?

2. How long have you been an educator?

3. Tell me about yourself and your experiences as an educator.

4. Why did you become a principal?

5. What was your status when you became a principal? This would include things like marital status, educational status, whether or not you had children, etc.

6. What personal conflicts, if any, did you experience during your pursuit of the principalship?

7. Tell me what your work-life balance looks like in the principalship.

8. What role, if any, has race played in your experiences as principal?

9. What role, if any, has gender played in your experiences as a principal?

10. What role, if any, has faith or spirituality played in your experiences as a principal?

11. What barriers, if any, have you encountered as a principal?

12. What supports, if any, did you have that prepared you for the principalship?

13. What are some additional supports that you feel that current aspiring Black female principals could benefit from?

14. What role, if any, did mentorship play in your aspirations to become a principal?

15. What supports do you feel districts can provide African American women aspiring principals for career advancement?