At the Intersection of Gender and Race: A Qualitative Study of the Lived Experiences of African American Female Elementary Principals

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AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE
ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

By
Andrea M. Haynes

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education
Major: Educational Administration
Under the Supervision of Dr. Jill F. Russell

Omaha, NE
June, 2016

Supervisory Committee
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Abstract

AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

Andrea M. Haynes, Ed.D.
University of Nebraska, 2016
Advisor: Dr. Jill F. Russell

This study examined the “lived experiences” related to race, gender, and the construct of time for five African American female elementary principals. The study specifically explored the intersectionality of race and gender. Through a qualitative phenomenological framework, the study aimed to research the implications of race and gender, at a specific point in time, for African American females in the elementary principalship. A phenomenological research method, that included semi-structured interviews, was employed to capture the essence of the participants’ stories and to fully understand their common experiences. Critical Race theory and Feminism theory were used as an intersecting lens for the theoretical framework.

Although each woman’s experience was unique, commonalities and collective themes were found and exposed as a part of this study. The female participants in the study confirmed that race and gender influence their historical and present-day journey as school leaders. Three central themes were generated from their stories: 1. The “Super Disciplinarian vs. the Master Relationship builder”, 2. Working twice as hard for half the
recognition. Learning to play the game, and 3. Brave enough to be broken – Resiliency and Perseverance. Through an examination of the central themes, along with a data analysis congruent with the literature review, the researcher posed three key findings in the concluding chapter. The key findings provide for a synthesis of the data and set the stage for implications for theory development and current practices. The African American female educational leaders in this study demonstrated perseverance and resilience as they rise above society’s low expectations for them and take their place at the table of school leadership.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to every Brown and Black girl who grew up feeling invisible.
I see you.
We are so much more than the sum of society’s perception of us.

*I am overwhelmed by the grace and persistence of my people.*

- Maya Angelou
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We are girls. We can do anything and be anything.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction to the Study

As I walked into the library, I could feel my heart throbbing out of my chest. There they sat; all thirty-two of the teachers I had been hired to lead. I was their principal. I was their new leader. This was our first staff meeting; my first staff meeting, ever. I will never forget the very first thing I realized in that moment. It was not that they were all smiling – because most were. It was not that the library was scorching hot – because it was. (Our school still had window air conditioners and it was the second week in August.) No, the first thing I remember realizing as I walked into the school’s library on that sweltering August day was that all thirty-two of my teachers had one thing in common; one thing that was different from me. Every single one of them was Caucasian…Anglo-Saxon…of European decent… White. I had been hired to lead a team of teachers that included thirty White females and two White males. In addition to them all being White, they were all over the age of thirty – older than I was. In that moment I knew why my heart was pounding like a thundering drum. I grasped for the first time in that moment that my leadership journey was going to be different than those before me. I knew that my African American heritage, the fact that I was a female, and my millennial birth was going to impact many facets of my ability to lead. What I didn’t know at the time was just how much my race, my gender, and the context of time would influence my experience.

There seems to be a unique experience that African American women undergo when placed in leadership positions in professional occupations. This experience is shaped and regulated by the social, cultural and historical factors of the past. Individuals
of African descent epitomize a unique group who hold a specifically differentiated place in history throughout the world and, in particularly in the United States (i.e., African Americans) because of slavery and its subsequent effects (Harley, 2008). Leadership typically comes with power and authority. However, for African American women the road to establishing authority and gaining power is wrought with roadblocks and obstacles (Harley, 2008). This is due to the fact that their lives are inextricably linked to a history of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their White counterparts (Collins, 2000). The role of the public elementary school principal in the 21st century is no exception to this phenomenon.

The dominant view that frames the perspective of leadership in the United States is generally associated with the leadership style of White males. This portrays an understanding of power and authority of a leader that is competitive and distant (Parker, 2005). However, in examining differences between how men and women lead, it is often less about what they do and more about the different experience they face when they lead (Chin, 2011). Stereotypic gender role expectations can constrain women’s leadership behaviors, and African American females who are hired to lead our schools are faced with unique challenges as they navigate the racial and gender stereotypes that pervade society.

Racism and sexism have been referred to as the double blind syndrome in the realm of schooling and academia (Stanley, 2006). Black women are subjected to these visible and sometimes invisible forms of marginalization. Therefore, the experiences of being African American and being female in the administrative educational realm do not happen in isolation of one another. They are not mutually exclusive. An African
American female cannot decide one day to shed her blackness and on a different day to shed her gender. She is always both. There is a well-documented finding in studies about Black professional women that demonstrates many Black women feel a need to prove themselves, particularly in circumstances where they perceive double standards for work performance compared to their White counterparts (Carter, Pearson, & Shavlik 1988; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Another researcher has gone a step further to assert that African American females may even experience "race fatigue" as a consequence of being undervalued (Harley, 2008, p. 21). The fatigue is an output from the suffering of race-related stress. Researchers have painted various pictures of the impact of the social and historical influences of slavery and servitude in the United States on current African Americans, but one of the most poignant was described by Clayvn Byrd (2009),

The tormentors no longer use the cold stings of the whip to carve trails in the flesh. Today’s weapons include withholding promotions and other opportunities that carve trails in the emotional psyches of their victims and an unforgiving, close minded organizational climate that reject diversity and cultural beliefs that differ from the dominant culture. (p. 4)

Just as the cultural, social, and political ramifications of slavery and servitude continue to evolve, the understanding around the experience of African American female elementary principals continues to transform. The combination of two marginalized identities (being female and being African American) play a significant role in how African American women perceive themselves and develop their professional journey, as they lead school communities. In addition, the leadership provided by these individuals is done within the context and space of a given time period. The school leadership experience of the 1980’s and 1990’s has shifted dramatically in the 21st century. This
research study aims to tell the story of African American female elementary principals leading schools in the 21st century. “At it’s best, the intellectual tradition of African American women's studies is the creation of theory from the practice of every day life, arising from reflection on the lived experience” (Mullings, 1997, p. 1). This study is an attempt to shine a light on the lived experience; the untold story - to bring the unknown to known.

**Statement of the Problem**

Nationally, urban principals tend to be White males over the age of 40, with very few African Americans serving urban populations (Shen, Rodriguez-Campos, & Ricones-Gomez, 2000). This homogenous landscape has created a void related to school leadership research and theory for those who are not male and not White. Overall, perspectives on Black women’s progression to and understandings within the principalship are scarce and random in the educational scholarship (Bell & Chase, 1994; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Loder, 2005). For African American women in educational leadership, the well-established glass ceiling brings additional barriers and sexist attitudes that impact their ability to lead and shape their leadership path. African American female school leaders frequently encounter discrimination and bias as they exercise their leadership authority (Parker, 2005). This is juxtaposed against a backdrop of a current fundamental need to educate and develop a new generation of school leadership that reflects gender and ethnic diversity, the same diversity we see in our urban districts.

When African American women and other women of color are hired to work in school leadership positions, they report ways in which their identities affect their practices (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Bloom
and Erlandson exposed in 2003 that African American female principals often feel compelled to work harder than their White counterparts to demonstrate their self-worth and to preserve elevated standards for their schools. The two researchers examined the lives of three African American female principals. Using in-depth interviews, they also found that the women felt they were invisible, as they struggled for equitable acknowledgment and recognition. There are also consistent descriptions that acknowledge African American leaders in organizational leadership often report disempowering happenstances where their authority is regularly doubted or scrutinized. Some report feeling that they experienced a probationary period at the beginning of their leadership journey when their qualifications needed a sort of validation before they were accepted into their roles (Byrd, 2009). As the number of African American females in elementary school leadership continues to increase, they are confronted by the “power play” of multiple stakeholder groups that are unfamiliar, unreceptive and uncomfortable with the changing face of school leadership (Byrd, 2009, p. 8). In order to copiously comprehend the African American female experience in the history of the United States, one must understand the multiple forms of oppression they encounter. As African Americans, they are exposed to the racism that has been part of the American experience. As women, they are subjected to the sexism that women face in the general population. However, much of the research that has been done on race in the United States ignores the role of gender, and much of the feminist analysis of society ignores race. The disregard for examining the multiple identities African American women face is nothing new. Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982) address this tendency to ignore the interface of race and gender on the lives of African American women. However, confronting situations
that are perceived to be associated with race and gender continues to be a challenge
African American female principals experience on a daily basis. This is in addition to the
daily challenge of raising student achievement for a population that is increasingly poor and increasingly difficult to serve.

According to many leading researchers in the field of educational administration, school leaders of the future must reflect the diversity of their populations (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Brown, 2005; Williams & Loeb, 2012). However, over time, little attention has been given to the actual need to increase cultural, linguistic, or other diversity among the ranks of educational leaders (McGee-Banks, 2007). The foremost way to bring about the desired change and success in our urban educational communities is to aggressively recruit, retain, and train more gender-balanced and culturally diverse school leadership (Harris, 2001 & Mack, 2010). Being aware of how to recruit and retain a certain marginalized population (like African American women) requires an understanding of their plight, their challenges, and of their journey. Urban minority school leaders remain under-researched, which has limited educators’ and policy makers’ knowledge of African American female school leaders and their unique leadership dilemmas. In addition, most leadership theory frameworks have been developed around traits commonly associated with White males. Horsford stated in 2012 in her essay on Black women and leadership that these “theories have not similarly explored the natural, inborn or divine gifts and traits associated with the great woman, and certainly not women of disadvantage and color” (p. 13). According to Taylor (2004), it is essential to research African American female principals because they are typically excluded from
academic texts about leadership. Providing additional research will validate their experiences as leaders.

African American female school leaders must negotiate the process of leadership within a predominantly White organization’s culture. A 21st century focus on “inclusion” in the workplace has led organizations to endorse and use homogenous workplace values that promote assimilation and reject the very individuality they claim to encourage (Parker-Terhune, 2005). Parker-Terhune (2005) goes on to report that as a result, Black women are pushed to satisfy others’ ideas of who they should be and made to conceal their true selves. At times, they may encounter even a pushback, fueled by racial bias from White colleagues, who may “treat them as if they don’t have the expertise to do their jobs” (Quinlin, p. 1, 2016). This study serves to enlighten the educational arena on the “lived experiences” of African American female elementary principals to better comprehend what supports can be structured and what obstacles overcome, to ensure success for this specific populace.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. The lived experience is defined as the intersection of race, gender, and generational position for African American female elementary principals. Perspectives on African American women in the principalship will further serve to clarify improved methods for encouraging and supporting other women of color, particularly African American women, in their leadership positions. Collins (2000) that Black women have spawned alternative practices and knowledge tied to their
lived experiences that are designed to foster empowerment and improve those experiences.

Many studies conducted during the 20th century were based on samples with high number of male participants. This was most likely due to the small number of females in school administration. For instance, Brown and Irby (1995) caution that a study that generalizes to all principals from a sample that is predominately male is likely to misrepresent women’s voices and experiences. Since then, although studies of experiences of females in building level positions have been completed, few studies that specifically look at leadership experiences of African American female elementary principals exist.

As relative newcomers to educational leadership in terms of race and gender, African American female building leaders are especially vulnerable to scrutiny. It can be assumed that overall, African American female principals must take great care in managing the race and gender expectations and stereotypes held by the different audiences they encounter in their interactions at work. There are some studies that say “code-switching” has become a dominant tool used by African American females to navigate the bumpy road of leading mostly White staff members (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Barnes, 2014; & Wheeler, 2008). Code-switching is the process by which individuals learn through practice and intentional observation to actively code-switch—to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language style for that setting (Wheeler, 2008). An important paradigm for the purpose of this study, the concept of code-switching will be further described in forthcoming chapters.
The intent of this study was to explore African American female elementary principals’ experiences and attempt to weave together common themes and understandings. Of particular interest was what, if any, life experiences led them to the elementary principalship, which experiences have had the greatest impact on their work, and how do they cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments? This type of investigation will assist the greater community in comprehending the experiences and impediments these women have endured. The results of this study provide a richer and more accurate understanding of the social and political structures surrounding the development of women and minorities in educational leadership positions. The findings of this study add a more comprehensive examination and dialogue to the field. It is important that models of school leadership include ideas and viewpoints articulated by African American scholars and school leaders (Brown, 2005). The study communicates ways in which African American women’s experiences can re-conceptualize how the educational leadership journey is viewed and thereby experienced for people of color. This will allow others to progress and thrive in educational leadership roles, specifically building leadership roles. In addition, the themes and information gleaned from this type of study will assist our understanding of the leadership of female African American school leaders and help lay the foundation for the development of needed future theoretical frameworks that are applicable to this identified group (Brinson, 2006).

**Conceptual Framework**

This study utilized two key theoretical constructs in the development of a conceptual framework – Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory. A conceptual
framework provides for a systematic view of the phenomena being studied by specifying the relationships among the variables (Creswell, 1994). Research continues to increasingly focus on uncovering connections among systems of oppression. The systems are typically organized along constructs of social class, gender, race, and nationalism (Collins, 2003). The theoretical models of Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory are two frameworks that encompass systems of oppression. Tillman (2002) asserts that research approached from a culturally sensitive perspective acknowledges the complexities of African American principals’ experiences. For the purposes of this study, it is proposed that these two frameworks intersect for African American female elementary principals. It is also proposed that these two frameworks operate within the larger construct of time and are historically influenced. In other words, the socio-cultural past histories underlying the experience of women and of African Americans in the United States is also examined and visible within the framework. The conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.1 denotes these proposed relationships and was developed by the researcher. The following sections include a depiction of the components of the theoretical frameworks and their significance in relation to African American women’s identities and leadership development.
Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

The "Intersection" of
African American
Female
Elementary principal
Young Gen X/Millennial time construct

The "Lived Experience" of
African American Female Elementary Principals

Developed by Andrea Haynes, 2016

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Feminist theory and Black feminism.

Feminism is a “range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women” (Beasley, 1999). Feminism’s presence was ignited as women rejected men’s interpretation of their lives (Gottfried, 1996). Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It “links to or is associated with concepts related to women, men, femininity, masculinity, and their historically and conceptually associated values, practices, and objects, including identity, sexuality, work, the state, and relations with other oppressed categories (race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation)” (Gross, 2010). As a theoretical framework, feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. Feminist theories are wide-ranging and distinct, but are largely based within three categories: radical, liberal, and postmodern. For the purpose of this study, a postmodern feminist perspective was used as the foundation for theory and understanding. A postmodern feminist lens articulates a way of understanding what is relevant to women and their social, political, economic, cultural, and conceptual relations (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011). This feminist lens allows for a broader view of the impediments and obstacles women face not only in leadership, but in life.

In addition to the more broadly defined term of feminism, the term “Black feminism” is characterized by an understanding of the ways in which sex, class oppression, and racism interconnect (Crenshaw, 1989). Black Feminism scholars assert that the traditional feminism movement was exclusionary and that inequities experienced by White women did not represent those experienced by women of color (Roth, 2004).
This study propositions that African American women may have dissimilar experiences of power, growth, and development compared to other women. This research seeks to encapsulate the experiences and understandings through the exact eyes of the participants in the study.

**Critical Race theory.**

Critical Race theory (CRT) is an evolving academic discipline that is focused on the examination of the intersection of variables like race, law, and power (Gordon, 1999). CRT asserts that power structures are in place and are based on White privilege and White supremacy. This perpetuates the marginalization of people of color (Bernier & Rocco, 2003). A cultural lens enables readers and researchers to understand and relate to the participants’ experiences within the context of a minority and majority culture. According to Byrd (2009), as a theoretical framework, CRT can be used to expose the injustices existing in organizations and advancing social change within the organizational contexts. In addition, CRT assumes the belief that certain barriers exist and are present for minorities within the majority culture. In general, CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the 21st century American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This dissertation attempts to illuminate through the lens of CRT, the experience of African American female elementary principals.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are rooted in the overall purpose. The purpose of the current phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. The lived experience is defined as the intersection
of race, gender, and generational position for African American female elementary principals. The study probed how their experiences and perceptions influence their approach to their work and their navigation of the leadership realm. A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to discover the meaning that African American females in the elementary principalship give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002). Explicitly, the study sought to define the “lived experience” of female African American elementary principals working in Mid-western urban school districts. The experiences were extracted from participants utilizing phenomenological qualitative research methods.

The qualitative phenomenological research study of African American female elementary principals answered four main research questions. The research questions guided the purpose of the study and focused on the actual phenomena being examined.

The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

R1: How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position, their leadership development, and their goal attainment? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?

R2: What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their White male, White female, and Black male counterparts?
R3: How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender impediments in their work environments?

R4: From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?

**Operational Definitions**

In order to better understand the full extent of this study, it is necessary to define several key terms.

**African American women and Black women:** The terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably to reflect the overall acceptance of the terms by people of African origin. These are women who self-identify as being a woman within the minority group of African American persons. They were born in the United States, but have traces or direct lineage to African ancestry.

**Race:** Race is generally understood as a socially constructed category to denote differences among people and is politically sustained to assign people to categories (Banton, 2000).

**Gender:** Gender is not only a biological categorization; for the purposes of this research study it is a “set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men” (Bell & Nkomo, 2001, p.16).

**Leadership:** Leadership has various definitions that can be found in the social science realm. As defined by Bass (1990), leadership is a process by which a person has the ability to influence others to accomplish an objective and to direct them in a way that
makes their unit more cohesive.

**Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is a term that symbolizes the numerous and multifaceted ways in which race and gender interact to shape a person’s experience (Crenshaw, 1989).

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

One assumption for this research study was that values, norms, stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs existing in educational institutions significantly impact female African American individuals’ development into leadership roles. The researcher assumed there was merit and logic to the theories described in the literature review in Chapter Two, specifically related to feminist theory, Black feminism and critical race theory. A second assumption was that the study would be conducted over a certain interval of time and is therefore only a snapshot of the “lived experience” dependent on conditions occurring during that time frame. A final assumption is that all respondents were honest and truthful in their replies. This assumption can be made due to the anonymity and confidentiality that was preserved throughout the study. The participants were volunteers who could have chosen to withdraw from the study at any time and with no ramifications.

The limitations and delimitations in this research study include:

1. The number of participants in this research was limited to the voices of the five participants who were selected by purposive sampling. This method of sampling is more fully described in Chapter Three.
2. The results of this study could be generalizable to elementary principals who (a) are female (b) are African American (c) are working in Midwestern urban school districts.

3. Lastly, the researcher emerged from the same gender, race, and professional occupation as the five participants; therefore, the researcher’s biases could interfere with the research methodology and findings. Careful steps were taken to ensure the regulation of these biases such as the researcher recognizing the biases and structuring the research questions to probe for the participants’ unique voices. It was the intent of the researcher to utilize her background as an asset in understanding the African American female elementary principals’ perspective - as only an insider could do. However, it is recognized that this insider status presents its own set of challenges to the researcher in maintaining the integrity of the data analysis. This influence is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

**Significance of the Study**

Little is known or understood about African American female elementary principals’ paths to procure leadership roles and sustain leadership positions. Just as women in leadership confront barriers or obstacles that men do not realize exist, African American women confront barriers in their path that White males or White females neither understand nor recognize. This study provides for critical knowledge of structural, political, and cultural barriers that obstruct African American women’s building level leadership advancement and sustainment. Diversity in school level leadership positions has meaningful links that go beyond just a portrayal of fairness and equality. There is
research to support a positive relationship between minority representation of principals and student outcomes. These outcomes include academic achievement, lower drop out rates, and higher graduation rates specifically for minority students (Dee, 2004; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Therefore, there are both symbolic and practical reasons why the presence of minorities in school leadership is important (Williams & Loeb, 2012).

African American and Latino school administrators have the proven potential to positively influence the student achievement and climates of school communities. These leaders are able not only to help students navigate their school environment and culture, but also to increase the involvement of other teachers and their students' parents (Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Williams & Loeb, 2012). By understanding the plight of African American women in school level leadership positions, preparation programs and school district level leaders will be better positioned to increase this specific population’s ranks.

Few studies have researched how gender and race interact and intersect to inform the leadership experience and development of minority women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). This study has assisted with laying the continued groundwork for future efforts to capture the personal and professional experiences of high-achieving African American women in the educational arena. The experiences lived by these women provide critical insights that are beneficial to aspiring African American women leaders in the educational leadership and other professional fields. If we are to achieve academic excellence and social justice in our schools, we must create a dialogue around the advantages of understanding how to support African American women (and minorities in general) in school leadership. The findings of this study reveal the power structures that limit the advancement and/or success of African American women in educational
leadership. Once identified, the destructive structures can be resisted or eliminated in order to facilitate meaningful success for African American women (Collins, 2000). In addition, the examination of each principal’s unique lived experience and story helps to recognize existing support structures that are particularly of importance for African American females in school leadership. These supportive structures are just as important to distinguish as the destructive factors. An examination of both types will lead to recommendations and advices for future leadership development and research in this area.

**Conclusion**

States and districts across the US are dealing with the mounting pressure to ensure all students attain high levels of achievement, regardless of possible complicating variables like poverty and English as a Second language (Syed, 2015). In these current circumstances, effective school leaders are in high demand. However, the field of educational leadership is widely recognized as both complex and challenging (Shields, 2004). Some feel it is the elementary building principal who is uniquely positioned to initiate positive change (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). In light of these increasing demands, it is imperative that the K-12 educational realm studies the leadership of African American women. African American women who are brave enough to take on the school leadership position are subjected to visible and sometimes invisible forms of marginalization. The larger educational institution rarely recognizes the leadership challenges they face, yet alone addresses them. Bernier and Rocco reported in 2003 that White privilege and racial and sexual oppression can all be disempowering for the African American leader. If we neglect to examine the leadership experience of
African American women in elementary school settings, then they will continue to be marginalized, as they have been in the past (Bartling, 2013). The outcomes of this study will not only serve to better understand the experience, but also provide a more inclusive representation of school leadership that better serves both its leaders, teachers, and most importantly, it’s students.

**Outline of Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters and includes an appendix section. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study, which includes the overall purpose and the conceptual framework, statement of the problem, and the research questions. Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature. Chapter Three describes the qualitative research methods, selection of participants, role and background of the researcher, and data collection and analysis methods. Chapter Four presents the main findings of the research study. This includes a vignette of each participant’s story and central themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. Chapter Five discusses the results in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature review, as well as identifying three key findings drawn from a meta-analysis of all of the data outcomes. The concluding chapter also includes implications for theoretical leadership frameworks, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

A Review of Selected Literature and Research examining 21st century school leadership, gender, and race

The overall challenge of school leadership in the 21st century continues to grow. Amidst swelling pressure, school districts across the United States are struggling to find ways to ensure high levels of achievement for all students, especially those in poverty and those who are second language learners (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Specifically, the role of the principal has intensified to include a staggering assortment of professional tasks, responsibilities, and competencies. In addition, with increased job stress and complexity, Gates et al. found in 2006 that the retirement and attrition of the current principal workforce continues to accelerate and will continue to do so in the next 10-20 years. This transition of principals provides school districts with both a challenge and an opportunity; an opportunity to grow as an organization and the achievable challenge to diversify their leadership ranks.

Providing competent school leadership requires both skill and an environment where skillful leadership is nurtured and supported. According to a six-year study that analyzed data in nine states, there was not a single record of a school improving student achievement in the absence of what was termed “talented school leadership” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Unfortunately, all school administrators face some type of challenge in obtaining this form of success. The job of principal has never been more complex or more critical. Many building leaders spend a great deal of time
attempting to acquire the knowledge or skills they need to understand what being an instructional leader really means. Their pre-service and in-service training may not have prepared them as completely or fully as the actual conditions require. This creates a challenging task due to the current high-stakes accountability demands that pervade public education (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The success of educational administrators in the United States schools is influenced by many variables, including demographics. In P-12 public schools, nationally, 82% of public school principals are White, 11% are Black, 5% are Hispanic, and less than 3% are identified as Asian and Native American (Digest of Education Statistics, 2013). These non-representative numbers can partially be explained by the fact that most principals come from the teaching ranks and fewer African Americans are entering the teaching profession (Williams & Loeb, 2012). As minorities in multiple ways, it is not far-fetched to assume that non-White principals and female principals confront barriers in their pursuit of the principalship and careers as principals. The dearth of teachers and administrators of color is contrasted against a backdrop of a tremendous increase in the number of children of color in United States’ public schools (Ferrandino, 2001). The reasoning behind why there is a lack of African Americans, and specifically Black females, in school administration, should be analyzed through a wide lens in order to obtain an accurate picture of the current landscape and understand their true experiences.

One expression and paradigm that assists in describing the current scarcity of African American women in school leadership has to do with the glass ceiling. Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) first laid claim to the term ‘glass ceiling’ in a special report from
the Wall Street Journal. The glass ceiling (according to the authors) is used to describe the management world, in which women and minorities have restricted access to executive level positions and are barred from opportunities due to prejudice and corporate tradition. Dominguez (1991) and Tavakolian (1993) depicted the glass ceiling as the “real or perceived” invisible barriers that impede advancement opportunities for women and minorities. Since Hymowitz and Schellhardt's article, however, the consensus has come to be that the glass ceiling is the invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from attaining higher levels within a given corporation (Jackson, 2001).

With this in mind, what type of glass ceiling impedes the success and presents challenges for African American female elementary principals? Do Black female principals feel they can “raise the ceiling” through certain tactics? If it is commonly accepted by scholars that racism and sexism are very prevalent in the United States, how do these systems of oppression shape the African American female’s experience and success or lack thereof in the school administration dominion? Allen, Jacobson, and Lomotey conducted research in 1995 that utilized thirty-eight questionnaires and eight in-depth interviews of aspirant African American women school administrators in western New York State. Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that most participants did not mention gender as a barrier. For the participants in their study, race was perceived as the single most salient barrier to career advancement. How does a woman in leadership separate race from gender? How do African American female principals traverse the bumpy road to effective school leadership? Do they feel as though they must be twice as good as and better than others with the same aspirations? When attempting to understand
the leadership experiences of this group, it is useful to consider the role of our society’s history. In other words, to know where we are going, we must know where we’ve been.

**Historical role of African American women in U.S. education and educational leadership**

African American women throughout history have seen the foulest side of America. They have been caregivers and breadwinners. Through centuries of oppression, they have shown incredible strength and resilience. And yet, after years of dealing with North American society's racist and sexist misconceptions, some have even found their way into leading corporations, major media organizations, the military, and our state and federal governments. However, this has not occurred without intentional hard work and determination and it only occurs for a small few in comparison to workforce statistics. What makes those small few different from the others? How does this apply to African American women in the educational arena? This can only be examined by exploring the literature around African American women and the educational realm.

Limited literature exists around the history and the role of women in United States’ education. Even less literature and narrative history exists for the role of Black women in United States’ education. Education has been fundamental in the African American community throughout history, as it is viewed as an apparatus for climbing out of marginalized status in American society. According to Shaw (1996), for many Black women, education was the tool through which they were prepared to uplift the African American community. The following is an excerpt taken from Coppin State University regarding the individual believed to be the first African American teacher who went on to be a principal.
Fannie Jackson was born a slave in Washington D.C. on October 15, 1837. She gained her freedom when her aunt was able to purchase her at the age of twelve. Through her teen years Jackson worked as a servant for the author George Henry Calvert and in 1860 she enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio. Oberlin College was the first college in the United States to accept both Black and female students. While attending Oberlin College, Jackson enrolled and excelled in the men’s course of studies. She was elected to the highly respected Young Ladies Literary Society and was the first African American student to be appointed in the College’s preparatory department. As the Civil War came to an end she established a night school in Oberlin in order to educate freed slaves. Upon her graduation in 1865, Jackson became a high school teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) in Philadelphia. Within a year she was promoted to principal of the Ladies Department and taught Greek, Latin, and Mathematics at the ICY. In 1869, Jackson became principal of the entire institute, making her the first African American woman to receive the title of school principal, a position she would hold until 1906.

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From these inspiring and humble beginnings, the role of African American women in educational leadership arose. Also from these modest beginnings, society began to adjust their fixed image of the African American woman as being subservient to one of being confident, accomplished and assertive. The acceptance of African American female leaders in educational leadership has evolved, but it will always be bound by its historical and socio-cultural bigoted beginnings.

In the period from 1830 through 1900, women, both Black and White, became more identified with teaching; by 1880, 57.2% of the teachers in the United States were women (Shakeshaft, 1989). Fast forward one hundred years and 69.0% of teachers were female in 1986. Over the next 20 years that number rose to 82.5% in 2005. As of today, 84% of teachers in the United States are thought to be female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Forlornly, while women flourish in the teaching force, women and minorities in P-12 districts remain marginally represented in educational leadership positions, particularly those positions where the most authority and highest
salaries are found (Gupton, 2009). According to employment statistics from the 2010 Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, minorities constitute 9% of what are considered “senior level” educational positions. This percentage includes superintendents and assistant/associate superintendents. School level leaders are referred to in the commission’s work as “midlevel managers” and minorities make up 16% of this category. Of the 16% of minorities, only 8% of those are women. In other words, contrary to what may seem logical, the profession of teaching (best known for its high number of females) continues to be guided and controlled by White men. To understand how we got to this place, it is important to review specific historical facts from the civil rights era.

**Brown vs. Board of Education.**

Before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in minority neighborhoods and districts across America, teaching and building administration were considered honorable and good-paying careers for African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. The teaching profession or school administration provided a possible pathway for African Americans and minorities to enter the middle class. Also, minority teachers and principals in their communities were viewed as positive role models for the young children in their care. These teachers and administrators instructed young people regarding how to relate to each other to eventually be able to impact the world (King, 1993). It has been estimated that approximately 82,000 African American teachers were teaching two million Black children in America in 1954 (Toppo, 2004). On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court’s decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down throughout the United States. *Brown v. Board* irrevocably changed the education
experience for all Americans, especially African Americans. The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, determined that in the field of education, the doctrine of separate but equal had no place in America. Separate educational facilities were considered inherently unequal (Van Delinder, 2004). Brown ended segregation in American schools and led the country into integration. The integration of schools, however, did not necessarily involve the integration of the staff. Black administrators, especially in the South, lost their jobs and influence during desegregation. African American administrators were no longer tied to Black schools, and they often were moved into the larger system, fired, or demoted (Franklin, 1990). Fultz (2004) reported many discriminatory firings and demotions of African American principals. For instance, of 467 school districts observed, 34 districts had dismissed their Black principals, and 386 Black principals (60%) had been demoted. Life for Black principals was disastrous during the 11 years after Brown. In 11 southern states, researchers estimated that 90% of African American principals lost their jobs. During these years, southern Whites attacked many Black students and legally prevented Brown’s implementation. They created over 3,000 private schools to combat integration (Schofield, 1991). It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 that small incremental changes began to occur for African American teachers and administrators (Grant, Tate, & Ladson-Billings, 1996). However, as noted in Loder’s qualitative work (2005) of African American principals during the 1980’s and 1990’s, individuals who did join the leadership ranks, had typically been prodded by the very few older African American women principals who had given them increasing levels of administrative and leadership responsibilities while they were still teachers. In essence growing their own
replacements, in spite of the district’s and societal barriers. The participants in Loder’s study reported being quite cognizant of the influence of the “invisible hand” (p. 260) of institutionalized racism and sexism in restricting and hindering their professional opportunities and aspirations. For the purpose of this study, it is important that the complexity of the historical role of African American women in US education and educational leadership and the Brown ruling is examined for its impact on today’s educational system and the plight faced by African American female principals.

**Significance of spirituality.**

When it comes to describing the life, legacy and role and African American women in the United States, many researchers find a strong correlation between African American women and their Christian spirituality (Mattis, 2002; Brown, 2012). Studies have shown that African American women have always been guided by “deep spirituality” and “openly acknowledged God and faith” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 364). Echols (2006) believes one's spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that he or she holds most dear, including a self-understanding of our purpose presently and in the future, and the legacy left for others to benefit. For the African American female principal, this self-understanding can create a connectedness to other principals, students, and the community. This connectedness and the spirituality it is based within is called upon as a means to cope with stress and make sense out of adverse situations (Smith, 2008).

**The Lingering Role of Race**

The adverse role racism has played in American history for over 400 years is widely acknowledged. However, the enduring influence of slavery and the lingering
effects of deeply rooted racism have imposed astounding limitations on the African American community. Many stereotypes plague African American woman and often, they are a direct result of racism in America. Sheena Childs (2012) studied gender and racial discrimination in the workplace and cites that in the arena of business, White men are twice as likely to get management jobs as equally qualified Black men and three times as likely as Black women. Although blatant racial discrimination actions may be at times to blame, more often well-intentioned human resource leaders employ less obvious, but still unproductive, methods that deter administrators of color from seeking employment in certain school districts (Williams & Loeb, 2012). Diverse applicants can be discounted in the interviewing process because they are “different” and possess possibly dissimilar cultural norms. In addition, Peters, Kinsey, & Malloy, (2004) developed a theory to explain how social stereotypes of stigmatized groups create an avoidance of activities that cultivate leadership. These to some degree covert actions can have a devastating impact on women and minorities in leadership. For this reason, within the past 20 years there have been studies conducted by Black feminist scholars that have examined both leadership barriers and leadership characteristics of African American women. Collette Bloom and David Erlandson (2003) studied the lives of three African American women administrators and exposed their struggle for equitable recognition and visibility within the field of education. The researchers used what they termed a “naturalistic inquiry advocacy approach” that included in-depth interviews. They found that the women faced unique challenges often left out of other literature or conversation. In addition, Henrietta Brinson looked at the impact of race and gender in leadership success of African American females in 2006. Her study focused on the barriers of
African American women in middle and upper management positions in corporate America. The study chronicled the stories of fifteen African American women who identify (through qualitative methods) barriers to their career advancement. Central to the study was the influence that discrimination, racism and sexism played as the women undertook the challenges found in the male corporate culture. This particular study and others have consistently found that racism and sexism inhibited the advancement of African American women leaders, with racism being the predominant factor (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Carter, 2013; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). According to Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003), “Black women often are treated like second-class citizens who must meet different demands than their White counterparts” (p. 99) such as working harder and giving more time. They have generally been concentrated in the lower policy-making positions where they serve as *worker bees*, carrying out policy and seldom operating in the capacity of law making (Smith, 1982). There is also a more recent interest in the actual disempowerment behaviors that occur when African American women take on leadership roles. Their mainly White teaching and staff personnel may challenge their authority in subtle and veiled ways. There may be resentment, resistance, and even undermining and ignoring of the African American woman’s position of power (Deitch, E. A., Barsky, A., Butz, R. M., Chan, S., Brief, A. P., & Bradley, J.C., 2003). Emdin (2016) states that there is a “coded language” (p. 3) that occurs when White teachers are attempting to undermine their Black principals. This includes statements like, “I don’t know, that’s just what my principal told me to do.” (p. 3). These challenges to leadership are not widely admitted, nor understood, much like the overall institutionalized racism that exists in all facets of society. Tondra Loder (2005)
surveyed an intergenerational sample of twenty African American women in Chicago and asked them to describe and make meaning out of their struggles and advancements to make inroads into the principalship. What she found is that for those African American women in school leadership roles specifically, there exists among many of today’s African American women principals a sense of alienation from the experiences of the civil rights struggle as well as feelings of frustration, incompetence, and despair about their inability to promote meaningful change in their urban schools (Loder, 2005). For all intents and purposes, racism has left social, physical, and psychological scars that have become a part of the academic world (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The following statement, written almost forty years ago, may still hold true for many today, "For all people of color, an aspect of their exploitation centers on being defined as the "other" (Said, 1979). Said’s research involved Asian organizational leaders and he found that for many of them, they could not escape their feelings of being not the norm, of being different from what was viewed as normal. Race and racism are integral and inescapable parts of our culture and social history in the United States.

**Feminism theory and the examination of elementary school leadership for African American females**

Achieving the lofty current goals of school administration in a democratic and transparent society requires for schools to provide gender-neutral settings. However, as with many feminized professions, women face restrictions in leadership opportunities. This is even though women are not a numerical minority. Women are a majority in the U.S. population and yet, they lack access to power (McGee Banks, 2007). In terms of securing their positions, women school administrators often have to struggle against the
socially constructed norms of leadership (Christman and McClellan, 2008.) As a result, “Workers that best fit the ideal worker norm – White, male, married, and heterosexual – are perceived as the more attractive worker” (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006, p. 500). Being aware of this barrier can cause women to feel as if they are at odds with their own gender. Schmuck and Schubert (1995) point out, “politically, and personally, women administrators are torn between being segregated into a culture of women and being integrated into a culture of men” (p. 282). Although increasing in numbers and while many women possess strong leadership skills, only a few find their way into positions of leadership inside the realm of education (Holloway, 2000; Alston, 2012). Much of this can be explained through examination of the Feminism Theory (FT).

In the late 1700’s American colonial law held that “by marriage the husband and wife are one person in the law.” The very being and legal existence of the women was assumed to have been suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of her husband “under whose wing and protection she performs everything” (Blackstone, 1765, p.10). This quote represents the state of affairs that necessitated the need for a focus on women’s rights in the United States. Basically, women had zero rights. This quote and the time-line of women’s suffrage events that followed over the subsequent 200 years paints an all-too-obvious but all-too-often overlooked picture: the experience of women in society is not the same as that of men.

In simplest terms, Feminist Theory, FT, is a theory on women’s rights and gender equality. It involves the study of women’s roles in society, which include their rights, privileges, interests, and concerns. In general, feminism and feminism theory originates from the knowledge garnered about the inequities and deep injustices suffered by people
based on gender and sexuality in society. According to Dentith and Peterlin in 2011, these theories were initially established within a liberal, mostly White Western movement for ‘women’s rights’. However, feminism and feminist theory have evolved considerably in recent decades into a broader, more inclusive field that seeks generally to “end sexist oppression” for women of all races, locations, and social classes and to eradicate all other forms of oppression that are suffered by people. A post-modern feminist theoretical approach, coupled with a Black feminist slant, is used for this study. As a result, gender is viewed within the wider context of social relations and is invariably connected to the principle of race.

“As the number of women increase in the workforce and in leadership roles, it is important to have models to understand the intersection of gender and leadership.” (Eagly & Chin, 2010, p. 216)

Trinidad & Normore give a clear example of this in their research done in 2005. They conducted a review of the existing literature on gender and leadership. They collected data through professional and academic journals of business and education, pertinent web sites, and textbooks. Once collected, the data was placed in categories according to common themes and patterns that emerged from the literature on the leadership styles of women in business and education. As a finding, they noted that in a school setting, women are faced with a leadership challenge dichotomy. Not only are they expected to set timetables and goals, but they are also expected to establish productive relationships with teachers, staff, parents, and students. “In the realm of education, women in leadership positions are expected to behave with sufficient authority to gain respect and maintain discipline, and with a large dose of caring and nurturing attitudes to fulfill gender role expectations” (p. 582-583). Clearly, the awareness of
perceptions and expectations influence how women lead (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). However, despite the growing number of women in administrative positions in schools, there is still a lack of research regarding their authentic experiences (Giese, T. H., Slate, J. R., Brown, M. S., Tejeda-Delgado, C., 2009). These same researchers assert the notion that “Research on the impact of gender on decision-making and other leadership practices is essential” (Giese et al, 2009, p. 8). Fulmer (2010) contends that not only is the current research bank devoid of issues that impact women, there is also a deprivation that prohibits men from understanding how their cultural identity as males interacts with women’s cultural identity as female. In other words, males tend to not recognize the influence gender roles can have on the workplace. This is a result of privilege. Simply defined, privilege is the notion that certain groups of individuals benefit from unearned and largely unacknowledged advantages in society (McIntosh, 1988). Although essentially disregarded, privilege impacts the organizational dynamics of all school districts. McFadden, Maahs-Fladung, Beck-Frazier, & Bruckner noted in 2009, “a new appreciation, new understanding, and greater empathy will be gained by re-examining the experience of women and acknowledging the importance of their leadership abilities (p.121).

**Black Feminism**

For African American women, it is impossible to look exclusively at gender because there is no way to disentangle the social construct from race. Mullings asserts,

> Various theoretical perspectives with an African-American feminist thought share a commitment to grounding in the real experiences of African American women, taking seriously the centrality of gender, race and racism in their lives. (1997, p. 3)
The social phenomenon of race and gender are salient factors and they compel African American women to navigate leadership roles differently than others. According to Meyers (2002), race and gender have worked together to oppress African American women in the workplace because both are grounded in stereotypical beliefs and myths. Where many White women face sexism, African American women face the combination of racism and sexism (Rusher, 1996). According to SantaMaria, Jean-Marie and Grant (2014), Black Feminism gained momentum during the civil rights movement, as African American women examined their exclusion and experiences with racism and sexism. This was compounded by exclusion from Black men’s organizations (e.g., The Black Panthers). Crenshaw contended in her insightful and ground-breaking essay in 1989 that African American women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either “racism” or “sexism”—but as a combination of both racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989.) This duality of oppression forces the African American woman to look at leadership patterns differently. The duality of oppression is more intricately explained through the term intersectionality. The notion of intersectionality is discussed more thoroughly in future sections of this literature review. Intersectionality refers to the experience of Black women in terms of their gender and their race simultaneously, not independently (Hooks, 2014). Tillman (2002, 2004 and 2005) has conducted multiple research studies that center on African American administrators. Through her work, she has exposed and described the complexities that African American women experience in the principalship. These complexities span both race and gender concurrently. Additionally, she focuses on the varying perspectives within their experiences. Turner (2002), in a study of academic leaders, highlighted many
of the special challenges faced by women of color. As leaders, these women report being more visible, yet they feel “socially invisible”; they feel greater pressure to conform and make fewer mistakes. Unlike the term "female" gender is not just about being a woman.

It is about the social relationships between men and women and the construction of femininity and masculinity.” (Mullings, 1997, p. 136)

Although there are perceptions that gender inequities have been overcome, it is expected that one small outcome of this study will be to unveil the gendered stereotypical behavior present and experienced in the educational administrative organizational setting.

**Critical Race theory and the examination of elementary school leadership for African American females**

Although we know gender plays a large role in finding perceived and lived success in educational leadership, Black women, unlike their White women counterparts, contend with two independent factors (race and gender) as they navigate the very unstable and challenging terrain of school leadership. The researcher of this study propositions that Critical Race Theory (CRT) allows for race to be placed at the center of the dialogue in a way that recognizes the realities of discrimination and oppression faced by Black women in educational leadership. In general, CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the 21st century American society (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001). Individual racism does not need to necessarily exist to see that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture. This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on White privilege, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color. In her research from 2009, Chanele Moore discusses that Black women must
“negotiate their place in the educational organization and carve out their own space” (p.5). Examining the challenges faced by African American female principals through the lens of CRT allows for the truth and the experience of the knower to be reflected (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001). In other words, the racial experience becomes central to the discourse and not considered something on the periphery or secondary. It legitimizes the experiences of people of color in an environment where those experiences (social and intellectual) have long been discredited and discounted, due to the beliefs held by the dominant group/culture. CRT assumes the belief that certain barriers exist and are present for minorities within the majority culture. Through this racialized and genderized approach, the stories of African American female school leaders can be accurately examined.

**Code-switching and Shifting.**

Code-switching (or what is sometimes referred to as “shifting”) has been documented as one tool Black women utilize to improve their social status and well-being in the dominant European driven society. It is the purposeful changing of the manner in which someone communicates (Wheeler, 2008). Code-switching can be viewed from multiple perspectives, but for this study, it is viewed from a socio-linguistic perspective. Although the other common perspective of “grammatical usage” is a relevant component of code-switching, the actual act is much more in-depth than just knowing the correct grammatical rules to follow. With Standard English as the accepted form of communication in American society, it thought to be a necessity for non-White individuals to code switch in order to be successful (Barnes, 2014). African American women learn through practice and intentional observation to actively code-switch; to
assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language style and common mannerisms for that setting (Wheeler, 2008). In addition to communication, the term “shifting” can expand this notion even further to include the physical posturing and minimizing social distance when involved in conversations. In 2004, the African American Women’s Voices project reported and published a book that promoted that this type of “shifting” is a sort of maneuver that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival and increase their chances of achievement in general society. Further affirmed, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) believe that African American women code-switch more than any other historically suppressed group. In their research, they report Black women may even be “hiding their true selves in an effort to appease their White bosses and colleagues” (p. 23). They assert that through the centuries African American women have at times altered their speech, appearance, and behavior to cope with racial and gender discrimination. They go on to reveal that Black women, especially those in professional occupations, make this shift daily as they struggle to feel good about themselves in a hostile world.

**Effective School Leadership – What are They Striving For?**

There is little doubt the public eye is fervently focused on school principals to deliver results. It turns out that building level leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning. This is according to the evidence compiled and analyzed by researchers working with the Wallace Foundation (Louis et al., 2010). School level leadership plays a vital role in determining the quality of the educational environment for students (Belt, 2009). This
evidence supports the present widespread interest in improving leadership as a key to successful schools. Yet, the expectations for the role may vary based on school context (i.e. rural, urban, or suburban) and the precedent set by previous leadership typically shapes those expectations. We know that each collection of stakeholders in education may have a different expectation of the principal’s role based on race and gender stereotypes and may treat the principal according to those expectations. McFadden et al. (2009) states that leadership is created through the will of the followers and that these followers’ perceptions are molded from personal experience, which is influenced by historical and social-cultural factors. These researchers go on to say that leadership exists to the degree that the followers “believe it does” (pg. 13). This concept can have a monumental impact on African American female school leaders. This revelation basically asserts that if the followers do not recognize the leader as a leader then there is no leadership present.

School leadership, for all who take charge, is both simple in nature and yet can be very complex to define. There is also no clear-cut, definitive guide for how to perform the job effectively (Moore, 2009). Emdin (2016) reports that there is a general mystique that besieges the role of the principal. The complexity of the role leads to differing beliefs on what type of leadership is best for the school setting. All types of leadership are described in the literature on effective school leadership using adjectives such as “instructional,” “participative,” “democratic,” “transformational”, etc. (Hallinger, 1992; Goldman, 1998; Louis et al., 2010). Progressive discussions of leadership are based upon two concepts: transactional or transformational leadership (Fisher & Koch, 2001). According to Parker (2005), transformational leadership places an importance on social
change and emancipation. Transformational leadership has been closely aligned to the leadership style of African American women (Walker, 2009; Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Parker, 2005). For the purpose of this study, a more unassuming classification of leadership will be applied to all contexts. No matter the adjectives used – research points to the same two essential objectives as being critical to any organization’s effectiveness. Effective school leadership, as defined by Louis et al. is 1. helping set a defensible set of directions and 2. influencing members to move in those directions (Louis, et al., 2010). As principals work to achieve these two objectives, their own demographic background has an influence on their daily tasks, their outlook on the mission, how they chart their course, the resources available to them, and their overall likeliness of success. No matter the characterization of leadership, Black female principals must balance the unique demands of the contexts in which they find themselves.

Resiliency.

With such a demanding position, burnout has become increasingly common in the principalship (Whitaker, 1996; Combs, Edmonson, & Jackson, 2009). Pully and Wakefield (2001) assert that possessing or developing resilience is the key to being a leader, because change is inevitable and therefore so is adaptation. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) suggest that a person’s “level of optimism (or pessimism) serves as a filter for interpreting adversity that strikes” and that “interpretation of adversity directly affects your response to the adversity and your overall resilience” (p. 19). In addition, Patterson (2001) asserts that resilience is a long-term, not a short-term, construct. A leader cannot be resilient today and non-resilient tomorrow. Even though adversity is an inevitable element of the job, most principals do not have formal training in the area of overcoming
adversity. To complicate matters further, personal characteristics such as gender, age, and years of experience have been examined related to job burnout and resiliency, but race has rarely, if at all, been considered (Combs et al., 2009). However, due to the nature of the work, the documented level of stress presented, the work environment, and the variables associated with their marginalized identities, resiliency has a role to play in the lives of African American female elementary principals.

**A Principal’s race and leadership.**

It is important to note that wide-ranging diversity in school level leadership positions has meaningful links that go beyond just a portrayal of fairness or equality. There is research to support a positive relationship between minority representation of principals and student outcomes. These outcomes include academic achievement, lower drop out rates, and higher graduation rates specifically for minority students (Dee, 2004; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Therefore, there are both symbolic and practical reasons why the presence of minorities in school leadership is important (Williams & Loeb, 2012). African American and Latino school administrators have the proven potential to positively influence the student achievement and climates of school communities. These leaders are able not only to help students navigate their school environment and culture, but also to increase the involvement of other teachers and their students' parents. Researchers have also noted Black principals using their shared cultural experiences to inform their practice. In particular, African American principals employ models of leadership that speak to the racial and cultural composition of the school (Brown, 2005; Tillman, 2004, 2005). Smith found that “nurturing of their students” was a strong theme in her qualitative research study done with African American female high school
Researchers in this field have expressed the need for more qualitative studies of Black principals to provide possible explanations for why the presence of Black principals may influence student outcomes (Williams & Loeb, 2012). This dissertation could be viewed as a direct response to that request. In addition, as Brown noted in 2003, given the increasing number of schools in large, urban districts with majority African American student populations, leadership theory, preparation, and practice must be approached from a broader perspective, “a perspective that includes the scholarship and knowledge of African Americans” (p. 585).

**Race and Gender Intersectionality**

African American female principals have two components of their identity that are salient to the general society; one being their race and the other being their gender. Race and gender interact to shape multiple dimensions of an individual’s experiences in the US (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is broadly defined as the manner in which multiple aspects of identity may combine in different ways to construct social reality for an individual (Shields, 2008).

Although coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the concept of the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women was most likely first described and preserved by Sojourner Truth in 1851 by means of a speech delivered at a women’s convention in Ohio:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well!
And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (Gage & Anthony, 1881).

Truth’s words distinctly contrast the character of oppression faced by White and Black women. This is because the landscape of African American women’s lives is heavily influenced by the dynamics of the biases inherent when one is both Black and female. It is a part of recorded history that when Sojourner Truth rose to speak on that day in 1851, many White women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would deflect attention away from women’s suffrage to emancipation (Crenshaw, 1989). This chronicled portion of history invokes a pure illustration of the level of racism within the women’s suffrage crusade and defines intersectionality. The experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood in terms of being Black, and of being a woman, considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce one another (Hooks, 2014). Symington reported in 2004 that the combination of identities is not simply an additive relationship. Instead, these two marginalized components of identity interact to produce a substantively distinct experience for women of color in leadership positions. Therefore, to examine the experience of an African American female elementary principal, one must acknowledge how the components of her identity (her gender and her race) interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. Byrd (2009) says that these identities should be viewed as initially “separate spheres” (pg. 1) that interlock (in a permanent way) into a system that shapes the structural aspects of an individual’s experience. It is also necessary to recognize that these forces are forces of oppression. They are socially constructed forces that represent barriers, challenges, and powerful impediments for African American women. Shields (2004) put forward the notion in her research that, “No one is defined by a single factor or characteristic.” (p. 127) The
situation facing women of color is more multifarious than that faced by White women. Paramount among the causes of added intricacy is the manner in which sexism has been emphasized without consideration of other types of discrimination (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). White females, who share the same skin color as most male leaders, can more easily focus exclusively on gender discrimination and may overlook the influence of race and ethnicity on perceptions of leadership (Suyemoto & Ballou, 2007).

In 2013, Shauna Carter conducted research through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with African American female principals of predominantly White elementary schools in the Northeast region of the United States. Carter asked her participants questions related to the personal, education, and professional backgrounds and experiences that influenced their leadership. She analyzed their responses through the Critical Race Theory lens and Black Feminist Thought. From the study participants' stories, seven themes emerged. They are as follows: 1. Knowing the White Community, 2. A Commitment against Race and Gender Inequalities, 3. An Obligation to the Race, 4. A Focus on Leadership for All (in their schools), 5. An Image of Authority, 6. An Attempt at Being Race and Gender –less, and 7. Self Empowerment and Empowerment through a Support System. Although some of the themes address only the influences of race on their leadership, most of the themes are a result of the participants being both Black and female. Ultimately, through their interviews, the participants in Carter’s study illustrated that there are race and gender influences in their leadership of schools. Although racism and sexism have evolved in professional communities to include more covert forms of oppression, African American women are often agonizingly aware of the differential treatment to which they are subjected. They are not treated as “whole” but
rather as fragmented individuals who experience the duality oppression from both race and gender (McGee Banks, 2007). African American women not only experience gender bias that initiates from the false premise that males are better suited to hold leadership positions (Bell & Chase, 1994; Coleman, 2005), but are also confronted by racial bias (Valverde, 2003). These are historically embedded in the power structures of organizations. In other words, there are multiple identities at play in a given context. Their marginalized experiences are often dismissed as insignificant or over-exaggerated because individuals who have experienced privilege and power in their lives misunderstand them. African American women are too dissimilar from White women to benefit from their shared gendered status and too dissimilar from Black men to benefit from their shared race (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Crenshaw (1989) argues in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” that a key aspect of intersectionality lies in its recognition that multiple oppressions are not each suffered separately but rather as a single, synthesized experience. Intersectionality, in this case, does not ‘assist’ in describing the experience. Intersectionality is the experience.

**Context of Time and Leadership Implications**

Elementary principals, both male and female, and of all ethnic backgrounds have at least one thing in common as they lead schools from one point in time to the next. They share their time perspective. Our social behaviors are inextricably linked to the point in time we are born and are then assimilated into society. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find studies that examine the contextual nature of a snapshot in time and school leadership. Cross-generational perspectives are especially lacking in the research
which contributes to an obscure understanding of how attempts to promote racial and gender equity in the principalship have progressed or been hindered over time (Loder, 2005). However, the construct of time greatly influences the actions of every person in society (Prensky, 2001). The time frame in which a person is raised, and then serves in a school leadership role, can greatly impact their experience.

It would be impractical to examine the lived experiences of currently practicing female African American principals without acknowledging the perspective and possible implications of time. Although they traverse the same lifetime, members of different generations experience and live in qualitatively different subjective eras. The female African American school leaders of just ten to fifteen years ago most likely had a very different experience from those currently practicing (Loder, 2005). As a significant, but small theme of this research study, the researcher chose to share the individual voices of the currently practicing African American female elementary principals who were born after 1975. This is due to historical context and the context of time. The younger leaders, leading today’s schools, are young Gen Xer’s and the oldest of the Millennials (Prensky, 2001). Those born sometime between 1975-1990 have been raised in a world characterized by a swift pace, constant change, and increasing technology (Wisniewski, 2010).

Millennial leaders may define leadership a bit differently than previous generations. Someone who “motivates or influences others to reach a shared goal” is the top definition of a leader in The Hartford’s 2013 Millennial Leadership Survey. These factors have a role to play in key differences between leaders of the 80’s, 90’s and early 21st century and the cohort of African American female school leaders that have taken the
helm within the last 8-10 years. Developed to capture the dynamics of generational change, the concept of “cohort” suggests that people who are born at or around the same time experience similar social and historical events which may impact their role transitions in similar ways (Ryder, 1965). The participants in this research study belong to the same generational cohort. Although not a major research topic in this study, the influence and context of time is viewed by this researcher as an important construct to both recognize and examine.

**Conclusion**

There are numerous social, historical, and cultural factors that influence race, gender, and leadership in schools and general society. School leaders with marginalized identities face barriers that their majority colleagues do not recognize or understand. To further complicate matters, schools function in an increasingly multifaceted and dynamic environment (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). According to Shields in 2004, aspirant school leaders must learn to “overcome pathologies of silence” (2004, p. 117). These “pathologies” are termed as the misguided efforts by some to demonstrate empathy and optimism by failing to recognize or attend to the identity differences that disregard the experiences of less powerful, marginalized individuals (Shields, 2004). This lack of acknowledgement can take a toll on both the diverse students being served, as well as the diverse individuals working within schools. African American female principals who find themselves in the administrative school realm have been overcoming these pathologies for over eight decades. Even so, there is a noticeable absence of research on how African American women experience leadership and develop as leaders. In addition, research has historically focused on only one aspect of the lives of women leaders. These minimal
categorizations along a solitary dimension cannot capture the dynamics of women’s experiences (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

With principal effectiveness and school leadership at the center of national school reform, rewards and sanctions affecting principals are increasingly common. The trends indicate an increasing acknowledgment that principals play a significant role in affecting student achievement and should be held accountable for it. However, the experiences and the road to success for elementary principals is not all paved with the same smooth cement. The experience is influenced by a number of variables. Females have a different experience from males; Blacks different than Whites, etc. For example, African American female principals often lack the connections or “social capital” ordinarily developed through ties in established cultures, i.e. that European Americans have more easily accessible to them (Parker, 2005). Much of the success of Black female principals depends on how well they interact and navigate the larger social and organizational context in which they find themselves. This study looks to examine the role the intersectionality of gender and race play in school leadership for Black females – the impact of sexism, racism, and the reported coping mechanisms African American women employ to counteract any negative impact from those elements. The study brings to the forefront the voices of African American female elementary principals, and captures a moment in time as an indicator describing the conditions (as they currently exist) for African American women who serve in these roles (Bartling, 2013).

Consideration of the intersection of multiple aspects of their identity provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these women as diverse leaders. All of this is an effort to broaden the understanding of their experiences in educational administration
and gain knowledge of the supports necessary to ensure an environment exists where they and their schools can experience sustained success.
CHAPTER III

Research Methodology Overview

The purpose of Chapter Three is to describe and detail the procedures that will be followed in conducting the research study. The specific research framework of a phenomenological qualitative approach was chosen for several compelling reasons, including the purpose of the study. The purpose of the current phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. The lived experience is defined as the intersection of race, gender, and generational position for African American female elementary principals. The intention of this study was to explore, examine, and describe the unique experiences of these individuals. The framework was guided by the research questions. The study probed how the participants’ experiences and perceptions influence their approach to their work, their navigation of the system, and their overall feelings of efficacy. A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to discover the meaning that African American females in the elementary principalship give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002). Explicitly, the study sought to define the “lived experience” of female African American elementary principals working in Mid-western urban school districts. These experiences are best extracted from participants utilizing phenomenological qualitative research approaches, as opposed to statistical formulas (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative Research Design

The purpose of using a qualitative research design for this research project was to
attempt to obtain insight and explore the experience, both in depth and complexity, of the principalship for African American females in Mid-western urban school districts. In qualitative research, the participants are intentionally and purposively selected (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researcher is interested in the subjects’ point-of-view and the identified themes that can be gleaned from within the group. In this sense, qualitative research serves the purpose of shedding light on people’s private significant experiences and opinions (Brinkman, 2013). The significance is in the stories and the experiences of African American female principals in the natural setting.

Qualitative research “is hypothesis-generating” (Flick, 2007) rather than serving to test a hypothesis. There are multiple qualitative inquiry approaches that a researcher can utilize. Creswell (2007) has noted ethnographies, grounded theory, phenomenological research, narrative research, and case studies (p. 14-15) all as being inquiry approaches within the qualitative realm. The inquiry approach that best fit the purposes and framework of this research study was one that attempted to understand individuals’ perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a their situation. This is most closely linked with phenomenology.

**Phenomenological research**

A phenomenological qualitative research study is designed to explain a phenomenon through human lived experiences (Byrne, 2001). Patton (2002) says the foundational question posted in phenomenological research is, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomena for this person or group of people” (p. 104). The tenets of phenomenological research support the belief that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world (Byrne, 2001).
Different from a quantitative design, within qualitative phenomenology, the researcher attempts to gain insight into the nature and meaning of everyday experiences. Patton (2002) stresses that the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomena as directly as possible through in-depth interviewing. The data collection procedure of in-depth interviewing will be described in more detail in subsequent sections of this proposal.

The purpose of employing the phenomenological design was rooted in the researcher’s ability to utilize interviews and discussions that represent the perspective of the participants (Byrne, 2001). Phenomenology embraces the assumption that a particular experience is best told and understood from the perspective of the individual experiencing it. In its earliest days, phenomenological research methods sought essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Fast-forward forty-five years and the phenomenological approach continues to be rooted in the everyday lived experience of human beings.

Although the individual experience is crucial, there is more to the overall story when conducting phenomenological research. “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon…” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). This is where the “phenomena” is captured. Like Creswell, Patton (2002) describes the importance of the “shared experience” (p. 106) that arises as a result of analyzing a phenomenon. A phenomenologist assumes a commonality in shared human experiences. The methodology for this study encompassed a similar mission as it sought to discover extensive descriptions of diverse African American female elementary
principals’ existing experiences in school leadership. Therefore, the lived experience of African American females in the elementary principalship in Mid-western urban school districts is best understood from the stated perspective of those same individuals. Plainly stated, the “essence” of the experience of being Black, being female, and being an elementary principal in a Mid-western urban school district (Patton, 2002, p. 106) can only be captured by examining their own words and shared interpretations.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting participants that are likely to be “information rich” in terms of the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007). In purposeful sampling, the criterion for inclusion has to be predetermined before drawing the sample. Purposeful sampling is used with the intent of achieving a thorough and in-depth understanding of those individuals who are selected for participation (Gall et al., 2007). Creswell (2007) suggests interviewing three to ten participants for phenomenological qualitative research. According to Creswell, a smaller number of participants allows the researcher to collect rich and detailed data. In addition, Patton (1990) asserts that qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples in an effort to maximize the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. He goes even further to emphasize, “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.” (Patton, 1990, p. 244).

For the purpose of this research study, seven African American females, who are current practitioners in the elementary principalship in Mid-western urban school
districts, were asked to participate. Participants were recruited through an introductory email. The email briefly explained the study’s purpose, assured confidentiality, and asked for a response as to whether or not they were able to participate. Five chose to consent to take part in the study. Once the researcher received an affirmative response, a follow-up email was sent with a letter of consent (see Appendix A) attached and a link for an initial demographic survey.

In addition to being purposeful, the sampling was also “homogenous”. Homogenous purposeful sampling entails intentionally selecting participants that are the same or similar in nature and uniform throughout (Patton, 1990). Homogenous purposeful sampling is used when conducting a study on a specific phenomenon to gain an understanding of the collective (Patton, 1990). This study purposefully sampled participants who were (1) African American, (2) female, (3) elementary principals, (4) in year 1-8 of their principalship, (5) between the ages of 35 and 44, and (6) working within a Mid-western urban school district. Homogenous purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to examine the phenomena with individuals who have many demographic identifiers in common. This will further provide credibility to the findings. All participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Confidentiality

The participants were provided with a consent form that detailed all of the expectations as a subject in the study and described the measures that were taken to safeguard the entrusted information shared during the research process (See Appendix D). Patton (2002) says that qualitative inquiry may be more “intrusive” (p.407) than
surveys, tests, and other quantitative methods. For this reason, confidentiality was assured through the use of pledged and guaranteed practices, which are described below:

1. “Assumed” names were used for the participants’ actual names, leading to the subjects’ identities being completely concealed.

2. All recorded conversations and written transcripts remained in the custody of the researcher throughout the study in a locked and secure location.

3. Correspondences were sent from the researcher’s private email account.

4. All interviews took place during off-duty hours.

5. The interviews took place off-site.

6. The participants had the right to review any data collected from them throughout the study. They also had the right to review the findings.

7. The participants were free to dismiss themselves without any penalty at any time during the study.

Due to the potential sensitive nature of the content of the interviews, the researcher went to extensive efforts to keep the information secured and private. The measures were put into place so that any information provided to the researcher could not be attributed back to individual respondents. Through the use of the described practices, the researcher provided an assurance of protection to participants that minimized or eliminated their risk of participation, and involved the active effort of the researcher to remove any trace of participant identity from the data.
Researcher’s Perspective and Context

When conducting qualitative research, personal bias is a factor that should be acknowledged and addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important that the author’s background and motivation be discussed so that readers can reach their own conclusions regarding the research. The primary author’s experiences as a biracial (African American and European) woman who attended desegregated schools and who holds the perspective of a feminist and critical race-theorizing researcher, greatly influences the data interpretation. The researcher was born within the time frame that most would identify as Millennial. In addition, the researcher is a current elementary principal in an urban school district with over 50,000 students. The researcher’s path to leadership included teaching in the elementary setting for four years, moving to the central office for three years, procuring the position of Assistant Principal for two years, and then becoming an elementary principal. The researcher currently holds an M.A. in Early Childhood Education, an Educational Administrative Endorsement, and is working to complete an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

Research Questions

The research question(s) is one of the most important pieces of the research design and defines what the researcher wants to learn and/or understand (Maxwell, 2005). The research questions developed for this study guided the researcher to identify the subjects’ perspectives of their experience related to being African American and female within school leadership in an effort to bring the “invisible to the visible” (Packer, 2011).

The research questions were as follows:
R1: How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position, their leadership development, and their goal attainment? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?

R2: What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their White male and White female counterparts?

R3: How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments?

R4: From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative researchers in the 21st century work with a variety of perspectives and study an enormous range of phenomena. However, the technique used to obtain data is most commonly the interview (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). For this phenomenological study, the researcher gathered extensive information and perceptions through inductive interviews and discussions through in-person interactions. This was in addition to an introductory email that included a short survey with open-ended questions. The questions allowed each individual to describe their demographics and background. All participants were interviewed within a two-week time frame. One interview session was scheduled
with each participant. The interviews were scheduled for 60-90 minutes in length. The time configuration varied for each participant slightly due to both the progress of the interview and the time limitations of the participants.

The researcher utilized semi-structured interview questions to explore the fundamental thoughts and perceptions of the subjects. Kvale and Brinkman noted in 2008, interviews allow participants freedom of expression in telling their stories. In her later work Brinkman (2013) also concluded that interviews “open up intimate aspects of people’s lives” (p. 149) and do so in ways that are often overlooked. The semi-structured interviews for this study assisted the researcher in understanding the feelings and intentions that influence the subjects’ actions and behaviors. Noted by Bogdan & Biklen in 2002, the interview (as a data collection method) is used to gather descriptive data in the participants’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how the participants “interpret some piece of the world” (p. 96). The interviews aided the researcher in acquiring a real sense of the participants’ understanding of their own situation.

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Digital recorders and transcription software have improved the efficiency for qualitative researchers in many social science fields (Fielding, 2000). Transcribing the recordings into typed written form allowed the content to be studied in detail, linked with analytic notes and/or coded. Overall, the researcher employed interview techniques that enabled the participants to express inner feelings and experiences and have those feelings and experiences appropriately captured for analysis and examination.
**Instruments**

The participants initially responded to a brief demographic survey that allowed each individual to describe their demographics, their background, and the demographics of the current school they serve (See Appendix B). For example, the survey will asked participants to indicate their age range, their educational attainment, where they were raised, the current demographics of the school where they are employed, etc. The survey was used to gather demographical information to provide background and commonalities for the data analysis. In other words, the relevancy of the demographic data depended greatly on the qualitative themes and trends extrapolated from the phenomenological interview process.

In addition to the brief survey, the researcher followed a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews provide a way of collecting information on and finding out about things that the researcher cannot directly observe (Patton, 1990). The researcher developed an interview guide that included a list of questions and topics that were covered during the discussion (See Appendix C). The semi-structured nature of the protocol allowed the researcher to deviate from the protocol as long as the topics are in the same trajectory of the original question(s). Warren writes in 2002, "Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation” (p. 83). Due to the nature of this conversational exchange, the researcher had a list of topical questions, but at times did not follow a fixed order in an effort to foster more authentic and flexible responses from the participants (Packer, 2011).

The interview guide included a variety in the types of questions that were posed. Patton (2002) guides qualitative researchers to choose their interview questions carefully
and distinguish between the types of questions being asked. Patton lists six types of questions that can be asked during a qualitative interview (pp. 348-351): 1. experience and behavior questions, 2. opinion and value questions, 3. feeling questions, 4. knowledge questions, 5. sensory questions, and 6. background/demographic questions. The researcher composed intentional questions that included all of the varying categories of inquiry. The questions were directly related to providing answers to the grander and more complex universal research questions that guided the purpose of the study. The wording that is used in asking the questions can have a direct impact on the quality of the responses that are elicited. Distinguishing between question types and being intentional in the selection of questions, compels the interviewer to be clear about what is being asked and helps the interviewee to respond suitably (Patton, 2002). Participants had the chance to reorganize their ideas and clarify and deepen their thoughts while they were answering the questions. The flexible interview style garnered a better flow for the conversation, which leads to more productive data (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

An important element to the interview preparation and execution for this study was the implementation of a pilot test (Kvale, 2007). The pilot test assisted the researcher in determining if there were flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design. It also encouraged the researcher to make necessary revisions prior to the actual implementation of the study (Kvale, 2007). A pilot test is typically conducted with a participant(s) that has similar characteristics to the purposeful sampled participants to be interviewed in the study. The pilot test and interview can also assist the researcher with the refinement of research questions (Kvale, 2007). As part of the process in designing the interview guide for this research study, the researcher conducted a preliminary pilot
interview with a retired expert in the field of elementary educational administration. This individual’s demographic background generally matches that of the participants who will partake in the study. The individual was an African American female who had worked both as an elementary principal and an assistant superintendent within a large urban Midwest school district. As a result of the interview and discussion, both the overall research questions and interview protocol were adjusted. The changes were made in an effort to better capture the prospective participants’ thoughts, feelings, and perceptions related to their experiences. The pilot participant assisted the researcher with refinement to the questions that permitted the future participants’ “individual stories” to be gathered and surveyed. With pivotal significance, the pilot interview and discussion also confirmed the researcher’s perception that a systematic research study on the intersection of gender and race within the elementary principalship was warranted and essential.

Data Analysis

In the customary qualitative research project, the step after conducting an interview is to transcribe it and analyze the material obtained (Packer, 2011). This qualitative study included both a demographic survey, to develop a picture of the participants, and an interview protocol that was administered through in-person interviews. The data that was extracted from the use of the two instruments was analyzed, coded, and summarized (Packer, 2011). This process broke the data into meaningful parts that aided in the analysis. According to Welsh (2002), there are many different approaches to qualitative data analysis. The three main approaches include: literal, interpretive, and reflexive. Mason (1996) is credited with labeling these three terms. The first approach “literal” is rooted in an analysis process that focuses on the exact use of
particular language and words. “Interpretive” analysis is more focused on making sense of the participant’s actual perceptions, based on the words used. Finally, “reflexive” analysis takes into account the researcher’s own synthesis of both the perceptions and the words used in the interviews. For the purpose of this study, the researcher used Mason’s “reflexive approach”, as well as one additional strategy. Patton (2002) provides a useful data analysis strategy that was employed during the data analysis phase of this research study. Patton describes in the third edition of his book entitled “Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods” what he calls “context sensitivity” (p. 61). As a function of this approach, the researcher ensures that throughout the data analysis the context of time, in a historical and social approach, is prominent. This awareness ensures that context is not forgotten and that over-generalizations are avoided. The context of time is extremely salient for capturing African American female principals’ experiences as a current experience. This same proposed study conducted ten years prior or ten years into the future should and would yield much different results.

In order to effectively combine these two approaches, the researcher mapped out the analysis process prior to the implementation of the study. The researcher chose to follow an interpretive phenomenological analysis process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012), which was in line with the overall phenomenological qualitative research design. The process included three main steps:

1. After reading the typed transcripts multiple times, the researcher utilized NVivo 11© qualitative software (described in a later section of this chapter) to assign a coding system to group, sort, and compare the participants’ responses. In NVivo software, researchers can store
concepts, ideas or categories as nodes that can be explored, organized or changed (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). The coding of study participants was expressed in nodes, which supported identification of codes and themes by doing a keyword and passage analysis. This process was the “literal” function of Mason’s theory.

2. The second step was to search through the literal data to identify more definitively certain patterns and themes, as well as repeated concepts and ideas. NVivo 11© qualitative software’s nodes allowed the researcher to make sense of the participant’s actual perceptions, based on the words used. This was the “interpretive” component of Mason’s hypothesis. Utilizing both of these approaches, along with a synthesis of the data from the researcher’s perspective and viewpoint, resulted in a “reflexive” and holistic analysis and led to the emergence of three central themes. A holistic analysis is almost identical to the interpretive phenomenological analysis and is one that examines those being researched, but does so through the lens of the researcher (Mason, 1996).

3. As a final and over-arching analysis step, Patton’s “context sensitivity” was employed. This was done throughout the reflexive tactics and was more of an awareness, than an actual step in the process.

The marrying of the reflexive and context sensitive approaches, allowed the data to be triangulated for internal consistency. By combining these complementing qualitative analysis strategies, from two different qualitative experts, the researcher was
able take readers into the “time and place” of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 47) so as to better capture the participants’ experiences.

In qualitative research and for the purpose of this study, the recording and tracking of analytical insights during data collection was the beginning of the data analysis (Patton, 2002). The need to begin analysis during collection is due to the emergent nature of phenomenological qualitative research. The analysis strategies detailed in the final two chapters of this dissertation are then based on two primary sources: (1) responses to the questions posed during the interview and (2) the analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection. The researcher manually conducted all of the transcription of the digitally recorded interviews. This aided in the coding, categorization, and analysis of the data. Computer-assisted methods were used for the data interpretation. Specifically, the program NVivo 11© was utilized. According to Markle, West, and Rich (2011), due to technological breakthroughs, qualitative researchers continue to improve upon the ways they collect, analyze or present data. This is all done in an effort obtain a purer authenticity or replication of participants’ perspectives (Markle et al., 2011). Patton (2002) is careful to point out that the software does not analyze the data for the researcher; rather it “assists” in analyzing the data (p. 442). The most recently developed computer assisted transcription software and data analysis software programs were vetted and investigated prior to implementation of this study. After examining the pros and cons of computer assisted transcription software, the researcher felt the transcription process would be best done by hand to allow for analytical insights to be made even during transcription. However, the researcher strongly believed that the data analysis software program NVivo 11© would provide essential
organizational tactics needed to categorize and code the data. The researcher found these initial contentions to be true. More detailed information related to the computer-assisted data analysis software program is what follows.

**Interpretation with computer-assisted qualitative data analysis**

After transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy, the recorded interviews were stored, organized and coded for analysis utilizing NVivo 11© qualitative software. Coding is the effort to organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories (Seidman, 1998). NVivo 11© qualitative software has been proven to provide an audit of the data analysis process as a whole and an accurate and transparent picture of the researcher’s data (Welsh, 2002). Using software, like NVivo 11©, in the data analysis and coding process has evolved over the past thirty years. The computer-aided process for coding has been thought by some to add rigor and precision to the field of qualitative research (Richards & Richards, 1991). The software allowed the researcher to perform a “content analysis” and “thematic analysis” of the transcribed documents. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012), the researcher did an initial bracketing of ideas, then created specific codes (nodes in NVivo), and arrived at a group of themes.

For this study, the recordings and analysis resulted in reliable, comparable qualitative data. The researcher employed thoughtful reflection in regards to making sense of the themes revealed through the software. Welsh (2002) asserts that in order to achieve the best results in qualitative data analysis, it is important that researchers do not rely solely on either electronic or manual methods and instead “combine the best features
of each” (p.4). Computer aided analysis programs have sped up the process of locating themes, grouping responses into categories and comparing responses (Patton, 2002), but in this research study the researcher will determine the significance of the themes and which informational patterns are worthy of extraction.

**Organization of Findings**

The findings for this research study are presented in the concluding chapters, Chapter Four and Chapter Five. The findings are organized into five methods of synthesis. The first is a narrative story of each participant. The second is a review of the collected data in relation to the guiding research questions. The third is a presentation of the findings as phenomenological themes. Multiple themes emerged from the research. However, those themes that were found to be evident across all five participants were defined as a “phenomenon”. These themes were extracted from the data coding procedures utilizing NVivo 11© qualitative software. The fourth and fifth presentation of data can be found in Chapter Five. The fourth method is an interpretation of the findings related to the Conceptual Framework and the Literature Review. The fifth and final data set are the key findings. The key findings are the synthesized outcomes of all of the methods of synthesis. All of the results of the study are described in the subsequent sections.

**Summary**

A qualitative research design methodology, coupled with a phenomenological context, permitted this researcher to explore, examine and accurately describe the unique experience of African American females in the elementary principalship. Packer (2011)
articulates the qualitative approach best when he contends that qualitative research is motivated by reverence for the distinct ways that individuals understand the world. Since researchers are not able to observe feelings, thoughts and intentions, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Phenomenological interviews are best employed when they involve an informal and interactive process that utilizes comments and questions (Creswell, 1994). Through the use of an interview guide that promoted an interactive dialogue, the researcher delved into the lives of African American females in the elementary principal position in an attempt to obtain a first person account of their experiences. Although, many qualitative research projects use only interviews as their source of empirical data (Packer, 2011), this study will also employ the use of a demographic survey to better understand the backgrounds of the participants being studied. Technological progress now offers the potential for more accurate, efficient, and trustworthy representations of qualitative data (Markle et al., 2011). Through the use of computer-assisted data analysis, the researcher extracted common themes shared and exposed by the participants. As Patton (2002) asserts, we interview to “gather stories” (p. 341). These stories and their corresponding discoveries serve as the foundation to describe the current phenomena related to the African American female’s leadership experience in the elementary educational realm. The discoveries are detailed in the concluding chapters.
CHAPTER IV

Results

Introduction to the findings

The purpose of the current phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, study participants described their experiences and understandings of their leadership journey as African American female elementary principals. Participants represented multiple school districts and urban areas across the Midwest.

Patton (2002) encourages the qualitative researcher to ensure they allow their data to be transformed into comprehensible findings. The researcher utilized multiple forms of reporting to convey the findings of the data analysis. The data for this research study has been organized into a summary of the demographic backgrounds of the participants; five personal narratives, describing the overall essence of each participant; three key themes that emerged from all five interviews; and a summary of the analysis of each corresponding research question that was included as part of the study. In addition, the analysis continues in Chapter Five, where the researcher expands upon the findings and further examines the themes within the proposed Conceptual Framework and with regard to the Literature Review in Chapter Two. In addition, Key findings are presented that are the synthesized outcomes of all of the data that was examined.

In order to achieve the most effectual analysis, the researcher used both electronic and manual methods of data analysis, combining the best features of each. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, to protect their individual identities and maintain
The major findings will be presented in this chapter and analyzed in Chapter Five.

**Participants’ backgrounds and demographics**

The participants in this study were five elementary African American female principals from urban school districts in Mid-western states. They ranged in age from 34 to 44 years old. One of the five respondents was born in the South and moved to the Midwest as an adolescent, while the others were born and raised in the Continental Midwest. All but one participant attended public schooling. On average, participants had 2-3 years of administrative experience in the principalship. All five principals had previous teaching experience. The average number of years teaching for the participant group was 5-6 years. Two of the participants were first generation college students. In terms of their educational attainment, two of the participants had earned doctorate degrees, two possessed the Master’s degree plus additional graduate coursework and one possessed an MA degree. The principals’ current school populations varied in demographics. Three of the five participants serve buildings with over 500 students. Two participants serve buildings with 300-399 students. Two of the five participants are currently assigned as principals in schools where over 75% of students are of a racial minority. One principal is also assigned to a building where over 90% of the students qualify for Free or Reduced lunch (F/R lunch). Two of the participants have student populations where 51% to 90% of the students qualify for F/R lunch and one participant is assigned to a building where only 21-50% of the student population qualifies for F/R lunch. As for the teaching staff at their respective buildings, two of the participants serve buildings with over forty certified staff members. The other three have twenty-one to
thirty certified staff members that directly report them. One of the participants with over forty certified staff members reported 4-8 of their staff members are of a racial minority. Three of the participants report that they have less than three certified staff members of a racial minority. One participant reported having zero certified staff members of a racial minority in her school.

The above general overview provides a summary of the homogenous sampled respondents personal backgrounds, educational attainment, and current schools’ compositions. Although each of the women identifies as African American or Black, the varied life experiences illustrate ranges of similarities and differences among them; thus, highlighting one of the tenets of Black Feminism that focuses on the diversity within the Black community (Collins, 2000). A demographic summary is provided in Table 1.

The individual narratives that follow include a brief descriptive account of how life experiences such as familial influences, educational experiences (e.g., high school, college, graduate school) and professional experiences served to shape and mold their perceptions of leadership and their own development as leaders.
Table 1

**Participant Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Mrs. Johnson</th>
<th>Dr. Bell</th>
<th>Ms. Brown</th>
<th>Dr. Jones</th>
<th>Mrs. Andrews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>35-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree</td>
<td>MA +30</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>MA +30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Gen. College Student</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Principal</td>
<td>6 to 8</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>3 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching</td>
<td>5 to 8</td>
<td>2 to 4</td>
<td>5 to 8</td>
<td>Over 8</td>
<td>2 to 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in the Midwest</td>
<td>Since 1 year old</td>
<td>Over 10 yrs</td>
<td>Over 10 yrs</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Since Birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal schooling</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Building’s Student Enrollment</td>
<td>400-499</td>
<td>Over 500</td>
<td>Over 500</td>
<td>Over 500</td>
<td>300-399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Building’s % Racial Minority</td>
<td>Over 75%</td>
<td>21-50%</td>
<td>21-50%</td>
<td>Over 75%</td>
<td>21-50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Building’s SES (% poverty)</td>
<td>Over 90%</td>
<td>21-50%</td>
<td>51-75%</td>
<td>76-90%</td>
<td>51-75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers under supervision</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White Teachers under supervision</td>
<td>Less than 3</td>
<td>Less than 3</td>
<td>4 to 8</td>
<td>Less than 3</td>
<td>Zero</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five Stories – Personal Narratives

The use of personal narratives in qualitative research analysis is based firmly in the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story (Andrews, Squire, & Tambokou, 2008). Prior to discussing the data in relation to the original research questions and prior to highlighting the central themes extracted from the study, the researcher begins with a brief description of each participant. Each description has been organized into a narrative story. These stories reflect the time and context in which they were captured and are aimed at providing a holistic portrayal of each research participant. The stories represent a collective effort to define the experience of being female, African American, and an elementary principal from a set of shared and individual experiences.

**Participant #1 “Mrs. Andrews”**.

Mrs. Andrews is the principal of an elementary school in a Mid-western urban school district. She describes her racial make-up as ¾ African American and ¼ Caucasian, although she identifies as African American. She has been a principal for a little over 5 years. She became a principal just before she turned 30 years old. Her school is located just outside of the city’s urban core and has a F/R lunch percentage of just over 50%. Her school is made up of just under 400 students. Most are middle class and lower middle class White and Black families, with an increasing South East Asian population that are identified as English language learners and have recently moved into the area. Approximately 60% of her school’s students come from a racial minority. Mrs. Andrews’ provides direct supervision and support to thirty-two certified teaching staff members and twenty noncertified staff members. On her entire staff there are only two non-White
employees. Zero of her certified staff are non-White.

Mrs. Andrews grew up in the same area as her current school. She describes her childhood as typical and nurturing. Both of her parents were college graduates and Mrs. Andrews says she never questioned that she would earn a college degree. However, she changed her major in her third year of college and went into the teaching profession after working in a summer program with at risk youth. She reports that after working in the program she felt compelled to work within the school system, helping to provide support and structure for children who came from impoverished backgrounds. Her family supported her decision to change her career path, but that one pivotal experience played the biggest role in her decision. She described that experience as one that involved low expectations of students from a colleague, and Mrs. Andrews knew that all children deserved a “caring adult to teach them” (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

Mrs. Andrews describes her leadership style as “democratic”. She feels that her staff know her expectations and are loyal due to the relationships she has forged through the years. She described many scenarios where her age impacted what she believed was her ability to lead. During the interview, Mrs. Andrews also described the difficulties she experienced replacing a male principal. She felt that she had to constantly prove that she could handle the difficult parents and the difficult students.

Many of my staff are well intentioned but they still hold many racist stereotypes when it comes to working with families of color. I think I kind of serve as an “Ambassador” for my race sometimes because I feel like the “only one”.

In working with her staff, Mrs. Andrews credits her intentional lens of “good intentions” as a basis for relating to her staff.

I find that it is best to assume good intentions when working directly with teachers. Teachers are sometimes unaware of their actions – of their biases. When
I assume good intentions, I am usually able to find some sort of common ground and some sort of reason for their actions.

In working with students and families, Mrs. Andrews also credits her interpersonal skills as the most important factor in overcoming any barriers related to her race, age, and/or gender. She considers those communication skills to be a crucial component of breaking down bias.

There seems to be an understanding most of the time (not all of the time) when you are of a similar race and culture. There is an unspoken level of respect – that really goes both ways. It is felt between us. …it’s like there is a connection, an unspoken agreement. Now, this doesn’t always happen – but it definitely happens a lot.

Mrs. Andrews feels that one cannot separate race from gender or gender from race, but that her age seems to be less and less of an obstacle the older she gets.

I have had both overt racism and more covert and since I believe it is impossible to separate my race from my gender, I have also had some sexist encounters. For example, one of my first years in job I had a parent who refused to speak with me because I was not White. He stated that I probably “did not speak English” and that he wanted to speak to an “American”. I was appalled and basically told him – Sir, I am in charge. If you want to speak to the person in charge that is me and if you don’t like that, you can take your child to a different school. He still refused to speak to me and took his child and left. He left the child at my school – but I never saw him again. Those types of interactions remind me that racism and sexism are alive and well.

Mrs. Andrews reports that she strongly believes her presence as both a teacher and now as a principal positively impacts her minority students’ school experience. She admits that she goes the extra mile to give her minority students (specifically those living in poverty) more care and support. She also feels obligated to open her “teachers’ hearts to their students’ humanity” (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

The district Mrs. Andrews is employed within has approximately 50 elementary schools. She reports that approximately one fourth of the buildings are led by minorities
and of that about 15% are led by minority women, all being African American and two Latina leaders. She feels this lack of representation presents unique challenges for her and her analogous colleagues. Although sometimes problematic, she feels mostly her district does not intentionally discriminate against non-White administrators. However, she discloses that she often feels alienated both at school and within her district and takes refuge in communicating on a weekly basis with her African American female and male principal counterparts across the city.

It is the more covert actions – those done discreetly and those that are institutionalized that really scare me. Practices that exclude non-Whites intentionally and/or even district practices that exclude women of color and women in general. I have noticed that often my district still looks to the men for committees and even for speaking in front of groups. In addition, White males and White women in general seem to dominate the upper echelon of our district. They seem to surround themselves with people who look like them - think like them – and then appoint people of color to go out and lead the schools. Sort of like, “go out and deal with your people…we’ll be here making all of the decisions.” You know? It’s crazy really. But it is allowed to persist.

Participant #2 “Dr. Jones”.

Dr. Jones is the principal of an elementary school in a Mid-western urban school district. She identifies as African American. She has been a principal for two full school years. Dr. Jones’ school is within the city’s urban core and has a F/R lunch percentage of just over 75%. Her school has a student population of over 500 students. Almost 80% of her students are categorized as a racial minority. Most of them are African American.

Dr. Jones provides direct supervision and support to over 40 certified teaching staff members. Although she reports having over ten non-White employees on her classified staff (i.e. kitchen workers, custodial staff, teacher aides, etc.), only two of her certified staff members are of a racial minority.
Dr. Jones grew up in what she described as the “South”. She describes her childhood as happy and secure. She grew up in a segregated town, but says she never really experienced “in your face racism” until her schooling, because of the demographic racial segregation (Dr. Jones, Interview, 2016). She was sent to integrated schools in the late 1970’s and remembers the impact of being one of the only Black students in a White school that was in a White neighborhood.

My parents had not gone to integrated schools, so I was first one to be bussed to a different part of town and I went to a White-led school. There was not as much family involvement, because my mom was not going to go and hang out with all of the White moms. So it was really a different experience. I ended up having to navigate a lot of issues related to race myself. Navigating school for myself.

Dr. Jones credits the only Black female teacher she ever had in her schooling (third grade) with igniting a fire within her to teach and eventually go on to be a school administrator. After completing elementary and secondary school, Dr. Jones became a paraprofessional (teacher aide) in a local elementary school. At the time she was majoring at the local university in accounting. However, she reported that after spending some time in the local public schools she noticed that many minority students, students that reminded her of own self, were under-performing.

I saw kids doing what was expected of them. No one expected them to perform, so they didn’t.

She was given the opportunity to participate in a “para to teacher” program and graduated four years later with her elementary teaching degree and endorsement in special education. From there she landed a teaching job in a predominantly Latino community. A colleague encouraged her to continue her higher education pursuits, and so she did.

Throughout my career, I kept finding out that if I took another step, I’d be able to
do to more…and another step, and even more.

Dr. Jones’ administrative path is what led her to the Midwest. She was initially placed as an assistant principal at a local low-income middle school. It was a trying experience, but one where she reported the largest amount of professional and personal growth. She recounted a situation where her then principal questioned her capacity to move to the next level of administration.

She asked me if I wanted to be a principal. I said, “Of course I do.” And she said, “I didn’t know you wanted to be a principal.” I sat there for a minute and then I got mad. I thought “What the hell? Why on earth would I be an assistant principal, and I don’t want to be a principal?” That is a logical progression. What did she think I was doing there?

Dr. Jones believes this was her first of many obstacles she encountered in working as an African American female school administrator. She was hired as an elementary principal three years after that interaction.

Dr. Jones reported that she strongly believes her presence as an African American principal positively impacts her minority students’ school experience. She reports that she is extremely intentional in her interactions with her African American female students.

What I noticed is that I have been intentional about reaching out to my students of color and this has led to my other students feeling comfortable with me in the same way. I notice everything about my Black students, their hair, their clothes, how they are doing at school overall. I comment on all of it.

In her response to the question posed, “Why do you comment on those things?” Dr. Jones also compared her likeness to that of being “socially invisible” for a long portion of her life as an African American female (Mullings, 1997, p. 136).

Why? Because the rest of their lives they might be invisible. They won’t have the opportunity to be noticed in this same way. I didn’t. I didn’t my whole life. I was invisible for a long part of my life as a Black woman.

The notion of invisibility was mentioned four times during Dr. Jones’ interview session.
In addition to feeling invisible, Dr. Jones described that she does not feel supported fully as an African American female in the educational community in which she resides. She reported feelings of isolation and even hostility.

You never know what people’s expectations are for Black people, let alone Black women. You can never really find that place of rest in this position, as an African American woman.

Participant #3 “Mrs. Johnson”.

Mrs. Johnson is the principal of an elementary school in a Mid-western urban school district. She identifies as African American. She has been a principal for over 5 years. Mrs. Johnson’s school is in what she describes as the “core” of the inner city. Over 90% of her students are on F/R Lunch status and over 75% of her students belong to a racial minority. The majority of that minority is African American. Her school has a student population of over 500 students.

Mrs. Johnson provides direct supervision and support to over 30 certified teaching staff members. Two of those certified staff members are of a racial minority.

Mrs. Johnson reports that she was raised in the same community she now lives and works. She even attended the same school district in which she now works. She is the youngest of the participants interviewed for this study. She is currently pursuing her doctoral degree from a local university.

Mrs. Johnson credits her mother, a former elementary speech and language teacher, for her desire to become a teacher. She credits her experiences as a teacher for later leading her to the administrative realm.

I never really wanted to go into administration, but I thought, “Let me go and get the degree to find out what they [other administrators] learned in class… to see if they are doing what they’re supposed to be doing.” So I just kind came into this
realm because if I’m going to complain about something or if I have complaints in my head, maybe I need to go through the programs they went through and just kind of see what they were told and taught. I actually initially had no desire to be a principal at all.

Mrs. Johnson joined a cohort graduate program after having taught for 5-6 years and soon after became an assistant principal. After two years as an assistant, she was asked to move to the principalship within the same school district, at a different building. She was the principal at that building for two years and was then moved to her current elementary school.

Mrs. Johnson feels her experiences as a teacher and assistant principal strongly influenced her leadership style in her current building.

I’ve worked for some principals who ran a dictatorship and that is not my leadership style. I’m more of a democracy though – people have input and get to share their ideas and thoughts… I have always vowed that I’d never have a staff who was scared or intimidated.

Mrs. Johnson believes one of the biggest hurdles she has had to overcome in her principalship experience has been the experience of being the first African American female principal at her current building.

I think sometimes my leadership style is misunderstood. Sometimes I do end up becoming the stereotypical angry Black woman or maybe that’s how it is perceived.

However, she views her race as a strong advantage in working with her student population and their families.

I think I can say some things to my families that maybe someone who didn’t have brown skin couldn’t or wouldn’t.

Overall, Mrs. Johnson was the participant who had the least amount of coded categories within her interview related to barriers for race or sex. Interwoven within her interview data sets are bits and pieces of reflections related to the impact of her age on
her leadership experience.

I remember when I was at my previous building one of the grandparents said to me one day, “Baby, are you old enough to be the principal here?” I said, “I’m 30 ma’am. I think so.” But I think I believe if I had said 29, she would have said “No you’re not!”

When asked if she believes the same question would have been asked if she were White her response was:

The individual maybe would have wondered the same thing. But if I were White, I would not have been asked.

Mrs. Johnson reports that she believes her presence as an African American principal positively impacts her minority students’ school experience.

I feel that it helps to break down barriers – both for students and their families. I feel called to be here.

Mrs. Johnson is often frustrated by the lack of support she receives from her district and the greater educational community.

Sometimes I ask myself, why I am doing this? I keep getting beat up and it’s taking a toll on me mentally, physically, and emotionally. Back in the day, we came together in these groups because we had to. There is still a barrier between White and Black principals. There was a time back before we came along, when many White aspiring principals and principals were upset because Blacks were getting principalships. At that time, they needed to come together to support one another. The need is still there – but maybe there is just never a good day of the week and we are all so busy. Sometimes I think that people don’t want to be seen as coming together as a united front. They’re worried about how it will look to the Whites. Black principals want to come together still these days – but they think others will judge them and maybe they will.

**Participant #4 “Dr. Bell”**.

Dr. Bell is the principal of an elementary school in a Mid-western urban school district. She identifies as African American, but describes her biological racial make-up as \( \frac{3}{4} \) African American and \( \frac{1}{4} \) Mexican American. She has just completed the first year of her principalship. Dr. Bell’s school is outside of the city’s urban center, but is within
city limits. Of all of the participants interviewed for this study, Dr. Bell’s school’s has the least amount of poverty (with only 30% of her students qualifying for free or reduced lunch) and the least percentage of minority students, with only 25% of her students identifying as a racial minority. Her school has a student population of over 500 students.

Dr. Bell provides direct supervision and support to over 30 certified teaching staff members. Only one of those staff members is of a racial minority.

Dr. Bell came to the Midwest as an infant and identifies as having been born and raised in the Midwest. She attended public schools and her parents were both college graduates.

Dr. Bell believes that her involvement in sports from an early age shaped her view of leadership and her desire to become a leader. She asserts that throughout her childhood, leadership always came naturally to her and she always knew she’d be in some sort of leadership position as an adult.

With a small percentage of minority students and a relatively low level of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, Dr. Bell believes her race and age are always salient factors in her daily interactions with students, staff, and families.

People are sometimes not aware of their biases – they don’t recognize it. But the bias is there.

Dr. Bell credits her mentors for supporting her throughout her career. However, she believes there is a large generational shift that has occurred between those mentors’ experiences and her own.

I would hear my mentors (African American female principals) describe their staff or families as thinking they were difficult or hard to get along with. These women had a different experience than mine…
As a leader, Dr. Bell feels it is very important for African American female principals to connect with their mostly White staff members in meaningful ways. She acknowledges her leadership style is rooted in relationships.

I’m going to connect with them [staff] — because it’s about feelings. I try to help staff recognize we’ve got to build trust. There are little things I intentionally let my people see — cause I want them to understand what their students might be going through. I may share about my background, my hair, my experience. But it’s strategic.

Dr. Bells describes her experience in life as a trifecta. She is aware of the intersectionality of her race, her age, and her gender.

There are so many pieces to my existence that interact on a daily basis. I am biracial, but I am a Black woman. I am a woman living in a leadership position that is dominated by a White male perspective. I am young — and when I entered leadership was extremely young compared to my colleagues. All of these things intersect each day for me and for the people I interact with. It is hard at times to separate them and know which part is impacting which reaction from people.

Dr. Bell reports that she believes her presence as an African American principal positively impacts her minority students’ school experience.

My race is definitely an advantage when I interact with certain students and their families. There’s that extra level of respect and connection. These families feel more comfortable just with my presence.

When asked about the support she receives from her district and the greater educational community, Dr. Bell expresses the struggle that African American female principals endure.

What people of color, African American females specifically, don’t have is that social capital and that informal network. …no one is going to talk about in a new principal training. There are issues that African American women will confront in leadership that White males and White females will never encounter. It is like an additional race they must run in order to cross the finish line. So basically we are running two races - while others are just running one.

Participant #5 “Ms. Brown”.
Ms. Brown is the principal of an elementary school in a Mid-western urban school district. She has lived in the Midwest for over ten years. She identifies as African American and had been a principal for almost 2 years at the time of this study.

Ms. Brown’s school is centered in the urban core and has a F/R lunch percentage of almost 75%. Her school is made up of approximately 500 students. Over 50% of her students are of a racial minority, most being African Americans.

Ms. Brown provides direct supervision and support to over 40 certified teaching staff members. Less than eight of those forty staff are non-White.

Ms. Brown has many life experiences that led her to the principalship, but one of the most prominent influences was her mother-in-law, who was an African American female principal.

I have always wanted to be a principal for quite some time – but the biggest thing was I wanted to be able to make a difference. My mother-in-law was a principal. She made a difference. I was always watching her. When you’re in a classroom you have influence there – but you can’t rely on just one classroom. You have to look at the impact you can have on multiple classrooms, by being an effective leader.

Ms. Brown believes her leadership style was fervently affected by her acknowledgement of the racial and sexist barriers that exist for women of color in leadership. She considers that awareness as a foundation for decision-making in her leadership role. She is keenly aware of what she has and what she doesn’t have.

With White males there is a brotherhood of some sort that wraps around them….even if they’re not very smart or if they don’t know about instruction. The brotherhood is thick. They may go golfing together, they may go drinking together, or their kids are together in ballet – it’s working nonstop for them. We don’t have that. There are so few of us and we are spread across the city. I know what I don’t have and what I do have working for me. That is key. I have always gone into this with my eyes wide open.

When it comes to her student body, Ms. Brown believes strongly that her
presence positively impacts her students of color.

I love being here because I see myself in some of the girls. Especially with girls, you look at African American young girls and some may be seen as loud – boisterous – they may get a bad rap. There is a different pitch in their voice and you can hear it. It is a cultural thing. My thing is that race comes into play right there – I don’t want to snuff out their light. I let them be who they are. I just want to be sure they are about learning and about education … empowering themselves. And it’s okay for them to be who they are. I think I am more sensitive about that because of my race.

Ms. Brown has confronted barriers related to her race, gender, and age. She has been accused on more than one occasion for alleged favoritism towards African American students. She describes one incident in particular:

I had a parent whose child brought a weapon to school. I was discussing with her the options of what we could do next for her child and she stated, “You don’t treat other kids like this. You people don’t punish your own race like this.” [Implying that for students who share my race – maybe I’d have a different punishment.] She ended up going to the central office on me and stating I was unfit to be a principal. Based on her comments it was obviously motivated by some sort of racial misapprehension. Despite what these racist parents may say to me, I’m there for their child. I take care of it.

When asked about what she feels district and the educational communities can do to support African American female principals, she provides a multi-faceted response.

I am not sure that the importance of supporting principals and teachers of color is even at the level of consciousness in many districts. It is like no one wants to admit this stuff in education. In other business realms there are support groups and formal networks for employees of color, but in education everyone puts on a blindfold and says they don’t see color. Well, we don’t have that luxury. We see our color.

**Summary of the Narratives**

All five of the stories included in this chapter are distinctively unique. Each participant’s story contained elements that set them apart from the others in an extraordinarily different manner and yet, there seemed to be certain experiences that were
atypically similar. This is all despite the influence of comparable historical, cultural effects and social-structural forces. The multi-faceted and multi-dimensional descriptions of how race, gender, and age informed the women’s journeys were included in the narratives. Through the utilization of the coding and nodes system within Nvivo, the researcher determined the use of quotes to be included in the narratives through a review of common phrases used by the participants to describe their experiences.

The semi-structured method of interviewing allowed for participants to spend the greatest amount of time discussing those themes they felt were the most important. It also allowed participants to go off on tangents and explore topics that may have not been included on the interview protocol. This resulted in a diverse set of responses. Patton states (2002) that the human factor is the “great strength and the fundamental weakness” of qualitative inquiry and analysis.” (p. 433).

Beyond the Narratives – An Expanded Data Analysis

The purpose of the current phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. The lived experience was defined as the intersection of race, gender, and generational position for African American female elementary principals. The research questions guided the purpose of the study and focused on the actual phenomena being examined. The questions were rooted in discovering how African American female principals’ experiences and perceptions influence their approach to their work and their navigation of the leadership realm.

The study was based on the following four overarching research questions:
R1: How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position, their leadership development, and their goal attainment? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?

R2: What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their White male and White female counterparts?

R3: How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments?

R4: From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?

For the intentions of this research study, the researcher utilized multiple forms of reporting of the data analysis. The researcher began the analysis by examining the original transcripts in multiple reiterations. Following that initial analysis of the data, the researcher utilized NVivo 11© qualitative software to organize words, phrases, and sayings. The researcher then was able to carefully study the significance of words and phrases to determine which informational patterns were worthy of reporting in relation to the initial research questions and central themes. In NVivo software, researchers can store concepts, ideas or categories as nodes that can be explored, organized, or changed (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). The coding of study participants was expressed in nodes,
which supported identification of codes and themes. The coding structure descriptions can be found in Table 2. As shown, each box indicates a coded node within the interpretive qualitative analysis process.

Table 2

Coding Structure Descriptions

As with the narrative reported data, the researcher determined the use of quotes for the following recounted segments through a review of common phrases used by the participants to describe their experiences. For the purposes of this study, quotes are used to emphasize a particular thought process or explanation that clarified concepts and ideas related to the interview questions (Brown, 2012). In addition to the use of narrative quotes, the below visual, listed in Table 3, is a termed by NVivo 11© a “word cloud” and represents an effective visual output of the commonly used words in the transcribed data sets. Word clouds allow researchers to discover the most frequently occurring words and phrases in the data.
Table 3

*Word Frequency Word Cloud*
The following sections include:

1. A probed review of the initial guiding research questions in relation to the data
2. A description of three central themes that emerged from the phenomenological data that was collected

**Review of Collected Data in Relation to Research Questions**

The research questions developed for this study provided a framework to assist the researcher to identify the subjects’ perspectives of their experience related to being African American and female within school leadership. Each question was aimed at obtaining a rich response to extract the “lived experience” of these women. For this section, each question will be examined individually, with the inclusion of specific quoted responses from the participants.

**Research Question #1.** *How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position, their leadership development, and their goal attainment? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?*

The participants in this study each described their past as being inextricably linked to their current view of their position and how they arrived at the principals’ chair. The connection of the importance of family was woven into each woman’s account. A couple examples of those accounts are listed below:

- My mom was a great example of strength and my grandmother was a strong example of faith (Interview, Dr. Bell, Spring 2016).

- My mom is a retired teacher, so she definitely played a role in in that – for wanting to go into teaching and then just encouraging me for future education. (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, Spring 2016).
The results of the interviews showed that these women felt “called” to help others. The Support Structure node was the only node in the qualitative coding process where spirituality was mentioned. (The presence of the concept of spirituality is discussed in further detail in Chapter Five). Mrs. Johnson explicitly stated her feelings on why she believes she is at her current building.

I feel called to be here. God works in mysterious ways and I’ve learned that so much being here (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, Spring 2016).

Partly, this concept is explored in greater detail under the name of “other-mothering” in a later section of this chapter. Each woman reported that she felt she had to take an active role in her students’ lives and the greater community either because of the examples set by their families or out of their personal desire to move their communities forward. Many of the women modeled their decision to lead others in the care of children after their parents, or as in the case of Ms. Brown, a mother-in-law.

The biggest thing was I wanted to be able to make a difference. My mother-in-law was a principal. She made a difference. I was always watching her. When you’re in a classroom you have influence there – but you can’t rely on just one classroom. You have to look at the impact you can have on multiple classrooms, by being an effective leader (Interview, Ms. Brown, Spring 2016).

The data affirms that the participants felt they were raised with a drive to help others.

A singular but important experience that transpired in Dr. Jones’ life that provided for a foundation for her career attainment and her eventual leadership philosophies occurred when she had her first African American female teacher. She struggled in school prior to having this teacher in an elementary grade and described the account.

This was until I got an African American teacher that I related to. Her name was Ms. Moody… having an African American teacher that year that validated me, I went well above my level and what was expected of me. One day I came back
from that pull out program and I went back to my seat and Ms. Moody and the pull out teacher were outside the door and they beckoned for me to come over. I came out in the hallway and they said, “We both know you’re too smart for this, you’re no longer going to go in this program.” For the first time I started school, I had an African American teacher that “got me”. She understood me. And so from that point on, I was like “okay, I’m confident.” So I blossomed (Interview, Dr. Jones, Spring 2016).

Research Question #2.

What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their White male and White female counterparts?

According to Collins (2000), there is a relentless grapple for African American women to survive in the workplace. Without a doubt, there are definite experiences described by the women in this study that they believe are unlike and dissimilar from the journey their White male and White female counterparts undergo. The qualitative coding process found that the participants mention barriers related to race, gender, and/or age a total of forty-seven times throughout the interview process. These barriers represent the differences. They are additional hurdles that must be overcome, while still traversing the bumpy road of school leadership.

Ms. Brown details the differences between herself and her White colleagues just in terms of a supportive network when she says,

The support network if you’re not Black is huge. With White males there is a brotherhood of some sort that wraps around them….even if they’re not very smart or if they don’t know about instruction. The brotherhood is thick. They may go golfing together, they may go drinking together, or their kids together in ballet – it’s working nonstop for them. We don’t have that. There are so few of us and we are spread across the city. I know what I don’t have and what I do have working for me. That is key. I have always gone into this with my eyes wide open. I’ve learned to not let that intimidate me. Keep doing what you know is right. Keeping working your strengths. And always advocate for yourself (Interview, Ms. Brown,
One of the main experiences in the participants’ journey and every day leadership that they perceived is different from their White male and White female counterparts was the over-arching responsibility they believed is placed on them as African American females to be the authority on all things discipline for not only African American students, but all students. This notion of disciplinarian was described by all participants and is included as a central theme in a later section of this chapter. The participants shared that they would be sought out for all behavior issues with students – even if they were not in the building during the time of the incident. Although most principals are seen as the authority figure that students will respect and listen to, this situation is unique because the responsibility is placed on them because of their race. Dr. Jones’ account seemed to embody all of the participants’ general experience when she shared,

Every time there is a discipline issue, I was hunted down. As the African American principal, you are always expected to be the disciplinarian. It seems as if my staff feels that I should always handle the discipline for our tough African American students. I am not sure White principals have that same experience (Interview, Dr. Jones, Spring 2016).

This expected role of disciplinarian did not just stay inside the schoolhouse. One participant felt the expectation and role increased her responsibility to step out into the neighborhood and exhibit the same racialized role. Ms. Brown describes her early experiences in her first year as an African American principal,

I felt like I stepped into the role of “protector” because who else was going to go into this neighborhood and deliver a coat to a child? Who else was going to go into the neighborhood of what people thought was a drug dealer’s house and get a signature for a field trip? Or if a student is suspended for 5 days and no one can get ahold of the parent, who is going to go to that house to deliver that message? If I don’t go – who is going to go? (Interview, Ms. Brown Spring 2016).
Another critical insight that was gleaned from the participants’ interview data that correlates with the theme of disciplinarian is the concept of other-mothering. Other-mothering is associated with African Americans and is defined as “the assistance delivered to blood mothers in the care of their biological children either in an informal or formal setting” by other African American women in the community (Case, 1997, p.26). Although none of the participants called it by this name, all five of the participants described ways in which the constant and multiple discipline sessions they had with students evolved into a sort of other-mothering opportunity. Mrs. Andrews describes this experience succinctly.

There are times when my African American students are in trouble and in my office and I use those opportunities to begin to subtly teach them about White privilege and how to survive in a White world (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, Spring 2016).

The concept of other mothering and its correlation with the role of disciplinarian is also examined more closely in the themes section of this chapter.

Some of the experiences described by the participants that they believe differ from their White counterparts focused on more concealed actions that display institutionalized racism, rather than explicit racist or sexist actions that can be easily quantified. Mrs. Andrews details this clandestine practice when she says,

It is the more covert actions – those done discreetly and those that are institutionalized that really scare me. Practices that exclude non-Whites intentionally and/or even district practices that exclude women of color and women in general. I have noticed that often my district still looks to the men for committees and even for speaking in front of groups. In addition, White males and women in general seem to dominate the upper echelon of our district. They seem to surround themselves with people who think like them – and then appoint people of color to go out and lead the schools. Sort of like, “go out and deal with your people…we’ll be here making all of the decisions.” You know? It’s crazy really, but it is allowed to persist (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, Spring 2016).
Other examples of how the African American female principals interviewed for this study believe their journey and experiences differ from their White male and White female colleagues are recorded in the subsequent data analysis sections of both this chapter and Chapter Five. The findings in the five narratives indicated that female African American elementary principals encountered significant challenges in their leadership experiences. These experiences hindered, but did not prevent the attainment of a principalship.

Research Question #3.

*How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments?*

The content analysis of the data brought to light three strategies African American female elementary principals use to cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments: 1. Seeking out an informal mentor(s). 2. Supportive Networks and 3. Code-switching/shifting.

Informal mentoring support was mentioned by four of the five participants as an important coping mechanism that assists them in dealing with the race, gender, and age barriers they may encounter in their work environment. Mrs. Johnson referenced a same race/same gender mentor she has had throughout her career.

> There is a mentor that I’ve had that I’ve shared stories with that only we could understand. Things she went through - Some of them were hard to hear. And they reminded me of racism I have experienced. But it’s important for us to tell our stories and for us to see people who look like us in all roles (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

Mrs. Andrews talked about the importance of mentors. She alluded to the importance of having same race mentors who believed in her capacities and encouraged
I also had a couple key mentors during my early career that also pushed me forward and believed in my abilities and me. One of those mentors told me early on to never compromise my beliefs about helping children in need – for a higher salary or a higher status position. I guess he taught me to always be mindful of those who don’t really have kids’ best interests at heart, especially students of color (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

In 2004, Catalyst published an article about advancing African American women in the workplace. Their study found that after being mentored, some 70% of women advanced in their careers. Also importantly, the mentoring of Black women has been correlated with enhanced psychosocial development, increased motivation, boosted optimism about achieving career goals, and a reduction of hopelessness and despair associated with their career attitudes (Godshalk and Sosik, 2000).

In addition to mentoring, another topic that emerged from the data analysis was the importance of having a network of colleagues to converse with on a weekly or monthly basis. Again, four of the five participants acknowledged through their interviews the importance of a network. These networks seem to give the women a sense of collaboration and a way to vent about their professional challenges.

The final strategy that surfaced during the data analysis was the presence and implementation of code-switching and shifting. This concept was reviewed in the Literature Review in Chapter Two and is one of the central themes that will be discussed later in this chapter. Code-switching is the process by which individuals acquire through practice and intentional observation the ability to actively assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language and mannerism style for that setting (Wheeler, 2008). African
American female principals utilize code-switching and shifting to manage the race and gender expectations and stereotypes held by the different audiences they encounter in their interactions at work.

**Research Question #4.**

*From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?*

Although the research utilized the term “educational communities” to describe the larger educational institutions and social settings that impact the work of African American female principals, the participants in this study interpreted this question during the semi-structured interview to be specifically prodding about their experience with their own school districts. All of the participants felt that there were additional actions that could be taken on the part of school districts to better support African American female elementary principals. The participants described in detail why this type of support is necessary and how it could be done.

What people of color, African American females specifically, don’t have is that social capital and that informal network. No one is going to talk about that in a new principal training. There are issues that African American women will confront in leadership that White males and White females will never encounter. It is like an additional race they must run in order to cross the finish line. So basically, we are running two races –while others are just running one (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

Mrs. Andrews specifically points out the need for same-race/same gender mentoring when she states,

School districts need to provide for formal support networks and mentors for their minority principals. My first mentor assigned to me was a White female. Although she tried her best to understand me and support me, she really had no idea the barriers I faced, because she had never faced them in this same manner.
Yes, she was a woman – but she was not a Black woman (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

**Phenomenological Themes**

Although the individual experience is vital to understand, there is more to the overall story when conducting phenomenological research. “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon…” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). This is where the “phenomena” is captured.

For this research study, the researcher used qualitative coding, within NVIVO, to learn from and to revisit the data until patterns and explanations began to emerge (Creswell, 2007). The researcher then took on the responsibility of confirming or disconfirming patterns that appeared (Patton, 2002). As the researcher reviewed the coded data, categories began to emerge and became the collective thought pattern of the participants. Patton (2002) describes the importance of the “shared experience” (p. 106) that arises as a result of analyzing a phenomenon. The ongoing creation of categories continued until saturation occurred, which is the point where the data did not yield any new codes or categories (Dick, 2005).

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting the codes and categories within data to describe the information in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are typically identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Aronson, 1994, p. 1). The researcher carefully examined the themes that emerge from the informants' stories and were categorized by NVivo 10© qualitative software. The coding analysis chart listed in Table 4 represents the percentage of the coded data that categorized into
each node. As detailed by the chart, the node of “Race and Gender Barriers” had the most significant presence in the data sets. However, each of the nodes listed were present in all participants interview data. This level of occurrence is what led to these nodes being labeled as key terms and themes within the analysis process.

Table 4

_Coding Analysis_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of node existence for coded data categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What districts and educational communities can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Gender Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-mothering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-switching/playing the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age and Generational Context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What follows is an explanation of each theme in relation to the Literature review in Chapter Two. Addressing the themes in relation to the literature reviews provides for deepening insights into the experience of the participants.

**Theme 1: The “Super Disciplinarian vs. the Master Relationship Builder”**

Common in the narratives of each of the five African American women involved in the study, was the notion of being the super disciplinarian. All of the participants revealed ways in which they believe they are viewed by their staff and families as the go-to-person for discipline. References to discipline were noted nine times across all five
interviews. This may not seem odd or peculiar since school administrators are typically charged with providing discipline and are naturally seen as the regulator of punishments. However, for African American female principals there seems to be yet another layer to this role. Research points to this notion as well. In schools where the majority of students are children of color, Emdin (2016) reports that White teachers often expect any teacher of color, and especially a principal of color, to as what he has termed be a “behavior modifier” (p. 5). This is the authority figure that students will respect and listen to because of their race. This has multiple negative ramifications for African American female principals the most poignant being the fact that this leads to their instructional expertise being discounted because they are only recognized for their interpersonal skills with students of color. Dr. Jones noted this experience by recounting her feelings towards the experience of having her instructional expertise discounted.

I remember countless White males throughout my career who couldn’t handle a single behavior and didn’t know anything instructional and they were promoted time and time again. A White male can be incompetent, they do not have to be strong in anything, and they’ll still get promoted before I would (Interview, Dr. Jones, Spring 2016).

Edmin goes on to report that when African American leaders become intricately entrenched in the culture of the young people they serve, White educators have a hard time understanding and valuing those dynamics. They may even perceive the principal’s actions as undermining the White teachers’ efforts. Like was mentioned in the literature review in Chapter Two, the “invisible hand” (p. 260) of institutionalized racism that the participants in Loder’s study in 2005 experienced is still alive and well with today’s African American female principals. For African American female principals there is yet another layer of complexity beyond the racial differences. As also emphasized in Chapter
Two, as women, they are held to standard of needing to be both caring and nurturing as well. However, often they struggle to balance these juxtaposing roles.

Participants in this study gave multiple examples of ways they nurture and care for their students, especially those from non-White ethnicities and students living in poverty. Dr. Jones provided a vivid and stirring account of why she reaches out to her students of color and why she makes specific and meaningful connections with them.

I make sure that my African American students can march in my office any time of day. I am specifically connected with every Black female student in my school. They may never have another Black female in charge in their educational experience or even in their life. So when they want to come in here and hug on me... when they have new braids and when they need me to help, they know I will hook them up. ...I notice everything about my Black students, their hair, their clothes, how they are doing at school overall. I comment on all of it. Why? Because the rest of their lives they might be invisible. They won’t have the opportunity to be noticed in this same way. I didn’t. I didn’t my whole life. I was invisible for a long part of my life as a Black young girl and woman (Interview, Dr. Jones, Spring 2016).

Findings from this study seem to validate Loder’s (2005) study that concluded motherhood and values of caring and nurturing are significant to how African American females interpret their positions as educational leaders. Participants demonstrated a commitment to their same-race and minority students by taking action to foster their success and meet their emotional needs. This included working to foster a positive self-image for their students of color and harkening their mostly White staff members to do the same.

I have gone to staff members in my building and said, “When you see this student, tell her she’s beautiful. Tell her she’s smart.” I have seen this change some of our students’ behaviors. Maybe now they walk with confidence. And maybe that’s just at school or even just when they see that person who speaks to them – but it is a start (Interview, Dr. Jones, 2016).
This commitment to same-race and minority students involves almost a motherly feeling. This mothering experience is noted multiple places in the data analysis. However, it is most thoroughly explained in Chapter Five within Key Finding #2.

**Theme 2: Working Twice as Hard for Half the Recognition; Learning to play the game**

Throughout the interviews, all of the participants made statements that described how the intersection of race, gender, and age affected their leadership development, leadership experience and career trajectory. The idea of a “triple jeopardy” is applicable since each informant reported that she encountered barriers or challenges that were both racial, sexist, and at times related to her generational position. This theme suggests that African American female elementary principals are keenly aware of the racial and gendered inequalities they encounter. After providing a stirring account of Dr. Jones’ experience with both racial and gender inequalities she experienced in her leadership journey she concluded with the statement,

*I was not going to be beat, because I knew growing up Black, you just know if you’re going to get somewhere, the expectation is that you’re going to have to be better than others* (Interview, Dr. Jones, 2016).

Dr. Jones’ words encapsulate the spirit of African American women as they traverse the school leadership road with multiple marginalized identities. There is a well-documented finding in studies about Black professional women that demonstrates many Black women feel a need to prove themselves, particularly in circumstances where they perceive double standards for work performance compared to their White counterparts (Carter, Pearson, & Shavlik 1988; Etter-Lewis, 1994; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Their multiple identities intersect and weave a tangled web that must be navigated in
order for African American female principals to find success.

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality and argued that race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences. Dr. Bell provided a lucid description of the intersection of her marginalized identities.

There are so many pieces to my existence that interact on a daily basis. I am biracial, but I am a Black woman. I am a woman living in a leadership position that is dominated by a White male perspective. I am young – and when I entered leadership, was extremely young compared to my colleagues. All of these things intersect each day for me and for the people I interact with. It is hard at times to separate them and know which part is impacting which reaction from people (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

As they work within their school communities, the participants described ways they were confronted with the assumptions and stereotypes associated with their race and gender.

I think sometimes my leadership style is misunderstood. Sometimes I do end up becoming the stereotypical angry Black woman or maybe that’s how it is perceived (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

In addition to the negative stereotypes that impacted the experiences of the women, the analysis showed that their experiences helped them to learn to navigate the organizations in which they are employed. There is an acknowledgment by all participants in this study of the extra effort that is performed on their part to prove their worthiness of their positions. There are also proactive measures employed by the women to counteract the inequities. Sometimes these efforts are categorized by critical race theorist as code-switching. Code-switching is the process by which individuals learn through practice and intentional observation to actively code-switch—to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally
choose the appropriate language style for that setting (Wheeler, 2008). Dr. Bell actually referred to the process as “code-switching” within her interview. She acknowledges the practice and uses it commonly to negotiate her roles as a school leader.

I don’t consider code-switching or changing as being fake. I consider it as this is who I am- and this is how I interact in this world (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

Dr. Jones was also the only participant who discussed the physical properties of code-switching when she stated,

When I cut my hair and wear it natural, I get different reactions from people – different feedback. Society favors my hair when it is long and straight. I know that my appearance plays a role, as a woman. When you are “closer” to what is considered the norm or beautiful, people’s treatment of you changes. People feel more comfortable. We know there is a favored appearance, especially when it comes to women (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

Dr. Jones also acknowledged during her interview the presence of this act of assimilation into multiple cultures and the advantages she gained from being able to exist between two worlds.

I knew and know how to assimilate between White culture and Black culture…. I felt like I knew how to play the “White game” – but I also knew how to walk into a group of the custodial or kitchen staff (who were typically people of color) and I could talk with them just as if I was a part of their crew. I could be accepted into their group. With White staff, I could also talk the way they talked and walked they way they walk and I now understood that was an advantage, that none of them had. And I started carrying myself that way. I starting having more confidence once I realized what I brought to the table (Interview, Dr. Jones, 2016).

Similar to the results of Yejide Safiya Mack’s research on minority principals in 2010, all of the participants shared that they feel that they must work harder and do better than their counterparts of other ethnicities because of their race and negative stereotypes associated with it. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) believe that African American women shift more than any other historically suppressed group. The participants in this study revealed a sentiment of needing to, at times, hide their true selves to appease White
I don’t always get to be myself in the workplace. It gets better over time and as the staff and families get to know me. As an African American female principal, I am always aware of the need, or maybe it is more of a pressure, to conform to what others think I should be (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

**Theme 3: Brave enough to be broken – Resiliency and Perseverance**

The building level leadership experiences of African American females are deeply embedded in a landscape that is satiated with disparities and discrimination. Almost all of the participants felt that being Black, as well as a woman, were not two mutually exclusive categories. The majority of the participants felt that gender, race, and age merge together within their lives and their experiences.

The resilience of African Americans in general is an important theme in American history. Collins (2000) acknowledged that resiliency is often a quality associated with the leadership of African American women as a survival mechanism for difficult situations. Although all of the women in this study are confident in their leadership abilities, they daily grapple with their circumstances in order to find success. On a daily basis, hour-by-hour, these women demonstrate resiliency and an essence that cannot be broken. Ms. Brown details her feelings towards the subject of perseverance and resiliency when she stated,

> You have to do that as a Black female. You have to almost fight the odds and put yourself out there. And you may be on your own – you don’t always have that latitude to grab someone. So you have to do it for yourself (Interview, Ms. Brown, 2016).

The results of this study revealed that the women demonstrated high levels of resilience or response to adversity. Preceding chapters have established that women and people of color struggle against the socially constructed views of leadership that assumes
a White masculine form. The question that innately evolved during this research study is, what assists African American female principals in achieving and maintaining their leadership roles, despite the racial and gendered environments they encounter? This question will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Most scholars view resiliency as an adaptive and coping attribute that forms and hones positive skills, such as patience, tolerance, responsibility, compassion, determination, and risk taking (Collins, 2000; Smith, Tooley, Christopher, & Kay, 2010; Richardson, 2002). Mrs. Andrews displayed enormous levels of patience and determination as she described her feelings towards the barriers she faces.

I think that often we forget the role race and gender play in our daily lives. As African American female principals, we have become accustomed to just getting the job done. We work harder and longer, but only receive partial credit. We forget ourselves that we are doing these things. It is not right. But it is our reality (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

For the most part, resiliency involves the ability to overcome adversity (Janas, 2002; Richardson, 2002.) The participants’ stories convey the belief that although at times they may encounter racism, sexism, ageism, they are keenly aware of their abilities and have a resolute confidence to press forward.

Summary of Themes

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). An exploration of the participants’ lived experiences revealed overarching themes that communicate the blended experience of all of the participants. These themes included: 1. The “Super Disciplinarian vs. the Master Relationship builder”, 2. Working twice as hard for half the recognition. Learning to play the game, and 3. Brave enough to be broken – Resiliency and Perseverance. The themes are patterns across the
data sets that the researcher felt were important to the description of a phenomenon being studied. In addition, the themes relate to the original research questions and the conceptual framework. Due to the phenomenological approach, the researcher emphasized the participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences as paramount in establishing and reporting on the themes.
CHAPTER V

Discussion and Conclusions

Overview of the Study

The purpose of the current phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and discover the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female elementary principals in Mid-western urban school districts. A qualitative approach to this study allowed the researcher to focus on rich descriptions of five elementary principals’ lived experiences to accurately describe the phenomenon. The participants in this research study represented multiple school districts. The participants seemed to be more than willing to confide in the researcher. This could be because of commonalities of race, position, and cultural connections (Brown, 2012).

In Chapter Four, the researcher utilized multiple forms of reporting the findings of the data analysis including, a summary of the demographic data of the participants, personal narratives, themes across the interviews, and input in response to each of the research questions. An exploration of the participants’ lived experiences revealed the following themes:

1. The “Super Disciplinarian vs. the Master Relationship Builder”
2. Working Twice as Hard for Half the Recognition; Learning to play the game

The themes formed a basis for understanding the phenomenon studied.

This chapter and the sections that follow expand upon the findings and themes in relation to the proposed Conceptual Framework and with regard to the Literature Review.
in Chapter Two. Key findings are presented that are the synthesized outcomes of all of the data that was examined. This chapter also discusses how the presented findings can inform current leadership theory development and current practices. The chapter concludes with an outline of recommendations for future research on this topic.

The study was based on the following four overarching research questions:

R1: How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position, their leadership development, and their goal attainment? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?

R2: What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their White male and White female counterparts?

R3: How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments?

R4: From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?

The sections in this chapter detail three key findings that emerged from this study and a discussion of the findings in light of previous literature, the implications of the findings of this study in relation to leadership theory, and the implications for the general
practice of African American female elementary principals. In addition, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and final thoughts are presented.

**Interpretation of Findings related to the Conceptual Framework and the Literature Review**

When race and gender are involved, culturally sensitive methodologies and conceptual frameworks can be helpful. The researcher developed a proposed conceptual framework for this study. It is introduced in Chapter One. The conceptual framework illustrates the intersectionality between race, gender, and generational age for African American female elementary principals. The created framework serves to exemplify how the social constructs race, gender, and age affect the lives of African American women in elementary building level principalships. The conceptual framework does not explain the phenomena – rather it provides a systematic view of the phenomena being studied by specifying the relationships among the variables. An intersecting view of Critical Race theory and Feminist theory were used to explain the women’s perceptions of their experiences. A cultural and feminist lens enables readers and the researchers to understand and relate to the participants’ experiences within the context of a minority and majority culture. The findings of this study closely align with the researcher’s proposed conceptual framework and literature review.

**Racial and gender-based barriers.**

Similar to Brown’s recent study in 2012, the participants all reported ways in which they felt “sized up” (Brown, 2012, p. 38) and placed under a microscope because of their race and gender. Due to pervasive barriers rooted in racial and gender bias and stereotypes, the women who participated in this study affirmed the daily battle African
American women are confronted with each day in their leadership journey. The barriers were evident within their own schools in relation to their staff and school families. Obstacles were also communicated from within each of their own district’s organizational systems. More specifically, the participants in this study communicated that gender and racial stereotypes overlap to create unique, and uniquely powerful, barriers and obstacles.

**Intersectionality.**

The concept of intersectionality is the central component of the conceptual framework and described heavily in the literature review. As hypothesized, the data gleaned from this research study strongly supports the theory behind intersectionality. All of the participants reported the intersection of gender and race in multiple respects. As noted in the literature review, the experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood in terms of being Black, and of being a woman, considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce one another (Hooks, 2014). Resembling Shauna Carter’s findings in 2013, this study reveals the fact that African American women are often agonizingly aware of the differential treatment to which they are subjected. All of the participants in this study denoted the intersectionality phenomena in their experiences. Results of the study confirmed that African American women, living in the Midwest and working in the elementary principalship, still experience the notion of intersectionality and invisibility which can lead to feelings of disempowerment and marginalization that permeate their experiences.

**Code-switching/playing the game.**

The feelings of disempowerment, often lead African American women to code-
switch and “play the game”. Black women can code-switch/shift to accommodate differences in class, gender, and ethnicity. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) reported that Black women may hide “their true selves in an effort to appease their White bosses and colleagues” (p. 23). They also revealed through their research that Black women, especially those in professional occupations, make this shift daily as they struggle to feel good about themselves in a hostile world. This concept of “playing the game” and code-switching was examined as one of the central themes in Chapter Four. Similar to what Bloom and Erlandson exposed in 2003, the participants in this study affirmed that African American female principals often feel compelled to work harder than their White counterparts to demonstrate their self-worth and to preserve elevated standards for their schools. Also noted in the literature review, some studies have found that when African American female principals have a mainly White teaching staff, the staff may challenge their authority in subtle and veiled ways. Deitch et al. (2003) found that there may be resentment, resistance, and even undermining and ignoring of the African American woman’s position of power. Four of the five participants in this study make reference to undermining behaviors. Dr. Bell asserts that this is what happens when you are, “around White teachers all day” (Personal communication, Dr. Bell, 2016).

**Context of time and generational age.**

As examined in the literature review and represented symbolically within the conceptual framework, the context of time and the variable of age was a minor, but identifiable theme that emerged from this research study. Our social behaviors are inextricably linked to the point in time we are born and are then assimilated into society. The participants from this study were all of the same generation. There was a definite
feeling by participants that the female African American school leaders of the previous
generation had a much different experience.

These women had a different experience than mine, having secured their positions earlier and having grown up during Civil Rights. But there seemed to be an anger there… A resentment – that I just don’t carry (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

**Nurturing students/other-mothering.**

The collective dialogue of each principal in this study contained elements of the intentional efforts to mother and nurture their students, particularly their students of color. This ideal of care and responsibility is well documented in mainstream literature on female leadership (Kropeiwnick, 2001). However, African American women seem to dig deeper into this construct, as they encourage, nurture and provide for their students’ holistic needs. Collins (2000) asserts “other-mothering” is an ethic of care where African American women feel accountable to all the African American community’s children and treat them as they are their own kids. A review of the literature, along with the results of this study, affirm that these caring and empowering practices are tied to the cultural heritage of African American women (Tillman, 2004). This finding is further conceptualized in the subsequent key findings section.

**Resiliency and Perseverance.**

Like the participants in Smith’s study in 2008, despite daily challenges to their leadership, each of the three informants exercised “strength and resilience in order to survive” (p. 124). Each woman exposed a mindfulness of racism and sexism in her leadership experiences, but was reluctant to allow it to challenge their success. Collins (2000) asserts that even though African American women operate in White power structure, they use their power to transform structures toward their agendas or goals. In
recognizing their unique positional status, African American women are then able to develop methods that enable them to survive and resist.

**Finding not Consistent with the Literature**

According to the presented literature in Chapter Two, spirituality played a prominent role in the leadership of African American females in previous generations. However, a review of data that emerged from this research study did not yield this same relationship. Although two participants referenced spirituality briefly, they did not establish or communicate that their faith sustained them in their positions as principals, as previous research has revealed (Brown, 2012). As the researcher synthesized the data for this study, a common premise was discovered for four of the five participants that they feel “called” to be in their positions. This is interpreted as a monumental sense of commitment, but to connect this to religion or spirituality would be a stretch of the interpretation. The researcher contends that the data gleaned from this study demonstrates an evolution of religion and spirituality for African American female school leaders. This evolution points away from direct references to religion and spirituality and steers towards a broader sense of commitment, that may include spirituality, but not in such a direct and explicit manner.

**Conceptualization of Themes into Key Findings**

In this section, as a part of the researcher’s data analysis procedures described in Chapter Three, Mason’s reflexive data analysis strategy (1996) was employed to synthesize three main pieces of data:

1. The literal responses to the interview questions
2. The identified central themes that were extracted from the coding process

3. The synthesized data in relation to the conceptual framework and Literature review.

From this meta-synthesis, three key findings emerged. They are discussed in the subsequent sections.

**Key finding #1: The barriers related to race, gender, and age for African American female principals are intertwined, creating an “intersection of experience”**.

Statements and stories from the interview sessions provide countless examples illustrating the influence of race, gender, and age and their intersectionality on the participants’ decision-making, leadership practices, and overall journey. As noted in the Literature review, Intersectionality involves multiple aspects of a person’s identity and how those aspects combine in different ways to construct social reality for the individual. Race and gender inequities make themselves known in multiple ways for African American female principals. The literature review in Chapter Two discussed that African American female principals often lack the connections or “social capital” ordinarily developed through ties in established cultures, i.e. that European Americans have more easily accessible to them (Parker, 2005). This was affirmed through the interview process and data analysis. The study found that a large portion of the success of Black female principals depends on how well they are able to “play the game” and interact/navigate their organization and community.

Although through the data analysis process, race and gender seem to play a more prominent role; four of the five participants referenced the impact their age has had on
their experience. The participants in this research study belong to the same generational cohort. Dr. Jones references the influence of age and generational context when she stated,

Those in the generation before us had a different experience; they are more uncomfortable discussing these types of things because they dealt with discrimination on a totally different level than we do. They can’t stand that stuff. My former mentor (who had been a principal in a Midwest district for over 20 years) she said, “You’ll never get a principal job with your hair like that (meaning in locks).” But I said to myself, if a district doesn’t want to hire me past my hair, then it’s their loss. We have a different experience then they had (Interview, Dr. Jones, 2016).

As referenced in the personal narrative section, Mrs. Johnson also shared a particular story in order to communicate the impact her younger age has had on her experience as a school leader.

I remember when I was at my previous building one of the grandparents said to me one day, “Baby, are you old enough to be the principal here?” I said, “I’m 30 ma’am. I think so.” But I think if I had said 29, she would have said “No you’re not!” …some of our parents are old enough to be my parents – like grandparents (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

When prompted with the question by the researcher of,

“If you had been a young White female, would she have asked you?”

Mrs. Johnson replied,

The individual would have wondered the same thing. But no, if I were White, I would not have been asked. (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

The intersectionality of race and gender can make it difficult for African American women to judge whether or not a certain challenging situation or barrier was due to their being African American or a woman. This was a difficult determination to make in all facets of this study.
Key finding #2 – A considerable part of the “lived experience” of the African American female principal is employed and sustained by being an “other mother” to all students, particularly students of color.

This key finding is rooted in understanding the make-up of the historical African American family and community and the implications of that structure for African American female leadership in schools. All of the participants in this study described in multiple iterations a sort of “mothering” that they employ to their students of color. In their accounts, the participants shared stories that specifically described actions taken on their part to connect with their students of color and “mother” these students, hence empowering the students and enriching their school experience. This is in complete juxtaposition to the “disciplinarian” role commonly placed on them by the dominant race and dominant organizational culture. Past researchers who have studied African American females in teaching settings describe this phenomenon as “Other-mothering”. Other mothering is defined as “the assistance delivered to blood mothers in the care of their biological children either in an informal or formal setting” (Case, 1997, p.26). The term stems from the relationships developed between slave women and other slave women’s children they cared for, who had been left motherless due to slave trading (Collins, 2000). A community other-mother is an African American female who uses her understanding of traditions and culture to foster community respect and exercise widespread power. A vision of the heart behind the concept of other-mothering is captured poignantly in the following two quotes. The first quote is by educator, civil rights activist, and founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Mary McLeod Bethune:
“I am my mother’s daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth.”

Mary McLeod Bethune, 1941

The second quote is more recent and was stated in 2008 by civil rights activist, activist for the rights of children, and the president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman:

“The outside world told Black kids when I was growing up that we weren't worth anything. But our parents said it wasn't so, and our churches and our schoolteachers said it wasn't so. They believed in us, and we, therefore, believed in ourselves.”

Marian Wright Edelman, 2008

Other-mothering has been noted in teaching settings, but has recently also been used to describe the mothering done by African American female leaders in school settings (Dunbar, 2015). It is the belief of the researcher that the African American female participants of this study utilize other-mothering to build relationships with students and their families.

When I came into a setting where everyone was White, I was always invisible. I was always on the outside looking in. I don’t want any child of color in my school to ever feel that same way. The advantage for me is coming from nothing, and then being in a position where I can have something and give it out to the girls who would normally be invisible. To my girls who come to school and their afros jacked up on the side, I’ll bring them in here {my office} and I’ll play India Arie’s “I am not my hair”. We’ll jam together (Interview, Dr. Jones, 2016).

Mrs. Johnson describes her other-mothering and the influence her same-race status has on her interactions with parents.

I think that my race helps me working with my families because I think I can say some things to my families that maybe someone who didn’t have brown skin couldn’t or wouldn’t (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

The examined data reveals an intentional commitment on the part of the Black female elementary principals in this study to provide holistic care for students, going
above and beyond basic educational or curricular needs (Case, 1997). These behaviors are self-reportedly implemented to ensure the students’ personal and academic success. One principal took this notion a step further and stated it plainly that is continually looking for ways to teach her Black students about how to “survive in a White world” (Personal communication, Mrs. Andrews, 2016). Foster (1993) reported that this was a common way for African American other mothers to teach young Black children about White dominant ideology. These examples also demonstrate how the roles of African American mothers often transfer into the leadership practices of African American females. This finding is a critical basis for understanding the lived experience of African American female principals.

**Key finding #3 - There are numerous opportunities for School districts and Educational Communities to do more to support African American females in school leadership.**

It is the responsibility of school districts and educational communities at large to recognize the researched based reality of racial bias in schools and support administrators of color in meaningful ways. Administrators of color should not have to bear the burden of navigating their White worlds and the factual and present White racial biases alone. Dr. Bell gives a forthright example of why such support is needed when she says,

Mid-western school districts and educational communities need to have open and honest conversations about the impact of race on educational leadership. School districts and educational communities on both coasts have recognized and addressed these same issues regarding cultural bias and implemented programs for supporting all administrators in differentiated ways (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

All of the participants in this study reference this issue. They disclose that it is a complex topic that is sensitive and although it can be awkward to bring up, it is a necessity.
When you talk about cultural proficiency, these are things that have been done to us and not us choosing to do them. Nobody has to be accused of being anything – this is just the norm. Someone just needs to bring it to a level of awareness… it’s okay to talk about sensitive things (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).

Mrs. Andrews seems to share this same sentiment.

Race, gender, and even age are all barriers that some of us minority principals encounter, but these are taboo topics at the district level. No one ever wants to talk about race or gender biases. They will bring up cultural proficiency from the lens of “everyone needs to be aware of this” but no one wants to address the real barriers that exist for African American leaders and especially African American female leaders. We have a double weight tied around our necks. We carry the weights with grace and poise – but they are heavy nonetheless! (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

Two of the five participants shared details about both formal and informal networks that have been created by the African American/minority administrators in their districts. In both cases the informal groups were created prior to the 1980’s and the networks seem to be losing ground and losing meaning.

Our district has an informal network for minority administrators, but in the past 5-10 years it has really lost steam. I think those principals before us were baby boomers and old Gen Xer’s who had experienced the civil rights era and more overt racism. Those of us who are coming up now – and are young Gen Xer’s or even Millennials, are subject to much more hidden types of racism and sexism (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

Mrs. Johnson appears to be involved in the informal network of minority administrators in her district. However, she discusses how the group is struggling.

I am one who is involved in the minority administrators support network and would like to figure out how to do more for minority administrators, but we are all so busy. Back when African Americans were just coming to this area, the network was more needed. There wasn’t email or other ways for people to stay in touch as much – so this network provided that. But now we are struggling to find ways to support African American administrators (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

Mrs. Johnson provides a partial explanation for why she believes some younger African American principals may not be reaching out to join these informal groups,
Sometimes I think that people don’t want to be seen as coming together as a united front. They’re worried about how it will look to the Whites. Black principals want to come together still these days – but they think others will judge them and maybe they will (Interview, Mrs. Johnson, 2016).

In their research study done last year, which studied Black and minority leaders’ career experiences in the business realm, Wyatt and Silvester (2015) emphasized that African American females not having a strong informal network is a significant barrier in the progression of their careers.

However, it appears that the school districts’ practice of providing the space for informal networks, while well intentioned, may not be sufficient. Emdin (2016) asserts that specialized training is needed to prepare principals of color for some of the unfair challenges they will face. Many states, aware of the principal and teacher shortage, have created programs that enable aspiring principals to be mentored by principals of color (Beebe, Lindley, & Presley, 2002; Garza & Wurzbach, 2002). In addition, Fortune 500 companies have also recognized the need for same-race support and mentoring. IBM recognizes that cross-cultural mentoring is important to make sure that employees are developing and have a fair shot of advancing within the organization (Diversity Inc., 2012).

To this end, this researcher recommends that African American women, who have reached the level of the principalship, receive mentoring and leadership programs that apply the four major themes discussed in the study.

These programs should target topics focused on:

1. Utilizing their strengths as cultural liaisons and relationship builders to hone in on supporting all students (Theme 2: Super Disciplinarian vs. the Master Relationship builder)
2. Engaging discussions dealing with race, gender, age and other intersecting identities (Theme 3: Working twice as hard for half the recognition.)

3. Increasing their understanding of the organizational culture and needed supports (Theme 3: Learning how to play the game)

4. Presenting ways to deal with the mounting pressures of the position and the complicating variables imposed by their marginalized identities (Theme 4: Brave enough to be broken – Resiliency and Perseverance).

Strategies should address both institutional and individual sources of prejudice and discrimination. Sources of prejudice and discrimination are often entrenched in particular historical and social contexts. Then they are shaped by institutional structures and practices. Seeking to address the issues and support African American female leaders and other minority leader populations, without dealing with these influences, is often ineffectual. All of this will be much more fruitful within the context of a district-wide effort for all staff to be more culturally competent. In that case, strategies should seek to impact the behavior of individuals, including their motivation and capability to influence others, and not be limited to the usual efforts to increase just knowledge and awareness. In other words, words without actions are futile.

Dr. Bell is careful to point out and suggest that the individuals who administer the culturally sensitive and focused mentoring and leadership programs have to do so with humility, a sense of urgency, and honesty.

It takes courage to take on race and gender. A lot of people don’t have that courage. It takes people who have courage and then those same people have to be people that matter, that other people will listen to. You can’t just plop someone of color in a position to take on these topics in a school district. You could have someone who just does more damage. I’d rather it be the right person – or no one (Interview, Dr. Bell, 2016).
Although support for their current positions is warranted, Mrs. Andrews took her assertions even further than the other participants and emphasized the role school districts should play in providing support to African American females elementary principals to move up and take on higher district level positions.

I wholeheartedly believe that the best Assistant Superintendents, Directors, and Superintendents were strong building principals. Minorities in general, but especially minority women need to be encouraged and supported to take on those positions. We can be the district level decisions makers. How can you serve a district with the majority of minority students and yet 80% of your central office executives around the decision-making table are White? (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

Mrs. Andrews was also the only participant in the study who referenced a lack of awareness of racial and gender barriers on the part of preparation programs at local universities and colleges. She gives a specific example that illustrates this reference.

I remember when I was getting my administrative endorsement; I was the only African American in many of my classes. I kept thinking to myself- wow, this is going to be rough. It was like I knew even then that I was going to experience something different from those others White classmates around me. However, even in my administration preparation program – things like race and gender were never discussed in the context of leadership. Why not? (Interview, Mrs. Andrews, 2016).

This lack of awareness on the part of educational leadership preparation programs cannot be widely generalized based on the data in this study. However, this is an area where further research is warranted.

**Implications for Leadership Theory development**

A myriad of research studies point to the notion that principals symbolize the essence of what it means to be hardworking (Belt, 2009; McFadden et al., 2009; & Louis et al., 2010). Principals spend countless hours and energy to help build America’s future
our children. This effort comes at a cost for all, but for African American female principals, the cost seems to be higher. However, largely missing from this dialogue concerning educational leadership seems to be the voices of African American female school leaders. Much of the research that has been done on race in the United States ignores the role of gender, and much of the feminist analysis of society ignores race. In order to fully understand the plight of African American female leaders’ experiences in organizations, we must understand the multiple forms of oppression they encounter. As African Americans, they are subject to both overt and covert racism. As women, they are subjected to multiple forms of sexism. As women existing in the current 21st century, they are subject to the construct of time and generational age and it’s influences. Confirmed through the data presented in this research study, these experiences related to race, gender, and age impact their leadership journey and the ways in which they lead. However, current models of leadership and leadership frameworks seem to ignore the role of race, gender, and age. The models seem to imply that all leaders are cut from the same cloth; thereby assuming their experiences will be similar. Most leadership theory frameworks have been developed around traits commonly associated with White males. Byrd (2009) states that scholars from management and organizational fields generally study leadership as a universal phenomenon. It should not come as a surprise that educational scholars have done the same.

“Current contemporary models of educational leadership may be insufficient to prepare educational leaders to work effectively in diverse communities. This is because they often ignore the role of race and race relations in America. (Brown, 2005, p. 588)
However, this generalized approach excludes socio-cultural realities that may be associated with the experience of leading schools. This omission has left a gap in our understanding of how African American women’s racial and gendered identities influence their development as leaders. The data presented from this research study further emphasizes the belief that educational entities need to more thoroughly research African American females and other minority populations, because they are typically excluded from academic texts about leadership.

“We need to transform our views of leadership to promote more robust theories and diverse models of effective leadership” (Chin, 2011, p. 1)

The results of this phenomenological study further Chin’s assertions that there is a need for explaining the challenges that the combined effects of race, gender, and age place on the leadership experience; challenges which are not experienced by White men or White women in these same positions. Theory building research is needed in this area or alternative theoretical paradigms are needed in order to provide a more inclusive theoretical perspective of leadership and theoretical frameworks that are applicable to more diverse groups (Byrd, 2009). Without modernized and representative theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations, educational institutions cannot adequately prepare future educational leaders (Mack, 2010).

**Implications for Practice**

There are many implications for educational leadership practice that can be garnered from this study. Traditionally, research studies on educational leadership have focused on components of leadership that generalize leadership styles to mask gender or race. Walker (2003) points out that “the attempt to understand intersectionality is, in fact,
an effort to see things from the worldview of others and not simply from our own unique standpoints” (p. 991). As proposed, the findings of this study reveal certain power structures that may limit the advancement and/or success of African American women in educational leadership. In addition, by examining each principal’s unique lived experience and story, the researcher has identified existing support structures that are particularly of importance for African American females in school leadership. All of these findings can be translated into implication for future practice. This research study uncovered implications that are related to all facets of the educational community:

1. Mid-western school districts and educational communities must find a way to address and fill the empty pool of culturally diverse school leaders. This involves aggressively recruiting and retaining individuals from the marginalized identities examined in this research study.

2. Mid-western school districts and educational communities should begin to examine ways in which to implement minority-based support networks for administrators of color. This must come directly from the top. Strategies should have the support and participation of those with authority and power.

3. Higher education plays a major role in shaping the quality of leadership in today’s society. The findings in this study may be used by university preparation programs to address the lack of diverse leadership perspectives used in the preparation programs for the elementary principalship.

This study was designed to enlighten the educational arena on the “lived experiences” of African American female elementary principals and to suggest what supports can be structured and what obstacles overcome, in order to ensure success for
this specific populace.

**Limitations**

This study was limited by several factors. First, all of the participants were all working in the Midwest. Because of the immense diversity of school districts in the United States, a different demographic of geographic location would expand the scope of this study. Second, the experiences of only female African American elementary principals limited the study. Female African American middle and high school principals may also have experiences that may extend the scale of this study. Finally, despite my best efforts to be aware of my biases, it is possible that my own experiences as an African American female elementary principal produce a bias that places limitations on my analysis.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Additional research is recommended to expand the scope of this study. Due to this study’s limited scope and methodology, I would recommend the following research topics to further develop and verify the findings of this research:

1. Five female African American elementary principals who are currently employed in Mid-western urban school districts were the focus of this study. This study could be replicated with increased numbers of participants to compare findings.

2. This study sought experiences and perspectives of female African American elementary through personal interviews. Experiences and perspectives of staff
associated with elementary principals are unknown. The inclusion of others in the study such as teachers, staff, and central office administrators would allow for additional triangulation of the data.

3. This study focused on the experience of elementary principals. Comparative studies targeting the perspectives of secondary principals would add another dimension to this research.

4. Even though spirituality is noted in the literature review, it did not come across as a major theme in this study. Future studies could more closely and specifically examine the role of spirituality in the lives of African American female school leaders.

5. This study examined the role of code-switching and shifting in the lives of African American elementary principals. Additional studies could examine what toll, if any, the need for the Black women to become chameleons to adjust to their surroundings takes on their emotional and physical health.

6. This study focused on phenomenological qualitative methods. Future studies utilizing both qualitative research methods and quantitative methods (mixed methods) to study intersectionality could provide a richer context.

7. Although not a topic in this research project, the literature review revealed and discussed previous research study findings in relation to school districts’ hiring practices and policies that may negatively impact minority applicants applying for leadership positions. Further researcher in this area may be warranted in order to mitigate or alleviate those practices that may hinder well-qualified aspiring
African American females from acquiring leadership positions.

8. Resiliency and Perseverance were captured as one of the central themes of this research study. However, research in the area of resiliency in African American female leaders (both in education and business world) is lacking. The findings of this study highlight the need to further the study of resilience, linking it to leadership and specific subgroups of leaders, particularly African American women.

9. The lack of awareness, support and action on the part of school districts is a key finding in this study. Additional research studies could be conducted on the methods employed by school districts to address race/gender issues in their districts, in an effort to support administrators in their ranks who belong to marginalized racial and gender categories.

**Conclusion and Final Thoughts**

Barriers do not disappear for women of color after they reach the top. It appears the barriers only become more sophisticated and complex. African American women in the elementary principalship differ in their experiences, background, and beliefs; however, based upon the results of this qualitative phenomenological study, they are connected in their struggle to be accepted and respected. They are connected in their quest to make a difference.

An intersecting view of Critical Race theory and Feminist theory were used to explain the women’s perceptions of their experiences, identify implications for theory development and practice, and for recommendations for future research. As evidenced in
this study, there are pervasive barriers rooted in racial and gender bias and stereotypes that African American female elementary principals confront each day. The barriers were evident within their own schools in relation to their staff and school families and from within each of their own district’s organizational systems. Women of color in leadership positions must be adamant in spreading the word, sharing the research, and expecting to be treated equitably. The use of the sentence “She is an African American female leader.” in mainstream society is not appropriate. The term “leader” does not belong to White males and all others must have a qualifying designation. They are simply leaders—leaders who are willing to do effectively whatever the position requires.

Based on this phenomenological study, there is an urgent need for more attention to be focused on the experiences of leaders that have intricate relations with race and other dimensions of identity. This is due to the United States’ history of racist and sexist oppressive acts that devalue and marginalize some, while idealizing others. By accepting the notion of the influence of multiple identities and intersectionality on the leadership experience, educational communities can create respectful and encouraging solutions to the difficulties faced by women with complex and diverse identities who aspire to leadership. Leadership theories should be inclusive of all those in positions of leadership. Accepting race, gender, and age as social constructs that influence the experience of African American female elementary principals takes them from the outer ring to the center ring of attention. This movement propels the analysis of leadership and construction of leadership theory to new arenas. Their voices add value not only to topics of leadership, but provide an insider voice on educating students of color and students in poverty. This could create a new visualization of leadership that considers the work of
African American female elementary principals equally important in mainstream literature on educational leadership, to tell an untold story - to bring the unknown to known.
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Appendix A

Introductory Email

Dear __________:

My name Andrea Haynes. I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership graduate program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

As part of the requirements of my doctoral degree, I am conducting a research study that involves the examination of African American female elementary principals. I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of my research is to study the perspectives and experiences of African American women in the elementary principalship. By examining their experiences, there will be an opportunity to clarify improved methods for encouraging and supporting other women of color, particularly African American women, in their educational leadership journey. As the study explores African American female elementary principals’ experiences, I will attempt to weave together common themes and understandings.

Please be assured confidentiality is of vital importance, as this research is conducted. If you choose to participate, your anonymity will be preserved throughout the study.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete two components.

1. A brief electronic survey (should take you 5-10 minutes to complete)
2. A 45-60 minute in person interview with myself

The interview session will be audio-recorded so that I can accurately reflect and capture what is discussed. The recordings will only be reviewed by myself, as I will be both transcribe and analyze them. Once the analysis is complete, the recordings will be destroyed.

I would be happy to answer any questions you have related to this process.

I whole-heartedly thank you for your consideration. Please let me know if you are interested in participating.

Sincerely,

Andrea Haynes
Principal – Harrison Elementary

Doctoral ABD student – University of Nebraska at Omaha

andrea.haynes@unomaha.edu
Appendix B

Electronic Demographic Survey

Q. 1. What is your age range?
   a. 30-34 years old
   b. 35-39 years old
   c. 40-44 years old
   d. 45-50 years old
   e. 50-54 years old

Q. 2. What is the highest degree or educational level you have attained?
   a. Bachelor’s degree
   b. Master’s degree
   c. Master’s degree plus 30
   d. Doctoral degree

Q. 3. Were you a first generation college student?
   Yes or No

A. 4. How many years have you been a principal?
   a. 0-2 years
   b. 3-5 years
   c. 6-8 years
   d. 8-10 years

Q. 5. How many years did you teach prior to becoming a principal?
   a. 2-4 years
   b. 5-8 years
   c. over 8 years

Q. 6. How long have you lived in the continental Midwest?
   a. 1-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. over 10 years
   d. over 10 years, because I was born and raised in the Midwest

Q. 7. As a youth, did you attend:
   a. public school
   b. private school
   c. a combination of public and private school
d. other (home-schooled, etc)

Q. 8. What is the current student population of the school where you are employed?

a. 100-200 students  
b. 201-299 students  
c. 300-399 students  
d. 400-499 students  
e. Over 500 students

Q. 9. What is the approximate student demographic racial make-up of the school where you are employed?

a. 10-20% racial minority  
b. 21-50% racial minority  
c. 51-75% racial minority  
d. Over 75% racial minority

Q. 10. What is the approximate student demographic socio-economic make-up of the school where you are employed?

a. 21-50% free/reduced lunch  
b. 51-75% free/reduced lunch  
c. 76-90% free/reduced lunch  
d. Over 90% free/reduced lunch

Q. 11. What is the approximate number of teachers you currently supervise as a building principal?

a. 15-20  
b. 21-30  
c. 31-40  
d. Over 40 teachers

Q. 13. What is the approximate racial make-up of those teachers?

a. Zero nonwhite teachers  
b. Less than 3 nonwhite teachers  
c. 4-8 nonwhite teachers  
d. More than 8 non-white teachers
Appendix C

Dissertation “Semi-Structured” Interview guide/protocol

Research Question #1: How are the life experiences of African American female elementary principals linked to their view of their position and their leadership development? Part 2: Did various events that transpired in an individual’s life provide for a foundation for their leadership philosophies and ideologies? Are the events similar across the participants?

1.1 Tell me about your life experiences that led you to the principalship. (Experience/Background question)
   Probing questions: Have you always wanted to be a principal?
   What and/or who played a role in your decision?
   Did your family play a role in your decision?

1.2 How do you feel these experiences that occurred prior to your current leadership position influence your current leadership style and philosophies? (Experience/Background question)
   Probing questions: Did you have any support systems in your past experiences that you believe helped shape your current leadership role or journey?

Research Question #2: What experiences do African American female elementary principals have in their leadership journey that they perceive are different from their white male, white female, and black male counterparts?

2.1 As you lead your teachers and staff, do you believe your school leadership journey has been impacted by your race, your gender, and/or your age? If so, in what ways? (Feeling & Behavior Question)

2.2 As you collaborate and work with your parents and community, do you believe your school leadership journey has been impacted by your race, your gender and/or your age? If so, in what ways? (Feeling & Behavior Question)

2.3 Do you believe you have confronted any barriers related to your race, your gender and/or your age? Can you tell me about any barriers you feel you have had to overcome related to your race, your gender and/or your age? (Feeling & Behavior Question)
   Probing question: Do you feel that AA females who may have held the position of elementary principal 20-25 years ago would describe a similar experience?

2.4 Do you believe there are any advantages to being an African American female in the educational administrative realm? (Feeling Question)

Research Question #3: How do African American female elementary principals cope with and negotiate race and gender barriers in their work environments?
3.1 If you identified barriers above, how do you navigate your leadership role to ease or overcome the race and/or gender obstacles? (Behavior Question)

   Probing question: Are there any specific tactics you employ in working with teachers? Are there any specific tactics you employ in working with parents and your community?

3.2 How do you feel about having to make those adjustments? (Feeling question)

3.3 Do you believe your race or gender impacts your experience more? Or do you believe it is impossible to separate the two? (Feeling and Opinion/values question)

3.4 Do you believe that your presence, as an African American female principal, positively impacts your African American and other minority students? If so, in what ways? (Feeling and Opinion/values question)

Research Question #4: From the perspective of African American female elementary principals, in what ways can educational communities better meet the needs of African American female principals employed within their ranks?

4.1 Do you feel your particular school district adequately supports minority principals and female principals? If not, why? (Feeling and Opinion/values question)

4.2 Tell me about any strategies or methods you feel school districts and the educational community at large should implement and exercise to better support African American principals, specifically African American female principals. (Opinion/values question)

Closing question: That covers the items I included within my protocol. However, do you feel there is something I should have asked you, that I did not? Or is there anything you want to make sure you add?

• Interview guide based mainly upon data collection methods described in:

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Research Study:

AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

You are invited to participate in this research study. The following information is provided in an effort to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate.

- The purpose of the research study is to examine the perspectives and experiences of African American women in the elementary principalship. As the study explores African American female elementary principals’ experiences, I will attempt to weave together common themes and understandings.
- Please be assured confidentiality is of vital importance, as this research is conducted. If you choose to participate, your anonymity will be preserved throughout the study.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete two components.
1. A brief electronic survey (should take you 5-10 minutes to complete)
2. A 45-60 minute in person interview with the researcher

The interview session will be audio-recorded so the researcher can accurately reflect and capture what is discussed. Only the researcher will review the recordings. Once the analysis is complete, the recordings will be destroyed.

The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals; however, the data will not contain any identifying information.

You are free to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska.

Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented.

Signature of Subject ___________________________ Date ______________

Principal Investigator
Andrea Haynes
Appendix E

IRB Approval letter

May 18, 2016

Andrea Haynes, MA
Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 337-16-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND RACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum approval period of 5 years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2016-05-18 14:07:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs