The Experiences of African American Female Elementary School Principals in Southwest Georgia

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Curriculum and Instruction

in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development

April 2022

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my mother, Barbara Wilson, and my late grandmother, Claretha Wilson. When thinking of role models, I think of them. These African American women were the epitome of dedication, hard work, and professionalism. They were the best examples for anyone but especially me, an African American female in Southwest Georgia. They both taught me to respect myself and others. My mother and grandmother instilled in me a love for God, family, and my culture. These phenomenal women taught me the importance of getting an education and striving for whatever I desired. These two ladies are the apple of my eye. If not for the Lord, and them who has been on my side, I would not be who I am today.

My mother has always been my biggest cheerleader and champion. She supported me financial and most of all motivated me through this process. She raised me and my two sisters, Calesia and Sachel, as well as my bonus sister, Tiffany, as a single mother. She taught us to strive for excellence and always do what is best for us. She taught us how to be independent African American women by exemplifying the example of an independent African American professional women who demonstrated professionalism, hard work, and dedication. I love you mother, Barbara C. Wilson. Thank you for being who you are!

Love your daughter,

Dr. Sharonda L. Wilson

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ABSTRACT

Through the research conducted, the experiences of African American female principals in their efforts to become principals of K-12 schools in rural Southwest Georgia were revealed. The researcher sought to understand African American female principals' life experiences, perceived barriers, and strategies used on their journey to become principals. Qualitative research guided the researcher in capturing the narratives of six African American female educators who advanced to become principals of elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. The literature captured theories, information, and influences that aligned with the race and gender of the six African American female participants of this study.

Some information found in the literature may have impacted or influenced some of the perceived barriers and strategies these African American females encountered on their journey to become elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The literature revealed the rationales to support African American females desiring to become principals. The significance of this study supports and encourages African American female educators who desire to become principals. There is a growing need for African American female educational leaders to serve as mentors and work to encourage other African American females to travel the same path they traveled. The study also provided information to school districts' personnel departments, college and university leadership programs, local RESAs, and the state department of education.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Being an administrator at a K-12 public school can be a very valuable life journey. There are several rewards and challenges as well as numerous responsibilities that come with being a principal. Principals must work to meet the needs of all stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and community affiliates. Perceptions of these stakeholders, experiences, barriers, challenges, and accomplishments of the principal can influence the principal's journey. African American female principals are faced with additional circumstances, making the principals' experiences different when viewed through their lenses. Some of these factors include leadership, gender biases, or racial biases. This study ascertained whether the challenges faced by African American female principals might be because of their race or gender separately, or whether they might be because of both statuses, or neither one (Horsford & Tillman, 2012).

Based on reported research, principals working in K-12 public schools have been white. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) national data indicated females made up 52% of principals, 78% were white females, and 12% were African American females. Horsford and Tillman (2012) noted that 82 percent of K-12 public school principals were white, with only 11 percent being African American; of the 11 percent, 4 percent were African American females. There is scant evidence to prove that these statistics have changed much today.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), “teachers and leaders of color will play a critical role in ensuring equity in our education system.” The disproportionate number of minorities serving as principals in K-12 schools does not align with this statement. This divergence between the reality of the demographics of the US principals and the federal government’s statement shows the need for investigating how history, race, and gender are interwoven in the lives of African American women elementary school principals and therefore are worthy of study.

Problem Statement

African American female educational leaders tend to manifest cross-cultural leadership practices through a different lens of experience than their white peers (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014). Even though principals from any background can relate to students, some minority principals may better understand the cultural backgrounds and home environments of minority students, which may help those principals give more culturally appropriate rewards or consequences (Sanchez, et al., 2009). Nurturing relationships and demeanor with students are considered characteristics of female principals. As the demographics of student populations change, there is a need to demographically change the position of the public-school principal from being primarily white female-dominated.

According to the 2017-2018 Characteristic of Public School Principals report, the percentage of female principals increased by ten percentage points (44% to 54%) from 1999-2000 to 2012-2018; the percentage of white females was lower, while the percentage of Hispanic females was higher, but there was not a measurable difference in the percent of African American females (U.S. Department of Education, National Center

for Education Statistics, 2017). The demographics of schools in the United States have changed, but the demographics of school principals seem to be far slower to change. Based on the 2017 U.S. Census, only about half (49.9%) of elementary school students were non-Hispanic white, a decline from the 2007 Census reflecting 56.7 percent (United States Census Bureau, 2018). While students' demographics change, the demographics of school educators and leaders are not changing. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, African American females were the least represented group among all principals (2017).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and efforts of six African American female principals in becoming principals of their respective rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. An examination of the life experiences perceived barriers, and strategies were studied to increase the knowledge, awareness, and research of the roles race and gender play in African American female principals serving in rural communities. The findings of this research serve to encourage future African American females in their endeavors to become principals in rural communities.

Research Questions

The study examined the various factors defined by the experiences of these African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The researcher researched the history of women in the workforce, their careers, barriers, and the impact of women in educational leadership. The researcher included racial and gender composition and the intersectionality of race and gender throughout the research. The following questions guided the research in this qualitative study:

1. What are the personal and professional life experiences that impact the educational experiences of African American female principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?
2. What perceived barriers did African American female principals encounter in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?
3. What strategies did the African American female principals use in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

Significance of Study

With pending retirements and the growing number of K-12 schools in America, there is a need for additional principals in the coming years. There is a disproportionate underrepresentation of African American female principals among all principal positions. The purpose of this study was to reveal the experiences of identified African American female elementary principals in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. The findings of this study lend support to other African American females in their efforts to become principals in rural K-12 schools and inform stakeholders of the experiences and views of female African American principals. Others who may benefit from this study include State Departments of Education, Regional Educational Service Agencies, college and university leadership programs, educational associations and leaders representing rural school districts, and local district recruitment, retention, and training programs.

Conceptual Framework

The framework of this study is Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist thought (BFT). Collins (2000) identified the following four dimensions of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology:

- Lived experience as a criterion of meaning
- The use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims
- The ethic of caring
- The ethics of personal accountability

According to Clemons, the four dimensions of Black feminist thought help Black women qualitative researchers bridge the disconnect between their professional and personal lives and support them in increasing their understanding of the lives of their participants especially as it relates to the intersection of race, class, gender, and other cultural complexities (2019). Other researchers like Dillard (2016) and Givens & Jeffries (2003) used Black feminist thought to provide insight on African American women who work to improve and understand Black communities as well as to deepen our understanding of "an endarkened feminist epistemology" (Clemons, 2009, p. 2).

Collins (2000) described in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, the importance of Afrocentric methodological approaches and explained the four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology. The first dimension, "lived experiences as a criterion of meaning," connects their lived experiences and voice to address societal issues; the second dimension, "the use of dialogue," humanizes challenges, resists domination, and all knowledge is intrinsically valuable and should be tested for the presence of empathy and

compassion; the third dimension, “the ethic of caring,” means talking with the heart and the presence of emotions validates the argument; the fourth dimension, “the ethic of personal accountability,” demands one to be accountable for his/her personal knowledge claims (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist theory argues that “African American women are positioned within different structures of power fundamentally, different from the white women or African American men” (Grant, 2012, p. 104). When African American women become exposed to Black feminist theory, they both see and experience implicit and explicit bias, stereotyping, and microaggressions more as they strive to become educational leaders. “Since African American women are in an oppressed gender and race, this intersectionality comes together to explain further how African American females are being held back” (Reed, 2012, p. 43). The four themes, as outlined in Figure 1, examined by Black feminist thought relate to the personal stories of African American women and demonstrate the uniqueness of each woman while recognizing how some of their experiences can overlap (Fuller et al., 2019).

The lived experiences show there is knowledge attained through living as an African American woman and it could provide unique insights into the role of educational leadership. “Black women talked of oppression, refusing to hide the rawness of what power relations of racism, sexism, class exploitation and heterosexism does to people on the bottom” (Collins, 2015, p. 2350). The dialogue created among African American women in educational leadership demonstrates the importance of building relationships (Reed, 2012). Women, in general, may take different viewpoints on situations from those of men, and so African American females in educational leadership

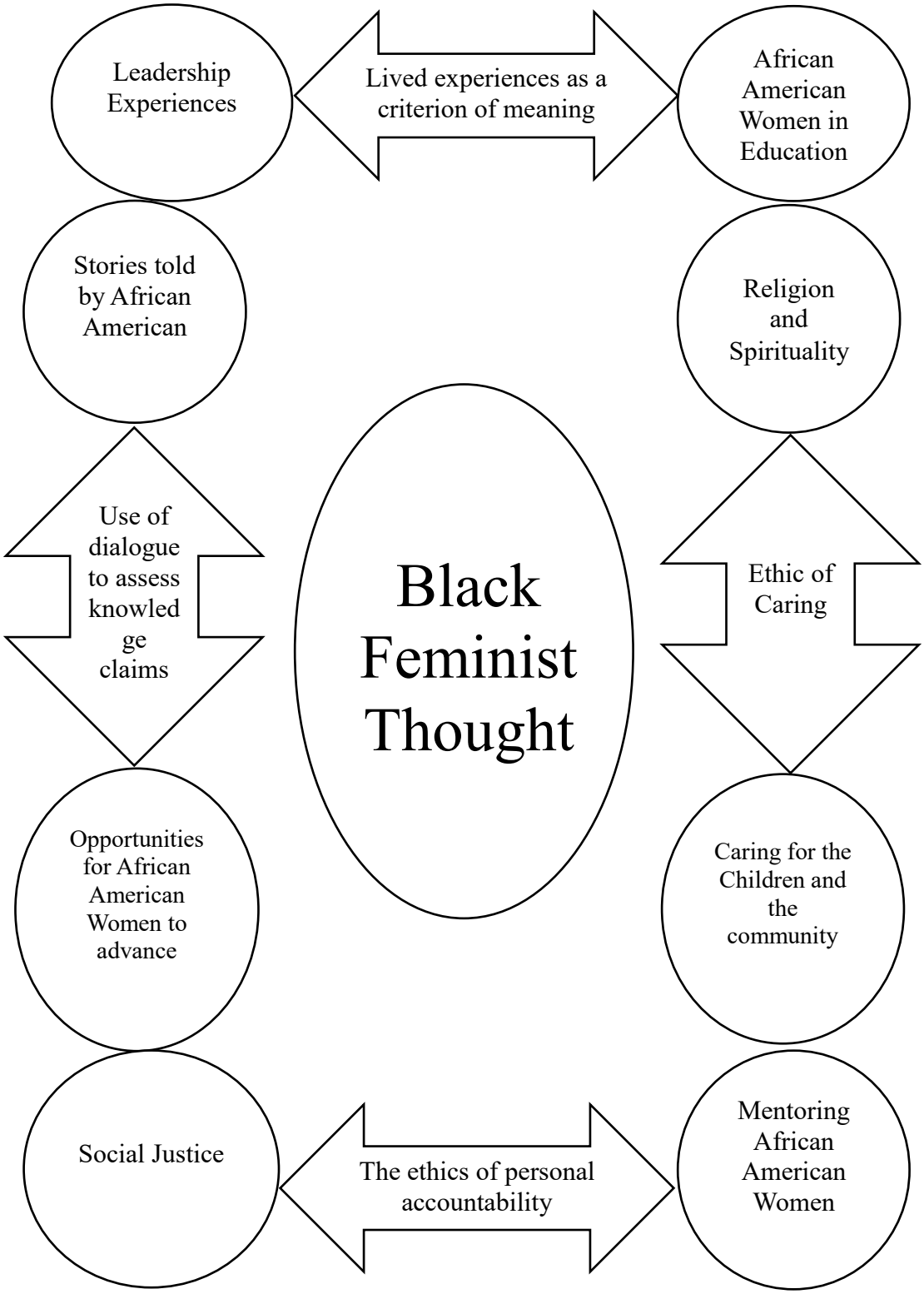
would use their relationships to bring forth change (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015).

The ethic of caring shows how important empathy and understanding students are to better understand African American women's experiences (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). Without showing emotion, the African American woman might be more inclined to share less about her experiences. The last theme of the Black feminist theory manifests as personal accountability and requires a great deal of objectivity. Mentorship is one way to have an accountability partner to help with taking responsibility for actions (Grant, 2012). African American women are less likely to be mentored by another African American woman even though they are more inclined to want an African American woman to work with as a mentor. Combining the complexity of race and gender helps assess why African American women can provide unique insight to African American women mentees when they are in educational leadership positions. Without someone to model personal accountability in educational leadership, it can be challenging to understand which actions might lead to taking responsibility for and which actions result from systemic oppression.

Collins's Black feminist thought was appropriate for this study because the participants of the study were African American females who gave voice to their experiences which were guided by the four dimensions of Black feminist thought. The framework allowed participants to share their experiences and connect to other African American women who had similar experiences. The participants were able to bring an understanding of perceived barriers, strategies, and challenges faced during their experiences to other African American women in positions of leadership as principals, district office leaders, higher education, or other levels of leadership. The use of Black

feminist thought was an effective lens that helped the participants bridge the gap between their professional and personal lives. “Black feminist thought and qualitative research encourage partnerships to be formed with participants who work to initiate dialogue as they begin to remember instances and give meaning to their experiences past and present” (Clemons, 2019, p. 4).

Figure 1. Black Feminist Thought Concept Map



Methodology

Qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Narrative analysis is a form of research used to understand the experiences of individuals by collecting and telling their detailed stories (Colorado State University, 2021). Personal narratives, family stories, and life histories can reveal cultural and social patterns through the lens of individual experiences (Creswell, 2009). The researcher captured the narratives and perceptions of six African American female elementary school principals leading schools in Southwest Georgia through interviews, observations, and documentation, The two central questions of narrative analysis the researcher considered were what did this narrative or story reveals about the person and world from which she came and how might this narrative be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it (Creswell, 2009).

Patton (2002, p. 227) stated, “Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases”. There are fewer African American female principals than white female principals working in schools in Southwest Georgia. The participants of this research were six African American females working as principals in Southwest Georgia elementary schools. The African American principals were selected if they were elementary school principals at schools in Southwest Georgia. The superintendents of schools in the Southwest Georgia RESA district played a vital role in the selection of participants. The superintendent of schools provided the researcher with potential participants. The researcher gained permission

from the superintendents (Appendix A) and the selected participants.

Using narrative analysis, the researcher sought to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of experiences by obtaining data through in-depth interview transcripts (Patton, 2002). One means of collecting data for this study was through in-depth interviews. Seidman (2006, p. 9) explained, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.” There are three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data: informal conversational interviews, general interview guide approach, and standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002). Data were collected using the general interview guide approach.

In addition to the interviews, observations provided the researcher direct insight into the participants' daily interactions in their school environment as well as the reaction and interactions of the participants during the interviews. “To understand fully the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method” (Patton, 2002, p. 21). Observational data is a firsthand encounter of the study and observing is the best technique when a fresh perspective is needed (Merriam, 2002). The researcher observed the participants in their school settings as a second means of collecting data.

Finally, available documentation, and a review of said documents, was the third means of collecting data. Documents were very valuable. Documents could be a stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued through direct observations and interviewing (Patton, 2002). The strength of documents as a data source is they already exist and could be pertinent to the situation (Merriam, 2002). Documents reviewed included school

climate studies, student achievement statistics, demographics, and disciplinary reports of the elementary schools in Southwest Georgia where the participants are principals.

Limitations

Limitations are elements of a study by which the researcher may be constrained (Creswell, 2009). This study was limited by the number of participants and the geographical setting of the research. Six African American female principals participated in the study. These six participants could not account for the views and experiences of all African American females. Furthermore, the researcher assumed all participants would share their experiences, perceived barriers, and strategies in an honest and forthright manner.

Assumptions

Acknowledging and identifying the assumptions and biases of the researcher was vital to the study. Acknowledging and identifying assumptions and biases aided in establishing a trustworthy and credible interaction between the researcher and participants. Assumptions could have skewed the results of the study. Patton stated, "Being able to balance observation with reflection and manage the tension between engagement and detachment" is essential when the researcher is observing the participant (2002, p. 328). The researcher must be aware of personal assumptions and notions when observing participants.

Definition of Terms

Barriers are something preventing or hindering someone from advancing or progressing to a position of leadership.

Black feminist thought (BFT) is a feminist perspective that acknowledges the

effects of race, gender, and class in the lives of women of color (Collins, 2000).

Education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially in a school or university.

Educational Leadership involves working with and guiding teachers toward improving educational processes in elementary, secondary, or postsecondary institutions.

Intersectionality is the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings like educational settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Leadership Style is the way a leader manages her workload and team; this involves her tendencies, methods, and mannerisms in her day-to-day responsibilities as the leader of the school.

Mentoring is a complex and multi-dimensional process of guiding, teaching, influencing, and supporting a beginning or new teacher or leader.

Narrative Analysis is the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction. The central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings (Patton, 2002).

Strategies are plans of action educational leaders follow to achieve a goal.

Summary

Studying people's stories can allow for seeing complicated structural, social, and educational issues which are abstractions based on real-life experiences (Seidman, 2006). The narrative analysis approach revealed six African American female elementary school principals' experiences, perceived barriers faced, and strategies used while working in

schools in Southwest Georgia. In-depth interviews delved into their experiences and revealed data pertinent to encourage aspiring African American female educators desiring to become principals. The study could assist in improving school districts by training aspiring African American female educators and by informing educational agencies and departments of education so that appropriate training and hiring practices of African American female educators are reviewed and available.

Race and gender guided the selection of the participants. There is limited research on African American female principals in Southwest Georgia. The study adds to current research. The literature review revealed the experience of women in leadership and the situations or circumstances that influenced the career choices of other African American female educational leaders.

In Chapter, I the focus of the study as an examination of the perceptions of six African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia is explained. Existing theories and research demonstrating the need for additional knowledge on the topic framed the research context. In Chapter II, the researcher provides a review of the literature and discuss what research is currently available for the topic. Chapter III consists of a discussion of the methodology, including data gathering and analysis choices. Chapter IV introduces the participants of the study. Chapter V reports the findings from the interviews, detail the analysis of the interview data and explains the themes uncovered in the findings. Chapter VI summarizes the study by providing a brief overview, detailing the limitations and implications of the study, and making recommendations for future research.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The need for African American women in educational leadership has grown increasingly important due to the lack of racial proportionality in these positions compared to African American males or White people. This void is not due to a lack of competency but due to the systematic power structures that act as barriers for African American women to attain educational leadership positions. This study aimed to showcase their traditionally silenced perspective to uncover the plight of African American women in educational leadership (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). A study that researched life experiences, the barriers that affected African American women in educational leadership, and strategies to overcome these barriers could guide future generations of African American women leaders (Reed, 2012).

This literature review collected, analyzed, and synthesized the data from numerous articles about the plight of African American women as they become educational leaders. The focus of the literature was on African American women's experiences as principals. Learning about these experiences that African American women endure might encourage the future generation of African American women in educational leadership. In addition to learning about African American women and their experiences, it was also important to look at which barriers have affected them personally on their route to educational leadership. African American women's leadership

development and preparation to become principals in educational leadership need greater study. However, previously identifiable barriers which block their success included lack of district support, gender roles, and leadership roles (Horsford & Tillman, 2012, p. 3). The reviewed research showed that the strategies to overcome leadership barriers for African American women were crucial for facilitating widespread change in the education system. These strategies to overcome the barriers included advancing justice and equity in schools and gaining more mentorship opportunities for African American women educational leaders.

History of African American Women in Educational Leadership

Throughout history, women have been instrumental in helping advance the ideals of education. Historically, African American female educators have linked their educational practices to social activism (Muhammad et al., 2020). Most of their educational practices began in segregated settings where they were educating children of color for the purpose of developing their identity and advancing their communities (Dixson, 2008; Johnson, 2015). "Black women leaders have defined leadership not only as a service to a school or an institution but also as involvement in social change. Historically, Black women took on roles as community activists, public speakers, and civil and women rights advocates" (Johnson, 2021, p. 15). When African American women recognize and acknowledge how much they have accomplished, they will be better prepared to recognize and affirm the identities of their students (Harushiman, et al., 2019). Women like Fanny Jackson Coppin, Alice Freeman Palmer, Mary McLeod Bethune, Annie Julie Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Lucy Craft Laney were African American women who impacted their communities as educators, activists,

speakers, and worked to improve the rights of minorities and women.

Fanny Jackson Coppin

Frances (Fanny) Marion Jackson Coppin was born enslaved in Washington, D. C. According to Evans et al., her freedom was purchased at the age of thirteen or fourteen (2019). She attended and graduated from Oberlin in 1865, and after graduating, she began teaching at the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) in Philadelphia (Evans et al., 2019). Evans et al. recounted when Coppin was assigned a course to teach at Oberlin with the understanding her assignment would be revoked if the students rejected an African American instructor (2019). Coppin emphasized the importance of reading and speaking skills (Logan, 2008). Coppin remained at the college for nearly forty years; during this time, she brought about many educational changes (Logan, 2008).

Franny Jackson Coppin was the first African American woman to be named principal of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia in 1869 (Samuelson, 2018). She was intimately involved in the community of the school, especially in the homes of African American women (Evans et al., 2019). She also demonstrated a commitment to her community by serving on the board of the Home for the Aged and Infirmed Colored People from 1881 to 1913. In 1878, Fannie Jackson Coppin She has been recognized as a champion of African American teacher education, and Coppin State College in Maryland was named in her honor (Evans et al., 2019).

Alice Freeman Palmer

Alice Freeman Palmer was born on February 21, 1855, and her parents were farmers who raised her in a middle-class household. (University of Michigan, 2022). (She was exceptionally gifted and taught herself how to read and write at the age of three

(Tonti, 2014). Her gifts and talent proved to be a foreshadowing of her future success as the president of Wellesley College from 1881 to 1887. According to Tonti (2014), Alice Freeman Palmer overcame disadvantage and sexism to graduate from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Arts degree. While earning her degree, she taught so that she could support her family back home in Broome County, New York. Alice Freeman Palmer became the youngest ever president of Wellesley College when she was 27 years old (Tonti, 2014). During her tenure as president of Wellesley, she changed the curriculum so that it would be more rigorous (University of Michigan, 2022). Palmer passed away at the age of forty-seven; despite passing at an early age, her efforts to champion women's post-secondary education have had a long-lasting impact on universities in America (University of Michigan, 2022).

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune would become one of the most significant educational leaders of the twentieth century (Evans et al., (2019) gave an in-depth history of Mary McLeod Bethune in her book, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954, An Intellectual History*. Mary McLeod Bethune was born Mary Jane McLeod in Mayesville, South Carolina in 1875. Mary McLeod Bethune labored picking cotton and harvesting corn to help support her family during Reconstruction (Evans et al., 2019). Her family wanted a different life for her, so at seven years old, she attended Mayesville Industrial Institute for African American children at Trinity Presbyterian Church. She graduated at the age of twelve and then studied at Scotia Seminary for Girls on a scholarship in Concord, North Carolina (Evans et al., 2019; Muhammed et al., 2020). Mary McLeod Bethune taught eighth grade at Haines Institute under the leadership of Lucy Laney who

influenced Bethune's teaching and institutional building (Evans et al., 2019).

She planned to work as a missionary in Africa but later realized that she could impact the lives of African Americans by "advancing the education of Black people in the United States and championing for racial equity and justice" (Muhammad et al., 2020, p. 423,). She dedicated her life to the community and public service. In October 1904, Bethune opened a high school, hospital, and the Daytona Normal Industrial School for African American girls between the ages of eight and twelve (Muhammad et al., 2020). She visited prisoners, served the homeless, and counseled people (Evans et al., 2019). According to Evans et al., Mary McLeod Bethune was also deeply involved in the "women's club movement of the early twentieth century" (2019, p. 24). She founded the National Council of Negro Women and was a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Evans et al. stated, "I argue that scholars have duly recognized Bethune as a premier educator in African American history, but they highlight her actions as an administrator or political figure rather than her contributions to social or educational philosophy" (2019, p. 25).

In 1936, she organized the Federal Council on Negro Affairs to bring social change focused on racial inequalities in communities and schools (Muhammad et al., 2020). She became the highest-ranking African American woman in government when she was named as the director of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 (Michals, 2015). In 1923, Mary McLeod Bethune became the first African American college president of then Cookman College which was once an all-men's college, but as a result of her presidency, the college became a coeducational institution, Bethune-Cookman College (Watson & Normore, 2017). In

Mary McLeod Bethune's will, she left the world a vision for the future through an expression of "hope, knowledge, faith, and a responsibility of power" (Muhammad et al., 2020, p. 426).

Anna Julia Cooper

Anna Julia Cooper was born a slave in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Anna Julie Haywood was an internationally educated scholar who graduated from Oberlin College with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics (Evans et al., 2019; Muhammad et al., 2020). After graduation, she taught college courses at Wilberforce in Ohio. According to Evans et al. (2019), Annie Julie Cooper was appointed principal of M. Street School in Washington, D. C. from 1901 until 1906. After leaving M Street, she worked at Lincoln University in Missouri until 1910. She returned to M. Street (renamed Dunbar High School in 1916) as a teacher after leaving Lincoln University (Evans et al., 2019). After retiring from Dunbar High School in 1930, Annie Julie Cooper became the president of Frelinghuysen University, a school for working adults, in Washington, D. C.

Annie Julie Cooper was a skilled lecturer and involved in her community. According to Evans et al. (2019), she addressed African American clergymen on the topic of womanhood at a conference in D. C. in 1886. She also spoke at the American Confederate of Educators in 1893 on the advanced education of women. Annie Julie Cooper volunteered with several social agencies, and she co-founded the Colored Women's League in D. C, a predecessor to the National Association of Colored Women. Annie Julie Cooper contributed to the ideas on research, teaching, and service that support Patricia Hill Collin's argument for Black feminist epistemology, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Evans et al.,

2019). Cooper's analysis of spaces African American women occupied contributed to the works that involved intersectionality (Muhammad et al., 2020). *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* was one of her writings that was published in 1892 and it provided the foundation for work in Black Feminism and Intersectionality (Muhammad et al, 2020). According to Muhammad et al. (2020), "Cooper's contributions to education and specifically to the intersectional theory lay a foundation for teachers to learn from when serving children of diverse backgrounds with respect to their race, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other social makers" (p. 423). The Journal of American History document Cooper's often quoted words, "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood…then and there the whole…race enters with me'" (2019, p. 668). Cooper's contribution to education is a foundation for teachers to learn from when serving children from diverse backgrounds with respect to race, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other social indicators (Muhammad et al., 2020).

Nannie Helen Burroughs

Nannie Helen Burroughs, an educator and activist, was the child of two parents who were formerly enslaved Africans (Muhammad et al., 2020). Nannie Helen Burroughs, born on May 2, 1879, was a school founder, organization builder, and social and political activist who contributed to the educational advancement of women of color (Muhammad et al., 2020). She was the leader of the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls which was one of the most successful schools for women in the United States (Samuelson, 2018). Nannie Helen Burroughs found the auxiliary group to the National Baptist Convention, the Women's Convention, and opened a National

Training School for Women and Girls (Evans et al., 2019).

Nannie Helen Burroughs was a leading voice in the African American community (Dittmer, 2020). Through the establishment of The National Training School for Girls and Women, Burroughs emphasized the importance of industrial training for women and girls regardless of their backgrounds, social class, or circumstances in life (Muhammad et al., 2020). Her work in Washington, D. C. mirrored the efforts of thousands of other dedicated teachers and community leaders "who passed on lessons of thrift, spirituality, and empowerment that overcame barriers to black achievement" (Evans et al., 2019, p. 148). Burroughs's work has also influenced theories like social education theory and Womanism (Bair, 2008).

In the second decade of the twentieth century, she first became involved with women's issues when she campaigned for women's right to vote, but she was unsuccessful in her attempt to make the white women's movement interracial (Dittmer, 2020). Dittmer (2020) describes Burroughs as "a charismatic speaker" who was often asked to speak at colleges and national gatherings of African American organizations. She defied the restrictions society placed on her because she was a female and African American, and her work foreshadowed the main principles of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Harley, 1996).

Lucy Craft Laney

Lucy Craft Laney was born in 1854 in Macon, Georgia, and her father was a Presbyterian minister who had brought him and her mother's freedom twenty years before Lucy was born (Georgia Women of Achievement, 2016). Laney is also considered to be Georgia's most famous female African American educator (Leslie, 2020). She

graduated from Lewis School in Macon, Georgia, and she was a member of the first graduating class of Atlanta University in 1873 (Evans et al., 2019). Laney taught in Macon, Savannah, Milledgeville, and Augusta for ten years before she started her school in 1883 in the basement of a Christ Presbyterian Church in Augusta (Leslie, 2020). Her school was named Haines Normal and Industrial Institute, which was the first school for African American children in Augusta, Georgia (Evans et al., 2019).

By 1912, the Haines Institute had thirty-four teachers and 900 students were enrolled; she instilled pride and confidence in her students and many of them attended Howard, Fisk, Yale, and other prestigious colleges (Leslie, 2020). She also developed other women into notable educators; Mary McLeod Bethune was an African American women educator she influenced (Evans et al., 2019). She was also affiliated with the black women's club and educators' network. According to Evans et al., Lucy Laney later developed the school into a leading preparatory high school in the South, and the school attracted well-trained teachers who were dedicated to educating students (2019). Leslie (2020) described Laney's school as a school that impacted the community, "Haines not only offered its students a holistic approach to education but also served as a cultural center for the African American community. The school hosted orchestra concerts, lectures by nationally famous guests, and various social events."

African Americans in Educational Roles

Until the first part of the 20th century, African American citizens in the South were not teachers or administrators (Peters and Nash, 2021). However, during the Civil Rights Movement, there was a focus on the provisions of a quality education, which included equal access to resources and funding for segregated Black schools that were provided

for the White schools (Hale, 2018). Hale also stated,

> This constellation of rights constituted educational activism of Black teachers who viewed their work as necessarily political in the articulation, demand, and defense of a right to an education during the earliest stages of the Civil Rights Movement through the era of desegregation (2018, p. 445).

W.E.B. Du Bois, Benjamin Mays, Septima Clark, R.R. Moton, and John Hope were African American public scholars and educators who considered race at the center of professional dialogue (Alridge, 2008; Baker, 2011; Charron, 2009; Du Bois, 1935, Jelks, 2012).

Historically, the African American principal served as a role model to African American children and demonstrated various forms of caring by exposing students to good teachers, good teaching strategies, showed sympathy, empathy, and compassion towards students (Tillman, 2008). African American educators took their job of educating students during the age of Jim Crow seriously by preparing to teach their students by completing rigorous requirements of a collegiate education at a time when only over half of all Americans attended high school (Hale, 2018). This preparation of African American educators poured over into their classrooms because they applied this knowledge to establish principles of academic excellence with an active sense of citizenship. African American educators wanted to ensure that their African American students received the same quality education as their White peers during the Jim Crow era (Hale, 2018).

The dismantling of a dual and segregated school system, institutional discrimination, and racist policymakers responsible for implementing desegregation at the local school level caused there to be massive layoffs of African American teachers

(Hale, 2018). Tillman (2004) estimated over 39,000 African American educators were released from their jobs by 1972, which is a loss of 46 percent of the African American teaching force within the first two decades after the *Brown* decision. Essentially, African Americans were not included in the desegregated system of public education that develop because of *Brown*, and school systems developed a means to discriminate by administering standardized testing as a way to exclude African Americans from obtaining employment (Hale, 2018). African American educators were fired even though they had satisfactory performance in the school systems in the prior years (Walker, 2015).

African American educators expressed in their prayers and speeches their disdain and challenges African American schools faced as Whites resisted desegregation (Walker, 2015). Walker (2015) reflected on the prayers African Americans prayed at the beginning of professional meetings acknowledging their experiences with hatred and mistrust that was rampant in the South. Despite all of the before mentioned, African American educators created a caring school climate that inspired the academic success of African American children and encouraged them to find their place and take hold of the American dream (Foster, 1988; Morris & Morris, 2000; Noblit & Dempsey, 1996; Walker, 1996).

According to Walker (2015), African American educators in Georgia identified three areas of concern during the time immediately after full desegregation in the South. These areas of concern are "the disruption of their power to advocate for Black (African American) children, the incongruity between language and practice in desegregation plans, and the lack of attention to the educational needs of Black (African American) children in the desegregation process" (p. 112-113). Desegregation also destroyed the ranks of African American leaders (Hale, 2018). According to Tillman (2004), studies

from the 1970s indicated that 90 percent of African American high school principals who worked in thirteen southern states and Border States lost their jobs. While deeply embedded institutional discrimination and racism in public schools is the reason for the majority of layoffs, some African Americans volunteered to leave education or decided not to pursue a degree in education after *Brown v. Board of Education* (Hale, 2018). According to Brown (2005), the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was the main reason why there was an increase in the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership and other educational roles.

The Transition to Leadership for African American Male

Historically, African Americans chose careers as teachers. By 1950, nearly half of all African American professionals worked as teachers (Madkins, 2011). With the integration of schools because of *Brown*, scores of African American teachers, including male teachers, faced ejection from the teaching profession (Sandles, 2020). W.E.B. DuBois was known as the founder of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), but he was also a teacher (Samuelson, 2018). He was a professor and taught Greek, Latin, economics, and history. Du Bois (1973) stated, "If and when they are admitted to these schools, certain things will inevitably flow. Negro teachers will become rare and, in many cases, disappear" (p. 151), which he predicted to be the consequence of *Brown v. Board of Education*. As a result of the *Brown* ruling, African American schools were irreparably impacted, and the impact was mainly because of the forced exodus of African American teachers who were forced to find employment in other areas (Bond, 2015; Rogers-Ard et al., 2013). According to Tillman (2004), African American male teachers were forced to find gainful employment outside of

education because if they decided to remain a teacher, their pay was significantly below their White counterparts.

Since *Brown*, the number of African American male teachers steadily declined because many African American males opted to work in professions viewed as traditionally for a male (Lutz, 2017). According to Fenwick and Akua (2013), African American males often do not obtain principal positions because they are more often considered for coaching positions, disciplinarians, or other non-curricular positions. Underwood et al. (2020) referenced there is limited research on the importance of supporting the advancement of African American male teachers to positions of educational leadership. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), only two percent of America's public-school teachers were African American males.

The Transition to Leadership for African American Women

The collective historical journeys in education for African American women have been characterized by disenfranchisement and exclusion, risk and achievement (Peters and Nash, 2021). There were few options for African American women in the South to pursue a career in education or to receive formal training to enter the education profession during the postbellum period (Collier-Thomas, 1982). After the Civil War, African American women worked in or attended schools called the clandestine school because they were forbidden to attend schools with White children (Jones and Montenegro, 1983). In some cases, abolitionists established schools so African American women would have somewhere to be trained to become a teacher (Peters and Nash, 2021). Many African American women made the decision to establish or work in schools where African American girls were trained to become teachers, and many of them

attended college and dedicated their lives to educating African Americans (Peters and Nash, 2021).

The feminist movement sparked conversations about the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Johnson, 2021). Collins' (2000) Black feminist thought proposed a philosophical and methodological shift in how scholars viewed African American women's contributions to social movements to mitigate the gap of knowledge in this area. Collins noted, "It is no accident that many well-known U.S. Black (African American) women activists were either teachers or involved in struggles for educational opportunities for African Americans of both sexes" (2000, p. 211). Odell (2020) stated that Black feminist thought was another way to study gender and educational leadership, and BFT articulated the experience of African American women leaders.

African American women principals have been excluded from established power structures resulting in some African American women principals' approach to leading schools differently than their White colleagues (Newcomb and Niemeyer, 2015). According to Newcomb and Niemeyer (2015), even though African American women leaders differ in class, sexuality, background, experience, and school environment, they also have similarities because they are African American principals. African American women assistant principals are less likely to be promoted to principal, but if they do, they waited longer to be promoted than their White counterparts (Bailes and Guthrey, 2020). Loder-Jackson et al. (2016) referenced Black feminist perspectives as highlighting "Black women's camaraderie with one another and Black [males] in fighting oppression while also interrogating how sexism and patriarchy undermine their alliances with men" (p. 200). The transition to leadership in education was difficult for African American males

and females.

Leadership Gap

The leadership gap is one of the primary causes for researching the life experiences, barriers, and ways to overcome barriers for women in educational leadership roles. Women comprise approximately 80% of elementary school teaching positions, yet they have been less successful in obtaining positions as school leaders (Watson & Normore, 2017). According to Tarr (2018), women were more present than men in almost every area of education; however, they were underrepresented in leadership positions. The representation of women in nearly every area of education signified that there was not a shortage of female educators available for leadership, but there was a shortage of female educational leaders (Reed, 2012). The lack of women in leadership roles posed a threat to the equity of leadership positions and addressing it is needed.

There are several reasons that this gender gap in educational leadership may exist, including women entering the workforce late, women having fewer career positioning advantages, the glass ceiling effect, and women's personal choice to avoid leadership roles (Tarr, 2018). "For a brief time, women held the majority of elementary school principalships. However, as the position became more "professionalized" they lost ground to men" (Watson & Normore, p. 2, 2017). Typically, African American female educators who become principals taught twelve to twenty years, about seven to fifteen years longer than their White male counterparts (Peters, 2012). What these systemic factors could construct were structuring to exclude African Americans from educational leadership positions. The intersection of systemic racism and sexism disproportionately minimized educational leadership positions for African American women (Peters, 2012).

According to Reed (2012), the combination of race and gender identities could offer a more nuanced understanding of how others perceived African American female principals in their leadership roles versus a singular focus on their race.

Women have been fighting to receive equal pay and workforce representation for years, and currently, women in educational leadership worldwide are still fighting this same battle. Recent movements such as the #MeToo Movement of 2017 and the Workplace Gender Equity Act of 2012 demonstrate how the efforts of women trying to secure gender equity are not paying off yet (Tarr, 2018). Women were not acquiring positions of leadership, and when they were in leadership roles, the pay was not equal to what it was for the males in leadership. In 2016, women comprised half of the population and half the workforce positions; they received roughly 80 cents to every man's dollar for similar work (Schmitz, 2017). The unequal pay between males and females correlated directly to their representation in leadership roles. In addition, more financial compensation was linked to higher leadership positions. If women are not getting higher leadership positions, then it makes sense as to why they are not earning equal compensation as men.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), women earned more degrees than men at every academic level. The fact that women earned degrees at higher levels indicated that there was not a lack of qualification but a lack of being chosen to lead these educational facilities. Research showed that White males were more likely to be selected for educational leadership positions than females and any other ethnic minority (Morrison, 2018). Selecting white males more often for educational leadership positions caused African American females to receive inherent discrimination

because of both their gender and their race. Reed (2012) suggested that these African American women had a realistic view of the challenges they faced in their school leadership roles. These African American females were disadvantaged, but it was worth taking the risk to become the leader who could enact change for the school and the community. For many school stakeholders, their encounters with African American women in leadership were scarce and limited.

Resiliency and perseverance were essential characteristics needed in the journeys of African American women focused on becoming principals or educational leaders. If they were not constantly positioning themselves and their careers for educational leadership, they could easily be left behind compared to their male counterparts. According to Horsford and Tillman (2012), the intersectionality of African American women in leadership has become a bridge for others, to others, and between others in multiple contexts over time. Put differently, African American women in educational leadership must also be willing to have patience because while their career was rewarding, it frequently came at the cost of being systemically overlooked for advancement opportunities (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). In addition to the discrimination African American females in leadership positions encountered, they had fewer career positioning advantages because the percentage of males promoted was higher than females, causing females to have to wait longer to get their chance at educational leadership positions (Tarr, 2018). The women were more likely to be employed as curriculum specialists or be in entry-level leadership positions, causing women to become discouraged in many circumstances since the road to becoming a principal could take so long (Peters, 2012).

In addition to many women not having the best career positioning to land themselves in educational leadership positions, they were also hitting a glass ceiling. The Glass Ceiling Act of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 was designed to combat discrimination in the workplace based on gender; this commission conducted a study that offered ways for women and minorities to have more representation in positions of management and leadership (Watson & Normore, 2017). As stated by Williams (2004) in Tarbutton's study (2019, p. 20), "the glass ceiling effect was significant for blocking women from receiving top-tier leadership positions." Reed (2012, p. 42) quoted Loder-Jackson's statement, "African American women have only recently begun to tap the glass ceiling of principalship". The glass ceiling effect is based on stereotypes, gender bias, and disproportionate amounts of males being the decision-makers for the organization (Williams, 2004). This showed that narrow thinking patterns and implicit bias, which might be unintentional, were causing women to be held back from their educational leadership positions. According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2016) report, educators saw subtle biases in school boards and search firms' recruiting tactics that involved stereotypes prohibiting women from being chosen as educational leaders. Until these recruiting patterns change, allowing for more equitable policies, the number of women, especially African American women, obtaining leadership positions will not increase. However, occupational discrimination still seems to exist in public school administration (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Another reason that there might have been an attainment gap in educational leadership positions for women was a personal choice. Many women were often conflicted by the demands of career and family responsibilities because school policies

for absences often were not family-friendly, causing women to shy away from taking these opportunities out of respect for their family duties (Tarr, 2018). Women with children were often stereotyped, making it challenging to attain leadership positions because many of them were already mothers when they finally got the opportunity to achieve an educational leadership role. According to Cheung and Halpern (2010), cultural attitudes toward women with children as being less capable than women without children, caused some women to shy away, fearing that they could not handle the pressures and demands of managing work responsibilities and family demands. Consequently, many female educational leaders did not have children, were widowed, single, divorced, or engaged in commuter marriages, suggesting that some women believed they should choose between being a nurturing mother and spouse and having a demanding career (Tarr, 2018).

Experiences in the School

Many African American women who did become educational leaders often found their first jobs in troubled urban elementary schools. There were serious historical inequities in urban education, resulting in funding differences, differences in teacher quality, recruitment, and physical structure of the building (Gooden, 2012). Since there were many issues within the urban schools, these issues created exceptionally high expectations for these new African American women leaders. One key to understanding the experiences that caused women to get involved in school leadership would be to study the intersections of race, class, age, and gender on their identity and experiences of oppression (Peters, 2012). A great deal of the research done on African American women's experiences in educational leadership stemmed from the research on women in

educational leadership. Since research detailing African American women is limited, women were more likely to be the subject of research specifically about their gender differences, but the literature did not focus on race as often (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). Learning about these experiences could assist people to overcome their oppression, whether caused by gender or race, and help them understand how people's experiences of other people may be similar to their own.

Santamaria and Jean-Marie's research (2014) aimed to gain an in-depth perspective on the experiences of six female principals working at primary schools. The study involved three African American women, two Mexican women, and one White woman. The results of the study demonstrated that African American women found strength in their stories and identities. African American women do not often feel that they can share their stories and finding strength through their stories was even more difficult. According to Gooden (2012), much of the literature developed in the last century omitted the voices and perspectives of African American women. The first African American female participant in Santamaria and Jean-Marie's study (2014) indicated that because she is an African American female, it caused her to think about how she delivered information and how others would receive it. She discussed her understanding of how people might interpret what she said differently, depending on where they were from and their culture. She also told of her grandmother's experience of being passed over for multiple promotions while working in a school as an Administrative Assistant because of her skin color and gender, which impacted the views of her mother who was also an educator. The second African American female participant in the study shared her story about why she wore high heels to school daily "in order to

demonstrate that she was in fact the principal; wherein the visitor to the school approached her and asked her to direct them to the principal" (2014, p. 349). The third African American female participant in the study came of age in the 1970s and was brought up in a family that valued and stressed the importance of getting an education. To obtain her position as principal, she relied on her work within inner-city neighborhoods and personal connections in her community. These experiences show the systemic roots of the oppression of African American women educators. According to Peters (2012), race and gender were never considered a hindrance in working with these families, although some people could take directions better when coming from a male. Some African American female principals dealt with injustices by using their power to reshape the rules to better serve their students and schools (Bass, 2012).

In the Santamaria and Jean-Marie (2014) study, an African American woman discussed how the racial injustices experienced by minority students were important. She also added how it helped some students at the school to experience greater levels of success when they were being led by an African American woman since some students were more able to express themselves about race or gender while at school. The first African American woman in the Santamaria and Jean-Marie's study (2014) worked to make sure she made decisions that would benefit students first. She also expressed that, as a professional, she drew strength from experiences and stories with which she identified. The second African American woman in the study worked to ensure her students felt safe, loved, and free to learn so the students could have as many choices as possible when they left elementary school and moved to the next level. As a principal, she was aware of the issues impacting the student achievement of Black students and she

also experienced what she identified as “injustices” that impacted her own son’s experience in school (p. 342). The last African American woman in Santamaria and Jean-Marie’s (2014) study worked to serve underserved populations by having community events like literacy fairs, educational conferences, and back-to-school events. She described how her role in the educational system was about civil rights, increasing access to education, and interrupting ignorance as much as it was about leadership. By understanding what led the African American female administrators into their positions, other African American female leaders could learn about the ways they can create change. These experiences fueled these African American women principals and helped them dismantle the barriers to educational equity, which inherently expanded their roles as a leader in the community. “Historically, Black women defied the odds and provided education for Black children. Even within the contemporary context, Black women have continued to work in ways that may be unnoticed, but clearly shape the lives of students” (Reed, 2012, p. 44).

Religion and Spirituality

African American females in leadership positions used their religious and spiritual backgrounds to influence their experiences as principals. According to Witherspoon and Arnold (2010), spirituality interrogated marginality, promoted social justice, and initiated social activism in schools. Faith is rooted in race and culture because of the past events that the race and culture of African American women have overcome, such as the Civil Rights Movement, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Reed, 2012). In Witherspoon and Arnold’s (2010) study, four African American women principal participants viewed their principalship as a mission or mission field. The women felt their religion or

spirituality (religio-spirituality) informed their educational and leadership philosophies. These issues still exist, but African American women are much farther than they once were in society. However, the advancement of African American female leaders represented in the future is threatened by not consistently increasing the number of African American female educational leaders.

The four African American women believed they were an "extension of God's care for their students" (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 226). A woman in the study discussed how she did not try to push her religion onto anyone at school or convert them, but she used her faith as a tool to help her stay committed to changing the school for the better. Faith was important to these African American principals because it gave them strength and resilience when working in harsh school conditions. According to Horsford and Tillman (2012), African American female leaders "must keep their eyes on the prize and offers suggestions for defining one's own success, developing a strategic plan, and building and sustaining mentoring relationships" (p. 4). The spiritual relationship of these women made them focus more on their care for others and not on themselves, which led to a positive interaction with students and colleagues. For the women in the study, spirituality was necessary for leadership, and in many cases, it was the foundation of their decision-making. According to Mansfield and Jean-Marie, "principals connected their spiritual beliefs and values as having a direct influence on how they led their school" (2015, p. 828). Knowing the spiritual foundation of these African American women principals was important to understand how higher worldly powers played into African American women's leadership in education. This spirituality was a way to help promote the fact that everyone should be treated fairly in the school system, regardless of their

cultural background. African American women could effectively translate authenticity to under-served and under-educated populations (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). The women from the Santamaria and Jean-Marie (2014) study expounded on how they felt that injustice could not be fought simply with flesh and blood, meaning that the spiritual nature of change and healing was the weapon against unfair practices that appeared in schools. The principals in Witherspoon and Arnold (2010) took different approaches, but their leadership behaviors partnered with God as their leader, and in turn, impacted the leadership they provided to their schools.

Barriers for African American Women in Educational Leadership

Lack of District Support

The lack of district support could be extremely disheartening when district leaders are mainly responsible for placing the principals in leadership positions. Peters (2012) interviewed two African American female principals about their backgrounds, mentoring, district support, and reform. Emerging themes from the interviews included the challenges of leading small schools, the responsibility of cleaning up the school culture, and the challenge to build-relationships. Within leadership, the characteristics women brought to their practice were typically undervalued (Reed, 2012). Feeling undervalued did cause the principals to perceive as if they were being handed an impossible task because they were not given the necessary tools or resources for success. According to Horsford and Tillman "…the perspectives of Black female leaders are too often dismissed as unimportant. And since Black female leadership is still somewhat of an anomaly in public schools, Black women may be marginalized in their efforts to make sure every child and especially Black children receive the education they deserve" (2012, p. 6). The

changes needed to the school's culture often seemed insurmountable, including ridding the school of gangs, changing cellphone policies, and even advocating for more money for students to take home textbooks. There was a need for school leaders to address educational inequalities identified as patterns of marginalization based on race, gender, and class, but these efforts had to include bringing an awareness to members of the school body and the district (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015).

One commonality between the African American women in educational leadership was that they did not feel they were taken as seriously by their district as their male counterparts (Reed, 2012). They also stated that they felt disrespected by parents, colleagues, and superiors. The educational leadership of African American women was responsible for cleaning up the physical environment, expelling students, and removing toxic faculty members. In Peters' (2012) study, one participant did not feel supported by the district. She felt the lack of district support made her feel largely unprepared to lead, so she left her principal's position. The second participant was assigned the position after the resignation of the first participant in the study. She felt there was a lack of "district investment" in the school (p. 29), so she too resigned from her position. Without doing all of this, plus more, the district could continue to ignore these causes of why the African American women principals might have failed. Instead, the district blamed the women themselves and their leadership because of the turmoil that they had been thrown into (Peters, 2012). These district leadership placements often became opportunities for African American women to fail, which is why they were more likely to be placed in an institution where there were already many other issues. "As districts plan reform to improve student achievement outcomes, a focus on specific leaders is necessary. As

numbers of nontraditional leaders (women, people of color, young adults) increase in school leadership, particularly in urban settings, districts must adjust to accommodate the needs of this unique (and diverse) population" (Peters, 2012, p. 36). All stakeholders had a responsibility to provide and promote equitable spaces for those (African American women) who did not identify as someone who fits in the longstanding stereotypical profile for leadership (Johnson, 2021).

Leading Small Urban Schools

Many women who gained a position in educational leadership ended up in small urban schools as the principal, which could also be a barrier to their success. Placement in urban school settings may have caused many African American women principals to feel forced to do the more challenging work. According to Reed (2012), there had been an increase in the national poverty in the United States, as well as increased community violence, and more inequalities in the judicial system for people of color. These factors often directly affected the youth who had to attend such schools. The home environment where students returned after learning also affected how they presented themselves when they came to school (Reed, 2012). In more urban neighborhoods, where there were more low-income and minority students, the educational leaders were often forced to deal with neighborhood and community issues in addition to students' issues while they were at school (Peters, 2012). Dealing with these issues could be overwhelming for many of the educational leaders who were mandated to help the students, who were African American women in many cases. African American women were more likely to become principals in challenging urban schools where the climates were not conducive to optimum levels of teaching and learning (Bass, 2012). These leaders learned to use their power to promote

safe, effective learning environments, which included leveraging their "leadership influence in the interpretation and administration of school policies in ways that serve the best interest of students, even within the context of harsh district mandates" (p. 75). The African American female principals demonstrated care for the students due to their personal experiences and identification with oppression.

Some districts often had the perception that an African American female could help predominantly African American schools by displaying the "other mother" image to the students (Fuller, et al., 2019). This perception stemmed from the empathetic and caring identity socialized into the African American female population. This concept is so important because many African American students did not receive the attention they might have deserved when they were outside of school. Reed (2012) discussed how one of the principals in the study stated that she did not feel that African American students would be receptive to the warmth and caring that she showed if it were to come from a White administrator. This suggested that African American females could serve an important purpose in their communities as they take on the motherly role for the predominantly African American students. Though this behavior may be beneficial for the students and school systems, it causes many African American women in educational leadership roles to feel that there might be boundaries that they must adhere to be perceived as successful. These societal expectations that kept African American females in the urban communities that they represented, demonstrated the importance of African American women spreading their wings and soaring to their maximum potential, which might be in predominantly White schools.

African American Women in Leadership Roles

Reed's research (2012) examined three African American female principals who shared their stories on how they experienced being an African American female leader in education. As a result of the research, Reed found that the three African American principals' superiors, colleagues, and parents did not take their concerns and issues as seriously as those of the males on the same professional level, which resulted in their superiors, colleagues, and parents displaying dismissive actions that exhibited disrespect. The study discussed how one of the principals felt that people challenged her leadership because of her accomplishments as an African American female. According to Chisholm-Burns, et al. (2017), "it is not talent, but unintentional biases and outmoded institutional structures that hinder the acceptance of the advancement of women" (p. 314). For African American women principals, the disregard for their authority and lack of parental support had been one of the most challenging nuances to resolve in the educational environment (Fuller et al., 2019). The parents were the key to getting students on board, but if they did not respect the principal because of her race and gender, it began to cause issues for the school. Reed (2012) found that many people perceived women as being more emotional in their leadership than men might be. "Typical male characteristics are commonly used as the default expectation by which women leaders are hired, retained, or promoted" (Chisholm-Burns, et al., 2017, p. 314). Fuller, et al.'s (2019) findings showed no conclusive information as to why the personal characteristics of the possible educational leader had influenced the odds of obtaining employment. "Women face a double burden in their careers if they want to get ahead: not only do they have to be exceptional in their positions, they also have to constantly fight to overcome stereotypes that may hamper

perceptions of their leadership potential" (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017, p. 314). Therefore, overcoming these stereotypes allowed African American women in educational leadership to have an opportunity to decrease the gap between them and leaders of another race and another gender.

Personal Accountability: Strategies to Overcome Barriers for African American Women Educational Leaders

Advancing Justice and Equity

"School leaders with social justice awareness are cognizant of the nested contexts of their school and the ways in which societal norms are translated into educational, economic, and political biases" (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015, p. 823). School leaders who acknowledged this in their daily practice were viewed as social justice leaders. According to Santamaria and Jean-Marie (2014), an African American woman shared that she wanted to put children and their education first, to remain as equitable and fair as possible. She expressed that this was not always going to be able to be done simultaneously. One example she shared was that she might need to allocate more money to one grade level over another, but only because that students in that grade level might be struggling more than the other levels. "She shared that there was a sense of entitlement with certain segments of the school community when she arrived as principal, and she had to make sure not to play into this" (p. 346). Becoming a principal is a huge accomplishment for an African American female, so staying humble was necessary because it was a significant accomplishment. In Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015), the African American female participant referenced how her practices aligned with her core values and principles to eliminate inequalities.

According to Reed (2012), female candidates completed educational leadership degrees at a rate of sixty-seven percent yet progressed to principalship much slower than males did. This feeling of being overlooked as one of the few African American women in educational leadership leads to a higher sense of fostering relationships. In Peters (2012), one of the study participants discussed how she knew all her students by name because she wanted to strengthen the culture at the school. Along with strengthening relationships came certain privileges that African American women could use to their advantage when they worked in African American communities. In the study, another one of the participants exclaimed that a White woman would never be able to talk to some of the students and staff in the manner that she did. This allowed the African American female leaders to use their skills to generate a unique change perspective based on values and beliefs about the political and moral choices made within the educational leadership system.

Many researchers argued that the school leaders' ability to cultivate educational equity, access, and achievement in diverse contexts heavily depended on whether they took an activist stance while developing the school culture (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). This ability meant that it was important for educational leaders to recognize intersectionality's role in education. Once these differences in race, class, and gender were recognized, there would be more open conversations about how to overcome these barriers. For stakeholders to further equity and justice, educators must be willing to acknowledge the disadvantages that many oppressed populations must endure (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014). Henceforth, female educational leaders must be willing to adopt a more democratic mindset that allowed them to capitalize on the input

of others. The leader could synthesize these injustices to discern which issues were the most prevalent by getting as much input as possible. That would lead to prioritizing many of the issues based on the number of individuals experiencing them. According to Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015), under-representation in gifted programs, over-representation in disciplinary issues, and over-pathologizing were concerns that young women and young African American students were subjected to within the school system. The issues African American women face in educational leadership were often systemically prevalent even in the younger grade levels, so bringing these issues to the forefront was essential for creating long-term changes in the schools. These changes could start to happen through exposure, mentorship, engaging in conversations about what it meant to be oppressed, regardless of whether it was happening because of an African American female administrator's race or gender, or some other reason.

Mentoring African American Females Leaders

One of the main ways that people could advance their careers or gain leadership positions was by following the advice or actions of a mentor. Mentoring reflected a unique relationship among individuals where two people engaged in a learning partnership to help the mentee accomplish specific goals (Grant, 2012). To achieve goals as an African American woman in educational leadership, the leader would often have to break through the glass ceiling, which is when artificial barriers based on organizational or attitudinal barriers prevent qualified professionals from advancing upward in their organizations to gain leadership positions. According to Carnes and Radonjevich-Kelley (2011) glass ceiling is a term used to describe the restriction placed on women in the workplace. For African American women, it could be challenging to locate mentors with

whom the women could feel comfortable or to whom they could relate. According to Grant (2012), African American women were less likely than men to initiate, cultivate, and maintain mentoring relationships with faculty. This reluctance was because many African American females preferred to have mentors who were also African American females. However, this can be difficult to achieve due to the lack of African American females in educational leadership (Reed, 2012). Reed (2012) felt that districts must closely examine their hiring processes to ensure a more equitable hiring process, particularly for principal positions. To increase school leaders' racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, females in school leadership roles often successfully mentored other females, but just as gender influences mentoring relationships, so did race and ethnicity (Grant, 2012). For more African American females to be involved in educational leadership, there would need to be an increase in the future selection of African American educational leaders, because of the mentoring that occurs. This strategy could help to overcome the barrier that a lack of mentoring by African American female principals created.

Ethics of Caring through Courageous Conversations: Passion, Practice, and Persistence

There must be passion, practice, and persistence involved in advocating for change within the educational system to help close the race and gender gap for African American women educational leaders (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). There is an expectation over the next few years, that the current racial and cultural mismatch between educational leadership and students will widen, and non-African American females will be expected to fill the vast majority of leadership positions. However, groups of students are becoming more racially and linguistically diverse, which creates even more pressure

for representation in leaders (Pollack, 2012). Since this gap increase appears to be inevitable, it is essential to consider how soon more African American women could fill these positions.

Passion, practice, and persistence will not guarantee that change will come automatically; however, these strategies allow for African American women in educational leadership positions to continually raise awareness about the issues that are causing their school systems to lag. Mansfield and Jean-Marie's study (2015) expounded on Singleton and Linton's (2006) work about the use of passion, practice, and persistence that focused on the leadership practices of female leaders (one of the participants in the study was an African American principal) to disrupt inequalities in education (i.e., transforming beliefs and practices concerning educational inequalities and engender equity to enhance learning for all students). Although their study focuses on the impact race has on the achievement gap, it is believed that Singleton and Linton's (2006) work on the conceptualization of courageous conversations about race could be used to assess other inequalities in education related to gender intersectionality. Without having these courageous conversations, school leaders would be limited in how they could move their schools, their employees, and their students' beyond simply the rhetoric of talking about issues of inequality (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). Having a sense of passion, practicing, and remaining persistent could potentially change the normative behaviors which are perpetrated every day in the education system. This could result in continual growth for African American women in education.

African American Women's Passion as Educational Leaders

Passion allows African American women principals and educational leaders to

feel connected and energized about their work within the community. In Horsford and Tillman (2012), the authors discussed how African American women principals described themselves as the mother of the schools, and the students could be considered children. When a person thinks of the relationship between the mother and their child, they often think of the passion that she will use to fuel her love. This relationship allowed the African American principals to be relentless about the changes they wanted to bring, which helped them succeed in transforming the educational system around them. In Peters (2012), one of the African American women principals in the study stated that she could effectively cross boundaries with teachers to encourage them to brainstorm and problem-solve with her because she wanted the teachers to become more integrated into the decision-making process. Through passion, school systems could resist changes that do not aim to fix the status quo and encourage solutions that promote diversity for African American women in the school systems. Horsford and Tillman's study of leadership styles for African American principals showed that they often went above and beyond the assigned duties to provide students with food, hair care, school supplies, nurturing, and encouragement (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). Their beliefs and values allowed them to advocate for the learning and educational resources needed for students to succeed. Sometimes, these resources were required to help students build their confidence and self-esteem, leading to a more successful group of students in the long term. According to Lyman, et al. (2012), self-knowledge and confidence could lead to acceptance of one's ethnicity, culture, and background, which was essential for personal conviction, motivation, and awareness of social justice issues.

In Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015), one of the participants discussed how

important passion was when it came to advocating for the right things and when doing the right things for students. Passion was needed to give hope to the students, staff, and parents so they would buy into the vision the African American woman educational leader had provided for the students and the school at an individual and organizational level. The participant of the study wanted her staff members to view the school through the eyes of the students and the community they came from, and she expressed to them "she's a teacher first and how important it was to have that dedication or calling, her passion about addressing the inequalities that have hindered opportunities for low performing students in her school is community-focused" (p. 831). Since most philosophies of schooling were built on Eurocentric models, the perspectives of African American females in educational leadership were often dismissed as unimportant (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). This dismissal of African American women who were principals increased their thirst for transformation within the school system. This transformation started within the school system, but it could be generalized to help foster change and remove oppressive ideologies and practices in society as well. One of Santamaria and Jean-Marie's (2014) participants discussed that mainstream administrators held African American administrators to a higher standard. She expressed that some of these mainstream leaders often accused African American administrators of being incompetent because they led schools where students performed at a lower academic rate. Burdened by the difficulty of educating minority students who some identified as systemically oppressed, left lots of responsibility to African American women principals and educational leaders who were helping to create shifts in the current oppressive practices within the education system. According to Mansfield and Jean-Marie

(2015), passion helped to ignite the flame for change, but persistence helped keep the school, the principals, and the students persevering when the likelihood of change grew increasingly difficult. Singleton and Linton (2006) referenced passion being premised on the "heart" of leadership: With passion, we engage our soul and our being in this work, along with our mind and our body…will have the strength not only to stand up for what is right but to do what it is right for them as well. (p. 12)

African American Women's Practice as Educational Leaders

Practice involves taking actions toward ensuring the education of every child to the best of their abilities. Passion leads to practice because the passion energized the African American women principals to make a change, while the practice ensured the change takes place. According to Santamaria and Jean-Marie (2014), one participant in the study exclaimed that she would fight for her students with the same passion as if she were fighting for her own children. This action often takes the form of African American female principals taking a role that extended beyond the boundary of the school by being more visible, active, and as trusted as any other community leader (Khalifa, 2012). These small continual actions led to changes in how African American female administrators exerted their influence over the students, the parents, and the community. According to Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015), equity audits were beneficial for using data-based techniques when identifying inequitable practices. The use of data collected by schools each year could reduce inequity. The data allows for leaders to draw on context-specific issues that help to identify patterns of marginalization. When dismantling the marginalization, one of the essential factors was to refrain from blaming children for their lack of success when the system's design was constructed to oppress them upon entering

the school system. In the study (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015), the African American female principal's practice was aligned with her core values. Her leadership practice included recognizing and embracing the diversity of her students' demographics and her instructional leadership promoted efforts that would build on the strength of their diversity. Due to the unequal amount of African American people involved in politics, educational leadership, and school systems curriculum creation, these imbalances still are proven to be true for many of today's schools. Finding small practices that could lead to more significant systemic change was a key to creating a more equitable society that allowed students from oppressed backgrounds to achieve success at the same rate as their white or male counterparts. "From passion, school leaders engage in specific practices to address issues of inequalities in schools" (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015, p. 824)

African American Women's Persistence as Educational Leaders

Persistence is essential for pushing African American female educators to devote their time and energy to helping school systems continually transform. Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) cautioned that without the principals' persistence, the schools would continue to shift from one transformation to another without providing any expectations for lasting change. Such shifting could be counterproductive because it limited the change by not continuing it, and it also showed that the change could happen, though it might not consistently occur. This could feel like a tease to the oppressed minorities. Peters (2012) suggested that to comprehend the experiences of many African American women in leadership, one must understand the multiplicative impact of race, class, age, and gender on their identity and their experiences with systemic oppression. Systemic change was challenging to create because of the historical practices that have occurred

for so long. The only way to ensure that change was systemic was to create long-term changes that allowed constant improvements for the African American community and females. Female principals were almost always encouraged to distance themselves from any intrinsic leadership qualities that made them perceived as feminine (Reed, 2012).

Since society is constantly changing, persistence may allow for improved methods of fighting oppression in the future. In Mansfield and Jean-Marie's study (2015), the African American female principal was focused on advancing her school community's level of understanding of educational inequalities by implementing initiatives that would raise awareness and address the issues. For example, women could not always prove racism and sexism, but with increased technology such as video cameras and cellphones, the oppressive behaviors were easier to identify now, then call out later. Horsford and Tillman (2012) suggested women continued to make gains as they aspired to attain top leadership positions in public schools. The future might help bring systemic change, even if the present is unable to do so. The only way to get to change is to keep fighting the implicit bias and oppression. According to Horsford and Tillman (2012), the increased number of African American females in K-12 education and higher education indicated a recognition of the knowledge and perspectives of these women. Though these improvements showed more diversity in the education system, there must also be diversity in the leadership roles. By being persistent in the plight toward inclusion in leadership, there is a higher likelihood of change happening much faster than if efforts were not consistent. "Persistence orchestrates the hard work of cultural transformation in schools" (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015, p. 825).

Summary

The review of literature documented the experiences of barriers faced by, and strategies used by African American women educational leaders. The disproportionality of the number of African American women serving as school principals in comparison to males or white females was documented. The cited literature goes back a decade or more, but the factors were both long-standing and yet also currently still exist. The review of the literature explored the intersectionality of race and gender and its impact on African American women's paths to becoming school principals. When African American women are selected for the position of principal, it is usually in communities of poverty and schools with low student achievement outcomes.

The literature (Bass, 2012; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015; Peters, 2012; Reed, 2012; and Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014) also expounded on ways African American female principals dealt with challenges during their leadership. Some turned to religion and spirituality; they worked to succeed despite social injustice and focused on passion, practice, and persistence. The literature review cited how African American women leaders advocated for change through passion, practice, and persistence. Grant (2012) argued that mentoring aspiring African American women who desire to become principals were what was needed; however, it may be a difficult task when there are not enough African American female principals to serve as mentors. What is needed now is research which applies these national trends to the lived experiences of African American women principals in Southwest Georgia.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

White men and White women collectively represent the majority of educators compared to African American women in the United States (Johnson, 2021). Johnson also references several scholars (Allan, 2003; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Sawyer et al., 2013) who agree that "existing paradigms cannot be unrooted without transparent conversations about the presence of gender and racial inequalities in educational leadership. Given the unique and intersectional experiences of women leaders at large and Black women, in particular, a multidimensional approach is required to create equitable pathways to leadership" (2021, p. 625). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The researcher used a qualitative research design and narrative inquiry approach to capture the perceptions, experiences, perceived barriers, and strategies of six African American female principals working at elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. More women are working as educational leaders across the country, but most of these women are not African American. As student populations have become more diverse, school leadership has not.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used for this study. The rationale for using narrative inquiry as the approach for the study, and the procedures used to document the stories of the participants are provide in this chapter.

Then the chapter explains the plan for analyzing the data. The procedure used to select participants for the study is described, how data are analyzed, and measures to ensure validity is described.

Research Questions

The study examined the various factors defined by the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The researcher researched the history of these women in the workforce, their careers, perceived barriers, and the impact of women in educational leadership. The researcher included racial and gender composition and the intersectionality of race and gender throughout the research. The following questions guided the research in this qualitative study:

- What are the personal and professional life experiences that impact the educational experiences of African American female principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?
- What perceived barriers did African American female principals encounter in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?
- What strategies did the African American female principals use in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

Rationale

Throughout time, there have been various sociopolitical movements centered around women's rights (e.g., women's suffrage); however, only a few have been more documented than the Black feminist perspective (Watson & Normore, 2017). The Black feminist movement rose out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and was characterized by the ways gender, class oppression, and racism were interconnected (Crenshaw, 1995). The Black feminist movement grew as more and more African American women experienced social, educational, and political marginalization through racism and sexism (Watson & Normore, 2017). In education, black feminist thought and qualitative research are guided by a certain understanding of learning strategies informed by African American women's historical experiences with race, class, and gender (Clemons, 2019). African American women identify with two intersecting oppressions by being African American and a woman. The construct of these intersecting oppressions is intersectionality (Collins, 2015). Patricia Collins is the architect of Black feminist thought which focuses on making the experiences of African American women relevant and indeed, at the center of analysis. Collins (2000) identified four parts of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology that helped Black women qualitative researchers "bridge the disconnect between their personal and professional lives" (Clemons, 2019, p. 1). The four dimensions are as follows (Collins, 2000):

- Lived experience as a criterion of meaning
- The use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims
- The ethic of caring
- The ethics of personal accountability

Black feminist theory could be a useful lens, exposing both implicit and explicit biases, stereotyping, and microaggressions that African American women experience as they go about their lives, including applying to be educational leaders. Black feminism fostered African American women's ability to obtain positions that were realistic and perceived lines of division (Watson & Normore, 2017). Most of the qualitative research that focuses on Black feminist thought highlights the work of African American qualitative researchers who brings light to communities of color and their lived experiences in critical and informative ways (Clemons, 2019). Dillard provides a broader understanding of a global Black feminist thought centered upon what she calls "research as responsibility," further describing it as "a catalyst for thinking about a vision/version of feminism that, for diasporic Black women, might open a way to (re)member our identities, lives, and work as Black women" (2016, p. 406).

"Since African American women are in an oppressed gender and race, this intersectionality comes together to explain further how African American females are being held back" (Reed, 2012, p. 43). These themes focused on the personal stories of African American women, which demonstrated the uniqueness displayed individually while also recognizing some of the experiences that could be shared (Fuller et al., 2019). Their experiences show there is knowledge attained because of living as an African American woman, which is why the African American woman can provide a unique insight into the role of educational leadership. Collins (2015) challenged the treatment of Black women as *objects* of knowledge by identifying them as *agents* of knowledge. In addition to the knowledge, because of being African American and female, the dialogue African American women in educational leadership could create with one another could

demonstrate the importance of building relationships (Reed, 2012). Women often have different viewpoints on situations than men do, and African American females in educational leadership use their relationships to bring forth change (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). Oppression is usually never an isolated event. The close-knit relationships formed under oppression could help shed more light on the injustices born by African American women in education. Those same relationships could also birth effective solutions (Tarbutton, 2019). Also, the ethic of caring shows how important empathy and understanding students are to better understand African American women in education experiences (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). The last theme of Black feminist thought is personal accountability. Mentorship is one way to have an accountability partner to help with taking responsibility for actions and decisions (Grant, 2012). African American women are less likely to be mentored by another African American woman because the number of African American women obtaining principal positions is not sufficient, even though they are more inclined to want an African American woman mentor. Combining the complexity of race and gender will help to assess why African American women can provide unique insight into African American women's experiences when they are in educational leadership positions. Collins (2000) described the importance of an Afrocentric methodological approach as follows:

> I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others

who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them (p. x)

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The researcher used a qualitative research design and narrative inquiry research approach to capture the perceptions, experiences, strategies used, and perceived barriers of six African American female principals working at elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. While the number of women working as school principals has increased, these positions are held mostly by white women, compared to African American women.

Qualitative research is "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Personal narratives, family stories, and life histories can reveal cultural and social patterns through the lens of individual experiences (Creswell, 2009). The purposed study used a narrative research approach. Narrative research is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher in a narrative chronology" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The narrative combines views from both the participant's and researcher's lives in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher captured the narratives and perceptions of six African American female elementary school principals leading schools in Southwest Georgia through interviews, observations, and

documentation. The two central questions of narrative research are what this narrative or story reveals about the person and world from which she came and how can this narrative be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it (Creswell, 2009).

Setting

I focused on an area in Southwest Georgia. Southwest Georgia is in Georgia's Southern Rivers Region. Southwest Georgia has antebellum homes, small towns, peanut fields, and plantations. Southwest Georgia includes the following fourteen counties: Baker, Calhoun, Colquitt, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Miller, Mitchell, Seminole, Terrell, Thomas, and Worth (Georgia Department of Economic Development, 2021). Southwest Georgia is primarily rural. According to the 2010 census, the population of Southwest Georgia was 496,433, and the most populated counties were Colquitt and Dougherty counties. According to the census population estimates in 2019, the population of Southwest Georgia was 342,902, with Colquitt and Dougherty counties being the most populous (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Southwest Georgia is home to Albany State University, major industries like Sanderson Farms, MillerCoors, Proctor & Gamble, Flowers Food, National Beef Packing Company, Georgia Pacific, TECT, Robert Bearden Trucking, Taurus, other industries, and farming. This region is also well known for its plantations and other small businesses (Georgia Department of Economic Development, 2021). Most of the residents living in Southwest Georgia counties are white. The counties with the majority white population are Baker, Colquitt, Decatur, Early, Grady, Lee, Miller, Mitchell, Seminole, Thomas, and Worth. The populations of Calhoun, Dougherty and Terrell counties are majority African

American. In 2019, approximately twenty-five percent of the people living in Southwest Georgia West and Central region (excluding Colquitt, Thomas, and Worth counties) and approximately twenty-one percent of people living in Colquitt, Thomas, and Worth counties were living in poverty, and forty-one percent of these residents were children under eighteen (Southwest Georgia Regional Commission, 2021).

The Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) for Southwest Georgia is Southwest Georgia RESA. Southwest Georgia RESA is located in Camilla, Georgia, which is the largest city in Mitchell County. Southwest Georgia RESA serves fifteen school districts (Baker, Calhoun, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Miller, Mitchell, Pelham City, Seminole, Terrell, Thomas, Thomasville City, and Worth). Colquitt County is in Southwest Georgia, but Southwest Georgia RESA does not serve the Colquitt County School District. If needed, participants could have been identified in the Colquitt County School District which is located in Southwest Georgia but is a part of Coastal Plains RESA.

I selected this area because I live and work in Southwest Georgia. Little research about the experiences of principals or educators in Southwest Georgia had been done. The majority of my educational experience has been in Southwest Georgia. I attended school from Pre-K through twelfth grade in Southwest Georgia. I attended college in Southwest Georgia. Therefore, I selected this area because it is familiar, and I value and want to understand the experiences of African American female principals who are working to educate students in Southwest Georgia.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher of this study, I engaged in one-on-one interviews with the participants. My participation were limited to the questions I ask during in-depth face-to-face interviews. I added to the interview questions based on the responses of the participants. Two of the three interviews were conducted through a virtual format because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I observed the participants in their work environment during the third interview. I also reviewed documents (i.e., school data, school demographics, etc.). I am an African American woman who has worked as an elementary school principal for 14 years. All my 14 years of experience have been in Southwest Georgia. While this experience can be beneficial to the study, it can also create researcher bias. I was mindful of my subjectivity and took measures to minimize researcher bias. Those measures are outlined in the validity section.

Furthermore, I am currently employed at an elementary school in Southwest Georgia. I knew three participants because I mentored one and participated in professional learning with two participants of the study. However, none of the participants worked in the school district where I work, nor did I communicate with them daily. The participants selected for the study were elementary school principals in other districts. I have experiences being that I am an African American woman who has worked as an elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia, but my experiences were not shared with the participants. Participants were able to decline to answer certain questions and choose not to share certain documents.

Proposed Sampling Technique

"Qualitative designs are naturalistic to the extent that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Naturalist inquiry guided the design of the proposed study. According to Patton (2002), naturalistic inquiry studies real-world situations, and the researcher should be non-manipulative, non-controlling, and open to whatever emerges. I conducted one on-site interview and observation at each participant's school and two virtual interviews. Furthermore, the personal experience and engagement strategy guided data analysis and reporting. Patton (2002) defined personal experience and engagement as the researcher being close to the situation or phenomenon under study, and the researcher's personal experiences are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon. As I begin to explore the experiences of the African American women elementary school principals, I came to understand their experiences. However, I conducted interviews so they could share their stories and experiences. I interviewed participants within the same RESA (Regional Educational Services Agency). The six participants worked as principals in four school districts. Two school districts had two participants per district and two school districts had one participant per district. I explored how being African American women impacted their leadership at the school and their experiences with students, parents, and their community.

The approach I took to collect the data was narrative analysis. The stories of the participants provided the data needed for the study. However, observations and documentation also provided needed data for the study. According to Merriam, three goals structure the narrative research approach. "First, narrative research is concerned

with using individual lives as the primary source of data. Second, it is concerned with using narratives of the 'self' as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy. Third, narrative research is concerned with deconstructing the 'self' as a humanist conception, allowing for non-unitary conceptions of self" (2002, p. 310). Those who are committed to feminist approaches to research tend to agree that these goals structure how narrative data should be collected and interpreted (Merriam, 2002).

Purposeful sampling is selecting information-rich cases strategically and purposefully depending on the purpose of the study and resources (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. My selection criteria included six African American female principals who work in elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. These schools were in the Southwest Georgia RESA (Regional Educational Services Agency) district. I contacted the superintendents of each school district in the Southwest Georgia RESA district and asked for their assistance in selecting participants for the study. The superintendents of schools in the districts knew who had certain years of experience and was able to identify the principals who served at elementary schools as well as their race and gender.

I contacted all participants via email and by phone asking; then sent them a letter (Appendix B) if they were willing to participate in the study. After the six participants were selected, I informed them their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time during the study. Before soliciting volunteers, I went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at the institution where I completed my doctoral degree as well as the sites where the research was conducted. This process

helped to ensure that ethical standards were being followed. Before the first interview, interviewees were provided an informed consent form (Appendix C) that provided an overview of the study and the procedures to be used. The consent form was emailed to the participants in advance for review and a printed copy was provided in person at the time of the first interview. Participants were also asked to give consent for the researcher to record the interviews. Participants were allowed to ask questions and were asked to sign a copy of the form before proceeding with the interview. The participants were informed that they can leave the study at any time.

Data Collection

There are three major sources of data for a qualitative research study-interviews, observations, and documents. According to Merriam (2002), the researcher must immerse herself in the data and consolidate the data focusing on those segments that may provide insight into the research questions. For this study, the following data was collected:

- Face-to-face or virtual interviews with study participants
- Observations of the participants in their work environment
- School and district documents (i.e., school demographics, school achievement reports, school handbooks, district personnel handbooks) along with other documents the participants volunteer to share

Interviews

Narrative analysis seeks to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of experiences by obtaining data through in-depth interview transcripts (Patton, 2002). One means of collecting data for this study is through in-depth interviews. Seidman explains, "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience

of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (2006, p. 9). There are three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open-ended interviews: informal conversational interviews, general interview guide approach, and standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002). Data were collected using the general interview guide approach. An interview guide lists questions or issues that were explored during the interview. It was prepared to ensure the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued when interviewing each participant. The interview guide provided topics or subject areas the researcher was free to explore, probe, or ask questions that brought additional clarity to the subject. The researcher, therefore, could build on the conversation and ask questions spontaneously (Patton, 2002). I used the general interview guide approach, allowing for the interview to seem more like a conversation but focused on a predetermined subject.

Seidman's (2006) three interview series approach was used for this study. The first interview (Appendix D) focused on the participants' personal and professional life history. The participants told as much as possible about themselves. The second interview (Appendix E) focused on the participants' past and present educational experiences and leadership. During the third interview (Appendix F), the participants reflected on the principalship which guided the meaning of their experiences as they relate to being an elementary school principal. Each interview lasted 90 minutes per participant.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one with just the researcher and the participant. The researcher interviewed the participants through a virtual platform and in their school setting if the participant agrees. At the end of each interview, the participant thanked the participants for their participation and reminded them they would have access to the case record created from the interview. Once created, the case record was shared

with the participant to ensure accuracy. The participants were able to request changes or additional clarification of the case record.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed through the use of a software program. I also took notes during the interview. To organize data, I wrote a brief memo of each interview relatively soon after completing the interview. This ensured the content and context of the interview while fresh on my mind and allowed me to make immediate direct interpretations. It also allowed me to capture my reflections on the interview and the study as a whole.

Observations

Observations gave the researcher a direct insight into the participants' daily interactions in their school environment as well as the reactions and interactions of the participants during the interviews. “To understand fully the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method” (Patton, 2002, p. 21). Observational data are a firsthand encounter of the study rather than a secondhand account obtained during an interview and observing is the best technique when a fresh perspective is needed (Merriam, 2002).

The researcher and participant decided on a day and time outside of the scheduled interviews that were appropriate for both to conduct the observation. I may have not been a complete observer since I also work in an elementary school as a principal. Therefore, I understood the what and the why associated with the observation because I understand the normalcy of a school day. I observed the participants in their school settings as a second means of collecting data. During the observation, I used an observational protocol to memo and code information while observing. Creswell (2009) described an

observational protocol used when recording information. The protocol consists of dividing a sheet of paper down the middle to separate descriptive notes (description of the participants, physical setting, events, or activities) from reflective notes (the researcher's thoughts). Included was demographic information about the school, time, date, and setting of the observation (school cafeteria, faculty meeting, conference, drop off or pick up duty, office setting).

Document Review

Documentation and reviewing documents were the third means of collecting data. Documents are very valuable. Documents can be a stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued through direct observations and interviewing (Patton, 2002). The strength of documents as a data source is that they already exist and are pertinent to the situation (Merriam, 2002). Documents related to the school and school principals, students, and staff were reviewed. These documents were available through the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), district, and school websites. Documents reviewed included school climate, student achievement, demographics, and school and district handbooks of the elementary schools in Southwest Georgia where African American females are principals. The gathering of the documents were used to supplement the interviews and observations and to develop questions for the next interview.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of participants and has the participants provide stories about their lives or experiences (Creswell, 2009). According to Patton, "narrative analysis extends the ideal of text to

include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction" (2002, p. 115). I allowed the participants to share their life and experiences through the lens of African American elementary school principals leading schools in rural Southwest Georgia.

Data Analysis Procedures

Three interviews were conducted individually with each of the participants. The interviews were three days to a week apart. Seidman explained the three 90-minute interview processes as being designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) allowing the interviewer and participant to explore the experience and make it contextual (Seidman, 2006). Tape recording the interviews captured the details of the participants' experiences. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions, analyze the data, connect threads, and patterns, and code the data (Creswell, 2009). Observations and documentation as additional means of data strengthened and added to the study. The researcher observed the participants in their school setting and obtained school documents that revealed the school climate, student achievement, and demographics

Reading the transcribed interviews, observation notes, and other documentation will be the first step in analyzing the data (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell named the following three main analytical options: memos, coding and thematic analysis, and connecting strategies. The researcher guided the data analysis using the following steps: organize and prepare the data for analysis, read through all the data; begin the detailed analysis with a coding process, use a coding process to generate a description of the participants and themes or categories for analysis, decide the presentation of descriptions and themes in the narrative, and finally, make an interpretation or make meaning of the

data (Creswell, 2009).

According to Butina (2015), narrative analysts have to use one of four of the following procedures to analyze data: narrative thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, or visual narrative analysis. I used the narrative thematic analysis process to analyze data. The five stages of narrative thematic analysis are:

- Organization and preparation of the data
- Obtaining a general sense of the information
- Coding
- Categories or themes
- Interpretation of the data

I started analyzing the data during the first interview. I observed and listened to identify emerging themes at this time. This analysis impacted the questions used during the second interview.

Issues of Trustworthiness/Validity

In qualitative research, the researcher's understanding of reality depends on how the researcher interprets the participants' interpretation or understanding of the narrative (Merriam, 2002). I am also an African American female elementary school principal in the Southwest Georgia RESA district. Therefore, "It is impossible to deal with these issues by eliminating the researcher's theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Therefore, I shared similar experiences, beliefs, and views as the participants in the study because I am an African American female with perceptions and beliefs based on experiences while working as an elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia. As the researcher who identifies with the participants, I allowed each

participant to share her story and perceptions. The researcher was cognizant of how personal values, experiences, and expectations influenced the conclusion of the study.

Throughout the study, the researcher established integrity by providing each participant with a copy of the interview's case record. Each participant was able to read and make changes as needed to the case record. I also read and reviewed the case records, observation notes, and documentation to ensure that there were no obvious mistakes. Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods or data (Patton, 2002). Triangulation reduces the risk of chance and systemic biases due to a certain method and allows for a better assessment of the researcher's results (Maxwell, 2013). Using these three means of data, interviews, observations, and documentation allowed for justification of themes and accuracy of the findings. Maxwell (2013) also explained the term "reflexivity" (p. 125), which is the fact that the researcher is a part of the world studied. The researcher avoided leading questions to not influence what the participant was saying during the interviews. This awareness aided in assuring the study was valid.

I was a part of the research because I am an African American female elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia. However, I tried to reduce researcher bias by selecting participants outside of the school district where I work. I have also attempted not to select participants with whom I have a personal relationship. The stories were those of the participants and not the researcher.

Ethical Issues

The study does not present any risk to the participants. I protected the identity of the participants and the schools and school districts where they work. I reassured the participants that I did not use their names in the study. During the interviews, the

participants were given a pseudonym. I was not sure what would be revealed during the interviews. If trauma or issues related to mental health were revealed, I had a list of counselors and other mental health service providers available to share with them. The narratives shared may have been extremely personal, or revealed experiences that probably reflect negatively on others, the school, school district, or community. I did not want any participant to be viewed negatively by any stakeholder.

Throughout the study, the participants received a printed informed consent form before the first interview and were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. Participants were able to withdraw from the study or stop the interview process at any time. Information collected during the interview through audio recording and written notes was converted to electronic files and stored on my home computer which was accessed only through my fingerprint. Hopefully, these steps alleviated any reservations the participants may have had and allowed for open and honest dialogue.

Before conducting the study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the institution where I pursued my doctoral degree as well as received approval from the superintendents of the schools where I conducted my study. As part of the informed consent process, participants were provided the IRB-approved study number. The IRB (Appendix G) process ensured that the research methodology and the general interview guide approach had been fully vetted. There were minimal risks associated with this study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The researcher used a

qualitative research design and narrative inquiry approach to capture the perceptions, experiences, strategies, and perceived barriers of six African American female principals working at elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. The participants of the study were six African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The participants were employed in schools in Southwest Georgia. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to tell the stories of the six participants. The results of the study are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter IV

PARTICIPANTS

Sharing stories is one way people bring meaning to their experiences. Throughout history, people sharing their stories allowed them to generate rich, in-depth accounts of their experiences and reflect on, make sense of, and give meaning to the experiences (Seidman, 2006). Patton described interviewing as "invigorating and stimulating-the opportunity for a short period of time to enter another person's world" (2002, p. 416). For this study, the researcher used a narrative analysis approach to enter the world of African American female elementary school principals employed in schools located throughout Southwest Georgia. A narrative analysis approach allows participants to share "first-person accounts of experiences that are in story format having a beginning, middle, and end"; therefore, the purpose of the narrative is to make sense of the experience (Merriam, 2002, p. 286). Seidman (2006) noted that at the heart of interviewing is the interest in the participants' stories and the recognition that their stories are worthy. This study is explicit to the experiences of a select group of African American female elementary school principals employed in rural Southwest Georgia. Therefore, the researcher was interested in the participants' stories, deeming their stories worthy and relatable, especially since the researcher is an African American female elementary principal in the target location. The participants for this study met the following criteria:

1. Participants must be African American female principals.
2. Participants must be currently working at an elementary school.

3. Participants must work in schools located in the Southwest Georgia RESA (Regional Educational Services Agency) region.
4. Participants must have three years of on-the-job school administrative experience.

The similarities in professional background and the willingness to participate in a series of personal in-depth interviews were the primary considerations for this study's participants.

After the participants were selected, they were invited to share their experiences through in-depth interviews, observation, and review of documents. All six participants were given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms given to the participants are names of African American female educators (teachers, administrators, and mentors) who positively influenced the researcher's educational and career choices. Due to the continued health risk of the pandemic, the first two interviews were conducted virtually through Google Meets to ensure the safety and well-being of all. For each participant, the third interview and observation occurred at the participant's respective school. During the interviews, the participants openly shared in-depth details of their lives that may have guided their pathway to becoming school principals. Capturing the experiences was accomplished as the participants described and recounted stories of their community and family, educational experiences from elementary to post-secondary, school leadership experiences, and principalship realities. The shared narratives included similar and different stories, which provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the experiences encountered and endured by African American female elementary principals employed in Southwest Georgia schools.

Debra

Debra is a very energetic and enthusiastic African American female principal. Initial communication between Debra and the researcher was via email correspondence used to inform Debra about the study and to invite her to be a participant. A telephone conversation between Debra and the researcher followed. During the initial virtual interview for the research study, Debra and the researcher met for the first time via the *Google Meet* video platform. The initial virtual interview was one of two virtual interviews, with the third and final interview occurring at Debra's place of employment. The researcher and Debra communicated as if they had known each other long before the first interview. All three interviews took place during the school day. Debra arranged for the two virtual interviews to occur during her scheduled lunch hour, though an hour lunch is something she rarely takes. For the final interview, Debra blocked out approximately three hours to complete the face-to-face interview and to allow the researcher to observe her school environment. During each interview, Debra asked the researcher to give her a minute to answer a telephone or walkie-talkie call. Before starting the interviews, the researcher shared information about herself and the study. With introductions completed, Debra took the researcher on her journey from childhood to her present time as a principal, making it known that she has worked at the elementary and high school levels and has been in education for 31 years. Debra also noted that she has taught second grade for eleven years and has worked as a grade-level chairperson, assistant principal, and principal. Debra's shared story answered the "WHY" for her decision to follow the pathway to the principalship.

Debra is from a tiny town in Southwest Georgia. She described where she grew

up as “the boondocks” and the “backwoods” of Georgia. She recalled living so far back in the woods that she “got on the bus around six o’clock in the morning and got off at four o’clock in the afternoon.” She and her siblings were the first to get on the bus and the last to get off. Debra reminisced about growing up with her six siblings, five brothers and one sister. Although she is the family’s middle child, she has always sensed that all her siblings looked up to her. She described her family as being nuclear, with both her mother and father in the home. Debra noted that all her siblings have the same mother. She further stated that her older siblings have a different father from the younger siblings. She was the eldest child of her father’s children and the middle child of all her mother’s children. Debra mentioned that while she did have “middle child syndrome,” she was identified by many as a leader among her siblings.

Debra was raised in a two-parent household. Her mother had three children from a previous marriage and four children with Debra’s father. Debra’s older siblings lived with the family for a short time until reaching adulthood. She stated her stepfather “treated them like they were his own” even though their biological father was still alive at the time. Growing up in a small rural town in Southwest Georgia was an excellent experience for Debra. Her father worked on a farm, and her mother worked in the farmer’s home. Debra said that her mother helped raise the farmer’s children and took care of the farmer’s house. In addition to working outside of the home, Debra described her mother as a “homemaker” because she also cared for her own family’s household. Debra shared that her parents were very influential in her life choices. They wanted better for her and her siblings. They would tell them, “We want you all to do better than we did.” Her parents had to drop out of school, but Debra depicted them as parents who ensured their

children had everything they needed to succeed. Debra identified her mother as the parent who had the most significant impact on her life, even though her father was the "breadwinner" of the household. Part of the family's income was used to purchase books. Debra's mother ordered books through the mail and spent many hours reading the books to her and her siblings, thus, inspiring each child to love reading. Debra recalled that one of her older brothers was instrumental in impacting her life choices by constantly stressing to the younger siblings, "the way you make it out of here, you've got to go to school." This brother was in the Army. Every time he came home, he would remind them of what they needed to do to advance in life. Getting an education was a priority emphasized and reinforced by Debra's parents and older brother.

Debra did not go to kindergarten. Instead, she started school in the first grade. She described her first-grade teacher as an African American woman who embodied what being a teacher should look like. She shared memories of growing up in her small rural community and having several African American educators residing in and near her community. One of her principals was an African American male, and his wife was a local teacher. She recalled her first-grade teacher having sisters who were also teachers. As a six-year-old student, she was most impressed by her first-grade teacher. When she met her first-grade teacher, Debra knew she wanted to be a teacher. She described her teacher as having a "beautiful spirit and the most beautiful penmanship." As a first-grader, Debra felt the teacher "cared about [them]."

From elementary school to high school, Debra described herself as a "bookworm" who was not involved in many clubs or school activities. She mentioned winning a couple of awards but quickly noted, "…there were other students in the classroom who,

unlike me, were considered most likely to succeed." While attending a high school Parent and Teacher Organization (P.T.O.) meeting, a teacher approached Debra's mother and stated, "This young lady is going places." That statement was confirmation for Debra. Debra added, "… because of my family's background, I don't think they [high school personnel] thought I would be who I am today". To this day, Debra believes this particular high school teacher saw more in her than any of her teachers.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of reading and becoming educated, Debra spoke of how her mother was the parent who made sure the children attended and participated in church functions. Through church attendance, Debra's pastor became another influential person in her life. She described him as a young pastor who supported the youth in the church, school, and community events. Debra also described her pastor and members of the congregation as encouragers. She emphasized that striving for excellence inside and outside of the church were standard expectations. Debra referenced her relationship with God and made the importance of God in her life known. She smiled as she reminisced about how she admired "the mothers of the church" when she was growing up because of how they dressed and carried themselves as ladies in the church. Debra added that practicing and performing Easter and Christmas speeches as a young girl helped her read with expression. The members of the church always recognized her accomplishments. The recognitions contributed to Debra's zeal to strive for excellence just as she had been taught. As Debra continued to reflect on how the Word of God and her church family helped her grow spiritually, she did not hesitate to share that her spiritual upbringing also helped to mold her into the person she is today - from believing in herself and her potential to dressing the part, to instilling hope and confidence in

others, and on to being empathetic to the needs of students and coworkers. She humbly talked about her accomplishments throughout her 31 years in education. As an evangelist and woman of God, Debra expressed her desire to do what is right no matter what.

Debra's mother, brother, first-grade teacher, high school teacher, and pastor shared that she could do amazing things and made it known to her that she was destined for success. In the months leading up to her high school graduation, a young female college recruiter for a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) met with Debra and shared the good news that college was within reach. The recruiter informed Debra of what she needed to know and do to enroll in college. Debra stated, "I knew what I needed to do to graduate high school, but I needed more information about college enrollment." The HBCU recruiter was the first person to share college information with Debra. Debra attended that HBCU and was able to live with her older brother and his wife while enrolled in college. To help defray costs, she worked in a fast-food restaurant. Debra recalled her mother going to the farmer or the wife of the farmer to borrow money to help pay for the remainder of her college tuition that was not covered by federal grants.

As Debra reflected on her first few months as a college student, she shared that there was a time when she thought college was not for her because she had to take developmental studies reading the first quarter of enrollment. She stated, "I cried, and I cried…I thought college wasn't for me at that moment". She recalled starting college to major in nursing because she was told that nursing was where the money was. After an incident with one of the college professors, it did not take long for Debra to mentally return to her childhood dream of becoming a teacher. She remembered that first encounter with her first-grade teacher. She remembered that moment when she knew she

would be a teacher. The memories, reflections, and childhood dreams prompted Debra to change her major from nursing to early childhood education. She remembered the African American teachers carpooling together from a larger city to her small rural community to teach. After graduating from college, she also started her career in a small rural community in Southwest Georgia before beginning work in a larger school district. Debra shared that she was the only one of her siblings to earn a bachelor's, master's, educational specialist, and doctoral degree. She noted that several of her siblings had military careers, and some earned associate degrees. Despite the range of accomplishments, Debra lovingly shared the importance of dreams, aspirations, family, and family support.

Several individuals in Debra's "village" saw her potential and spoke excellence into her very being. Debra echoed the expectations of her parents and older brother. She reflected on a high school teacher's statement to her mother at a Parent and Teacher Organization (P.T.O.) meeting. She remembered how her church family would acknowledge her successes. In "fast-forwarding," Debra spoke of the recognition she received because of her leadership abilities as a second-grade teacher. According to Debra, the school principal frequently commented on her leadership abilities and qualities, often saying, "Wow, you have this; you can lead this school." Her school principal encouraged her to go back to earn a master's degree in educational leadership. She served as an assistant principal for two years before becoming a principal.

Currently, Debra is the principal of an elementary school that enrolls students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Her school is a beautiful two-story brick building located in a residential neighborhood. The housing projects are located across the street

from her school and stretch around the school's perimeter. The grounds of the campus and projects are very clean and well-manicured. It is apparent that the community takes pride in the school being in the neighborhood. Debra's school focuses highly on academics. Parents must apply for their child or children to be considered for enrollment. Students applying for acceptance to the school must take an entrance exam. Currently, there are approximately 446 students enrolled. From a demographic stance, ninety-six percent of the students are African American, two percent are White, and the remaining two percent are Hispanic and multi-racial. As indicated by the data, White students are the minority group at Debra's school. Debra further noted that she leads approximately 70 teachers and staff and maintains an open-door policy.

This year is Debra's first year as principal at the school where she is currently employed. In the past four years, the school has had four principals, and she is the fourth principal. Currently, her school does not have a functioning leadership school improvement team. Even so, Debra and her assistant principal are very visible in the school. Debra communicated that she is working to build a solid working relationship with teachers and staff. She listens to, respects and values their ideas, suggestions, and recommendations. Debra emphasized that she also encourages her teachers and other staff to be involved in decision-making based on their areas of expertise. Debra shared her beliefs that this form of empowerment helps establish school-wide buy-in on important matters and helps all staff know that their input is valued. Debra added, "Everyone in the school is very important. It takes all of us working together to lead the school in establishing a positive school culture and climate for student success." Under Debra's leadership, the school will continue working to meet the needs of the at-risk

student population. Since the school accepts students based on academics, the at-risk population identified were English Language Learners (ELL) and students who are not on grade level.

Debra described her relationship with the parents of her students as a good one. She explained that parents had not been allowed to be present in the school building since the COVID-19 pandemic. Debra uses every chance she gets to meet and greet her parents. Since she has over 200 students transported to and from school by a parent or guardian, she positions herself to greet each one every morning and every afternoon. Debra spoke of how "greet time" also allows her to briefly address a parent's question or concern which sometimes requires a follow-up telephone call. Debra stated, "The important thing is to build trust and form a good relationship with the parents." Doing so has required Debra to be innovative in the way she leads her school. She mentioned how "greet time" evolved and expanded into the time set aside for drive-by parent activities. This was a new and improved way for Debra to involve parents and students. Debra decided to embrace this time of "newness." She mentioned that the school would become greater by doing things differently due to the pandemic.

More than once, Debra commented on how much she loves her job. As an elementary school principal, she views her position "as an opportunity to touch the lives of many people." One of her roles is to work with teachers aspiring to be leaders. As the school principal, Debra knows that she sets the tone for creating a positive school culture and climate. Debra referenced the effectiveness of a good principal in one sentence. "The heart of the principal must be correct." The most rewarding thing about being a principal is that she gets a chance to do what she loves, working with people. More specifically,

she loves having an opportunity to work with young people who, like her in her youth, do not realize their potential. Debra expressed her desire to continue being part of her students' "village" to promote their well-being academically and non-academically. Debra added that one of her desires is to leave a legacy of inspiration and perseverance. She described getting home after a day at school and reflecting on the question, "How have I served the people today?" Debra made it known that she works in the school as if she is doing work for the Lord. She believes in being "fair," "consistent," and "consistently fair."

On a Friday morning, I visited Debra's school. The school hallways shined, the walls displayed students' work, and the theme for the school year aligned with *The Wizard of Oz* theme. The office manager was delightful and polite, which added to the feel of a welcoming and inviting school atmosphere. He made sure the principal was available to see me. Sitting in the lobby area gave the researcher some time to watch some of the students as they went about their daily routine quietly and respectfully. I observed a student sitting patiently as he waited to be seen by the school nurse. I watched and spoke to students as they passed me. They exchanged my greeting with a "hello." Some students spoke before I did. The level of respect was pleasant to witness, not to mention how orderly and well-behaved the students were. I continued to watch different students as they walked freely in and out of the media center. There was a school atmosphere of high expectations, trust, safety, and excellence.

Debra walked out of her office to greet and meet me in person for the first time at the start of our third interview and observation. She was professionally dressed and just as pleasant as her office manager and students. Her personality was warm and energetic

in person as it was virtually. Debra's office area was very neat and organized. She had pictures of her children and husband strategically placed in her office. Her large bookshelf was neatly filled with books and binders. A medium-size conference table was part of her office décor. Debra invited me to sit across from where she sat at her desk. We both followed school protocol and kept our masks on throughout the interview and observations. I was appreciative of Debra's willingness to allow me to meet at her school during a time when visitors were not allowed in the building due to the pandemic.

Performance-based objectives (PBO) and students' work were displayed in the hallways. Debra paused to explain the importance of teachers following the units of study and understanding the PBOs. The PBOs are aligned to the Georgia Standards of Excellence. As we continued walking down the hall, Debra further explained her school's academic and behavior expectations. She shared her teachers are expected to introduce a PBO to students. Specifically, Debra stated, "The children know what they're supposed to do once a PBO has been introduced." Debra was very clear in noting that she expects her teachers to teach all students, be on time, and do their job. From the researcher's classroom observations, the students' level of active engagement was noted. The researcher also commented on how encouraging and well prepared the teachers were. The researcher's observations determined that the principal has an excellent rapport with her students, teachers, and staff by how they greeted each other.

Throughout the interview, it became apparent that Debra has a passion for helping others. She expressed her gratitude to the principal who encouraged her and helping others has been her way of "paying it forward." Debra stated she's "humble enough to give of myself and to share resources to help others be successful." She spoke of how

she, too, “stood on someone else’s shoulder” on her journey to becoming a principal. Debra expressed that she wants to ensure her assistant principal and other staff know what to do in her absence. Like Debra, the assistant principal is an African American female. As she spoke of this individual, Debra remained mindful of her assistant principal’s leadership potential, noting that she has made it her business to help design the assistant principal’s role as a stepping-stone to an effective principal leadership position. Debra commented that she listens to her assistant principal and pushes her to do more. She gives her tasks to complete so that she can gain expertise in all aspects of the position. Debra’s spiritual and professional advice to an African American female who is waiting and desiring to become a principal is to “wait, I say, on the Lord.” She stated, “delayed does not mean denied.” Debra added that the African American female aspiring to become a principal should not get bitter or upset but should find every opportunity to learn and grow in their move towards the pathway to the principalship. Debra summed up her advice to African American females waiting on a principal’s position by stating, “What is done while waiting is important.”

Debra’s advice aligned with her leadership style, which she described as “democratic.” She is not a dictator. She does not say to her staff or others that “she’s the boss.” She stated, “…if you are the boss, you don’t even have to say it.” Debra made this statement to describe her leadership style further: “I walk it like I talk it.” She listens to and respects the people whom she leads. She indicated that as a principal, she is “just loving on God’s people.” As an educator, and especially as a school principal, Debra referenced the tremendous amount of support she continues to receive from her husband and two children. The interview ended with Debra sharing, once again, her love for her

job and the opportunities she continues to receive to help others realize their potential.

Rosemary

Rosemary is a 31-year-old sophisticated African American elementary school principal. Before the initial interview, she and the researcher communicated mainly through emails. When I met Rosemary through Google Meets for the initial communication and part of the first interview, she appeared very formal and composed. After a short period, Rosemary's composure became more relaxed. Before long, the conversation was flowing. Rosemary participated in all three interviews while she was at work. The first interview was during the school day. She was interrupted three times by phone calls and a knock at her door. She apologized for the interruption, but it was genuinely understandable. The second interview took place at the end of the school day. During this interview, her son entered her office, and she lovingly said to him, "Momma's doing an interview right now," and gave him a big hug. Rosemary explained that her son entered her office to hug her because he had just gotten off the bus upon his arrival at the school. The last interview took place in Rosemary's office on an early Friday morning.

Rosemary's school is located on the outskirts of town. A local thoroughfare provides for a quicker arrival to the school. Though not located in an area where housing predominates, a few homes are near the school. Rosemary leads a kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary school with a population of approximately 720 students. The demographics of her faculty almost mirror the demographics of her student body. Her school's student body is approximately 85 percent African American and 15 percent White, and her faculty is approximately 90 percent African American and 10 percent

White. The school's physical structure is unique. The well-manicured lawn is an eye-catcher when pulling up to the school. The school grounds were clean, and the front entrance leading into the building was pristine. Visitors arriving at the school are allowed to enter after ringing a bell and speaking through a speaker to inform the office staff of the reason for the visit. Signs were posted at the entrance area to let visitors know that masks were required. When entering the area close to the principal's office, the office staff was very professional and maintained a friendly demeanor. The office staff greeted everyone entering with a "good morning, how may I help you?"

When Rosemary walked out of her office, she was laughing and engaging in conversation with her secretary. She was dressed very professionally in a dress and a pair of high heels on a Friday. It was obvious that she may not dress down at work. Rosemary's greeting was warm and welcoming. Her office was very organized, clean, and nicely decorated. Rosemary explained that the students were engaged in "Power Hour," noting that the time frame is usually longer than an hour as students receive intervention and enrichment services. She further explained that when the students return from winter break, they stay in their homerooms all day on Fridays to work on tiered instruction. During Power Hour, the hallways were quiet, with very little movement in the hallways. Rosemary noted that the teachers serve students from all educational levels, including gifted students, regular education students, students with disabilities, and students needing remedial education. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rosemary categorized all her students as "at-risk" because of a lack of sufficient learning opportunities once the pandemic hit. She stated, "A lot of people might call it learning loss. I don't. You can't lose something you were never exposed to". She continued to say,

"We just don't know what they [students] are facing." Fortunately, parents and the school community have been very supportive. Rosemary further explained that due to the pandemic, she must keep safety protocols in mind and issue-specific mandates, such as wearing a mask, in her efforts to keep her staff and students safe. She shared that contact tracing is another safety protocol at her school and one that she watches closely.

Rosemary grew up in a very small town in middle Georgia with a population of approximately 200. Her hometown was one with little to no racial diversity making it difficult for her to identify social justice initiatives in her primarily African American community. She mentioned not recalling any experiences of racism. Rosemary described the town where she grew up as "maybe about 95 percent African-American" and "drug-infested." She also stated, "You didn't hear of many people graduating." Rosemary shared that very few people from her community graduated from high school or attended college. Despite growing up in this community, Rosemary credited where she grew up as having a significant impact on her success. She looked at and used her community's low educational attainment levels as an opportunity to show that demography does not have to determine ones' destination. With this affirmation in mind, Rosemary was determined to rise above the barriers she witnessed in her community. According to Rosemary,

> "I would say that my community actually helped shape me in a manner that most people wouldn't think it would have. It actually encouraged me in a sense, wanting better, wanting to do so much better to the point where I could actually give back to my community. To be able to encourage other young ladies, like myself, that may see what I saw growing up."

Rosemary's mother and father conceived her when they were unwed teenagers.

Therefore, Rosemary grew up with her paternal grandparents until she was seven. After the passing of her paternal grandparents, her mom got her. At this time, Rosemary moved with her mother and maternal grandmother. She described her relationship with her father as "a great relationship now more so than…previously", and she credited her mom by saying, "my mom did a great job raising me." Rosemary's mom always had high expectations of her. She described her mom as being a very hard worker and a go-getter.

Even though the people mentioned above are those who raised Rosemary as a child, when speaking of her family, she first spoke of her husband and two sons. She married her high school friend and sweetheart when she was twenty years old, and he was a little older than she. Her husband and her aunt, by marriage, were the most influential people in her life. She credited them as being "the main people [who] influenced me" and "the main people [who] encouraged me." During a difficult time in her life that stemmed from a situation between Rosemary her and her mom, Rosemary recalled her husband, who at that time was her friend, and her aunt reminding her, "you got to do better; you can't allow the situation to get you down. You're too smart for that. You have too much to offer." Also in her corner was a school counselor who encouraged her to do her best, take the SAT, and go to college. This school counselor was a white female. Rosemary failed the social studies part of the high school graduation test. Her high school counselor did not allow her to pity herself. The school counselor listened to her, encouraged her, and walked her through the process of what she needed to do to push through and pass the re-test. Her aunt, her husband (who was then her friend), and her high school counselor were her influential motivators, encouragers, and supporters throughout her high school years.

After speaking highly of her three-person primary support team, Rosemary shifted

the conversation as she began to share more about her mother's expectations. She shared that education was essential to her family, but having a teenage mother made it difficult to communicate how important education was until Rosemary got older. Rosemary shared that her mother prefaced such conversations by alluding to her personal feelings and noting that she did not have the opportunity to "further her life because she got pregnant." Rosemary's mother wanted more for her, but she was not supportive when it was time for Rosemary to graduate from high school and attend college.

For Rosemary, "church was everything and the center of everything." Rosemary spoke of how she had to attend church every Sunday. She was very active in the church as a child, and she remains active as an adult. "It [church] has a lot to do with who I am. Treat people the way you want to be treated". Rosemary described the church as being integral in shaping her integrity. In her role as a school principal, she has no problem talking about God. She recalled having respect for everyone in the church. She also recalled that as a child, some of the most influential church members were those who had hearts big enough to love all children regardless of background and those who had no problem meeting children where they were before inspiring them to become more than anyone thought they could be.

At the time of her high school graduation and departure for college, Rosemary noted that once again, it was her high school sweetheart, her aunt, and her high school counselor who provided her with the support she needed. After graduating high school, Rosemary attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) to become a lawyer. When she left for college, her relationship with her mother remained a bit rocky. As such, Rosemary explained that she did not have the support of her mother and other

family members. She spoke of her talent for doing hair and shared that doing hair in her dorm room was how she made money during her college years. After spending a year at the first HBCU, Rosemary transferred to another HBCU at the advice of her good friend, who is now her husband. It was not until she took an elective course in the college of education that Rosemary "fell in love" with early childhood education. Rosemary found her niche and love for teaching while attending the second HBCU, where she also graduated. She radiated when she spoke about two ladies who were her college professors.

> "They were perfect. You could relate to them, so I think my love for them is what made me have a greater love for education. When I initially came…they made me want to be interested in what they did. They made a person want to take their courses; you know? So, I think their passion kind of instilled in me a passion and need…they were just so hands-on during that time. There were group assignments then, and I wasn't used to working with people. I wasn't used to having relationships. I wasn't used to that."

Rosemary expressed that those two professors showed an interest in what she had to offer to the education program. She felt that they believed in her, and their belief ignited her desire to earn a degree in early childhood education and a passion for teaching.

Rosemary recalled having predominantly African American teachers during her K-12 school years. As she reflected on the start of her career to the present, she shared that her experience as a long-term sub helped her to become a great teacher. After graduating from college, she returned to her small hometown town to teach elementary school. She taught at the school she attended as an elementary student, and she taught

alongside some of her former teachers. Rosemary remained a teacher at this school for four and one-half years, after which time she was offered a position as an instructional coach in another school district. She mentioned that her experience as a teacher helped her become a great instructional coach. The school principal where Rosemary served as an instructional coach was instrumental in Rosemary's success. The principal was "very straightforward in sharing her expectations." Rosemary pointed out that once the expectations were shared, she "made things happen." Again, Rosemary credited her success in education to two additional women who took her under their wings when she started teaching and the African American elementary principal who hired her as an instructional coach. Rosemary described her opportunities as being "blessed to be surrounded by people "… like those who encouraged and mentored her. She described the women who attributed to her success as having "a go and get it attitude." Rosemary followed the career path these women had traveled as educators. One of the women was so impactful and influential that Rosemary participated in the process to become a member of the same sorority as one of the women, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated.

After working as an instructional coach for one year, that same school district recognized Rosemary's leadership abilities and hired her as an assistant principal. However, the promotion was not in her immediate plans. Rosemary expressed that she was happy in her role as an instructional coach. She further stated that the superintendent of schools approached her and told her, 'I need your help.' He said to her that he needed her to work as an assistant principal at one of the schools in the district. This school was not the school where she worked as an instructional coach. Rosemary recalled the

superintendent being very specific about why he wanted her to work as an assistant principal at a particular school and what he needed her to do. He told her she was going into a difficult situation; it would be difficult, but she was the person for the job. Rosemary admitted, “It was exactly what he said.” She did not doubt that the superintendent would support her in this transition.

Taking the assistant principal position was a challenging career change for Rosemary. She felt as if she was in a situation where the principal was not supportive. She described him as being laidback. Rosemary shared that she had to do most of the administrative duties without guidance or support from the principal. She chose not to talk negatively about her principal. She stated, “I loved on him in the process. He’s my work husband”. Rosemary believes that the superintendent chose her to be the school’s assistant principal because the superintendent knew she would not speak negatively of that school principal. She would use her knowledge and expertise to help the principal and the school because of her loyalty and commitment to student success. After working at that elementary school for three years, a newly appointed superintendent transferred her to another school. At this school, Rosemary was assigned to the position of the school principal. She has been an elementary school principal for four years. Combined, Rosemary currently has twelve years of work experience in the education field. To this date, she does not hesitate to give her high school counselor credit for starting her on the path leading to college.

When asked about her leadership style, Rosemary first shared a childhood memory. She spoke of how she remembered her mother telling her to set high expectations. She remembered her mother telling her things she [Rosemary] needed to do

once those expectations were set. From her mother's advice, Rosemary knew that although her mother was not the most supportive parent, she wanted Rosemary to thrive. Rosemary emphasized, "My mom is so proud of me." She spoke of how her mom would reference what Rosemary was doing in her life and career with what she [the mother] wanted to do with her own life. She would tell Rosemary, 'I was going to do this, and I was going to do that.' In some ways, Rosemary felt that her mom was living through her and finding delight in sharing Rosemary's accomplishments and successes. With this bit of information, Rosemary then described her leadership style. "I'm not a micromanager," Rosemary emphatically stated. She continued to say that she sets high expectations for herself, her teachers, her students, and all other staff to maintain success for all.

Rosemary paused to reflect on her first few weeks as the school principal regarding encounters with students. She sensed that her students were a little intimidated by her at first. She quickly added that the intimidation was intentional because she felt the need to present a confident demeanor that was poised and somewhat reserved. Rosemary stated, "I purposefully did that because I am so young." She shared her need to set the tone as the school principal. In her fourth year at the school, it was evident that Rosemary's students loved and respected her. The amount of love that Rosemary has for her students and staff was also noticeable. She spoke of how she "treats them [her students] like they're her own children."

Rosemary referenced praying and calling on Jesus when handling difficult work-related situations. She stated that having an open-door policy is something that her students, staff, and teachers appreciate. In addition, Rosemary makes it a point to acknowledge her students and staff for their positive actions. By the time difficult

conversations are needed, she hopes that there is an established relationship and level of trust. Rosemary admitted that there had been times when she had to close her office door and deal with things alone because she would never want her frustrations to be displayed or taken out on others. According to Rosemary, the most rewarding things about being an elementary school principal include being able to instill hope, create opportunities, touch and improve lives, impact others, and engage in close and meaningful relationships with the staff. She continued to say, "Being able to impact and influence those who work under my leadership is very rewarding." Rosemary mentioned that she reflects on the one thing people will most likely hold on to when they think of her: "treating people the way [they would] want to be treated." For Rosemary, this kind of treatment begins with caring and being sensitive to the needs of others. One of Rosemary's desires is that her influence will resonate in the minds and lives of her mentees for a lifetime,

As principal, Rosemary made it known that her career provides countless opportunities to give back and 'pay it forward' to other African American women who desire to become school principals. She encourages paraprofessionals and teachers to go back to school. She also speaks at pinning ceremonies held for students earning a degree in education. Rosemary encourages college students to come to her school to complete their field experiences and student teaching. She desires to create employment opportunities that lead to teaching positions. Rosemary's advice to African American women who are striving and working hard to become a principal is six-fold: "check yourself," "find out what you need to do differently to make people see you differently," "put yourself out there," "be presentable and approachable," "realign your goals," and "be specific in letting people know [they are] missing out on an opportunity" by not

hiring them. She ended her advice with, “you can’t always compare your path to someone else’s path in the sense that a change of environment is sometimes necessary.”

Delores

Delores is a friendly, supportive, and gracious African American elementary school principal. Our paths had crossed before my communications with her about being a participant in this research. However, I did not know anything about her pathway to becoming a principal. Delores scheduled the first two virtual interviews after the school day ended to avoid any interruptions. She met with me at 7 o’clock for both interviews, and she alluded to respecting her family’s time and my time. The third interview and observation were conducted at her school.

Delores was born in a metropolitan area in Georgia. Her dad was in the military. Her parents divorced during Delores’s early years. After her parents’ divorce, Delores stayed with her paternal grandmother, where she remained through her primary years. Her paternal grandmother was a special education teacher. At the age of eleven or twelve, Delores moved with her mother and sister to Florida, where they lived for approximately two years. After those two years, Delores and her sister relocated to rural southwest Georgia with their mother. She stated, “The socio-economic demographics of the people I grew up around in southwest Georgia were primarily from the lower to the middle class.” Delores’ immediate family was described as an ‘extended’ family. Her immediate family included her father, mother, stepfather, 94-year-old grandfather, an older sister, an older brother, and a younger brother. She described herself as being “the middle child of both sets [of children] on both sides of the family.” Delores added, “Growing up, the manner in which my great grandmother carried herself taught me what respect, compassion, and

overcoming look like." Delores described her great-grandmother as "a knowledgeable and creative strong Black woman." Her conversation about her great-grandmother sparked another childhood memory. Delores remembered "watching her [mother] struggle a little bit and seeing her bounce back time after time." She spoke of how her mother kept her head above water as she made things work out for her family. According to Delores, her mother received strength from the writings and the music of strong Black women. Delores said that her mother focused on the positive aspects of the lives of those women.

Delores' family had extremely high values and expectations for her despite the moves and transitions that occurred during her childhood and her becoming a teenage mother. She emphasized how her grandmother "didn't play about school attendance when it came to school." Delores was expected to go to school, and her family stressed the importance of getting an education. When at school or out in the community, Delores shared that the expectation was to "not tarnish the family name." Delores recalled reading a note that her third or fourth-grade teacher had written on her report card. The note stated, 'having difficulties." She remembered having problems with math and science during her elementary school years. Delores attributed some of that difficulty to her parents' divorce and the family's frequent moves. By the time Delores reached middle school, she remembered trying to fit in with others and not applying herself academically. Yet, according to Delores, her family continued to instill in her that education was a way out.

Delores described herself as one who observes what's happening around her and others. She stated being "culturally aware with a keen sense of existing injustices." She

described growing up in a metropolitan area in Florida as being more progressive. During this time of her childhood, she recalled wanting to be a lawyer. She said, "I was always, always culturally aware of existing injustices and … and knowledgeable [about] such issues." While living in this area of Florida, Delores was selected to participate in a class focused on teaching cultural awareness. Unfortunately, due to her family's move to Southwest Georgia, she did not get the opportunity to participate in the class. Delores viewed moving from metropolitan Florida to Southwest Georgia as a "culture shock." Her mother had a degree, but she could not find a job in Southwest Georgia when they moved. Delores explained that her mother was living with a man to whom she was not married during this time. Being unemployed, Delores's mom could not get an apartment. A community agency offered her mom a housing project for the family. Her mother refused that offer because that was not the norm for her. Delores described her mother as a mother who always believed in hard work, getting an education, and making things work. Delores paused to mention that these same beliefs were passed down to her from her mother. Just as Delores believed she "did not know how to handle seeing injustices," she knew she had to find a way to do so regardless of her career. So, "[she] thinks it…held her back a little bit because [she] was the one to say that [isn't] right."

While in high school, Delores got pregnant and became a teenage mother. Still, she understood the importance of graduating high school. Following high school graduation, Delores started working in a factory. She believed it would be impossible to go to college because she was a young mother. In fact, she could not envision herself being a college graduate. Looking back, Delores recalled that except for her home economics teacher, she did not feel as though she received support and encouragement

from the large majority of her high school teachers. In between recalling memories of her elementary, middle, and high school years, Delores would reflect on the amount of love and support she receives from her husband and children. She lovingly talked about being married to her husband for twenty-five years and having three sons, one of whom is her husband's son from a previous marriage. She mentioned that her husband is a Missionary Baptist Church pastor. Delores noted that when her sons were young, she was the parent who always went to the school to check on them whenever she had a free moment during her factory work hours. On one of her visits, she witnessed a young girl sitting in the office. After engaging in a conversation with the little girl, Delores found out the girl was in trouble for using foul language. Delores chose to encourage the girl by telling her about appropriate behavior and the need to be her best self. Delores recalled telling the young girl, "You are such a beautiful little girl. Why would you do that?" The little girl started crying, and so did Delores. This was the moment when Delores realized that she wanted to go to college and become a teacher. She believed that she would become better equipped to manage problem behaviors in a non-punitive manner if she had a formal education. So, she started taking college classes. She would go to college during the day and work at night while her husband took care of the children. Delores recalled taking four years to earn a two-year degree and two additional years to earn a bachelor's degree. Delores stated, "I just kept going. I went to school fifteen straight years to earn a doctorate." Delores has worked in education for over twenty years and has held several positions, including substitute, paraprofessional, Head Start Pre-K teacher, teacher, assistant principal, and principal. She taught for eight years at the elementary level. Delores is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated. She works to give back

to her community and serve others through her work in the church and sorority.

In her reflections, Delores spoke again of her high school home economics teacher and the impact that this teacher had on her. She credited this teacher for seeing more in her than just being a teenage mother. She expressed that this teacher challenged her and "saw the potential in [her]." As stated by Delores, "My home economics teacher saw me as an individual. She pushed me to what I believed was my limit, but she kept pushing and encouraging me to not settle for less." For Delores, the teacher's actions were a testimony that somebody else believed in her. As Delores continued to reflect on her high school experience, she compared her home economics teacher to the few other African American teachers at her high school. She shared that she could not recall her other teachers "pouring" into her, but she recalled witnessing these same teachers doing positive things in the school and community. Delores stated, "I did not see a lot of teachers that looked like me."

Delores recalled attending a local predominantly White institution her first year of college. It was not until Delores enrolled in a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) that she met more "people that looked like [her]." Delores noted that several African American students and professors of education became her new role models and challenged her to remain steadfast and on course regardless of any difficulties she might encounter. Working in educational leadership was not an initial goal Delores sought to achieve. She explained that she began to see negative qualities in some teachers and school leaders that she did not want to see. She believed that negative attributes, including poor classroom management, would "…impede student, teacher and school success". Delores wanted to impact students and teachers by becoming the best positive

educational leader she could become. Finding a mentor, especially an African American female mentor, was difficult in the district where she worked. However, a White female leader in Delores' school district recognized Delores's leadership potential and became her mentor. Delores spoke highly of her mentor, noting how gracious her mentor was in sharing educational articles and encouraging Delores to attend educational conferences. Delores "realized there was more to education than just this area [of the state]." A White male school leader employed in Delores' school district recognized her leadership qualities and quickly took her under his wing. During their mentor/mentee relationship, he shared with Delores what she needed to do and showed her ways that he accomplished specific tasks. He also gave her the first opportunity to display her leadership abilities by hiring her as an assistant principal.

Overall, Delores credited her religion and love for God for her accomplishments. She stated, "I couldn't have made it without my religious beliefs." Delores was reared going to church and participating in church activities and events. She recalled the caring ladies in her childhood church. Those ladies were the ones who hugged you and made sure that everyone had something to eat. She continued to reflect on how "they made sure you were modestly dressed…and they taught you, by example, how to be a lady." These ladies in the church were Delores' "role models." Delores spoke of the fashionable way the ladies in the church dressed and compared their style of dress to the less than modest way young ladies now dress when attending church. Delores recalled how the ladies in her childhood church reassured her that she would be "alright" when they found out she was pregnant. They helped to make sure that she had everything she needed. The love they shared is something that Delores will never forget. "Rather than look down on me,

they chose to not be judgmental; they practiced what they taught."

Delores school is located in the city limits and sits directly across the street from housing projects. The visitor's parking was directly in front of the school. When I arrived on a Friday morning, school staff were busy assisting students out of their parents' cars just minutes before the bell rang. Delores was one of the staff members standing outside greeting the students and wishing their parents a good day as they dropped their children off.

When entering the school corridor, the shine of a well-polished hallway was a welcomed sight. Pictures of former principals hung on the front entrance walls for all visitors to see. The students wore their masks as they quietly entered the building. They used a computer to sign in. For the latecomers, tardy passes were being issued by the secretary. Students were greeted with a "good morning" and responded with the same greeting. It appeared that the students were eager to start their Friday morning. Three ladies were in the front office; one politely asked, "May I help you?" I introduced myself and informed her that I was there to see the principal, Dr. Delores. Up to this point, the school's atmosphere was very welcoming and pleasant, as determined by the immaculate school grounds, cleanliness of the building, warm greetings to parents, students, guests, and the orderly and respectful behavior of the students.

Delores came out to greet me and walk me to her office. As we passed the pictures aligning the hallway and entrance area, she explained the rich African American history of the school. Delores is the principal of a third grade through fifth grade elementary school. Her school has an enrollment of approximately 875 students and 110 staff... The student population is approximately 60 percent African American, 30 percent White, and

10 percent Hispanic. Every third, fourth, and fifth grader in the school district attends her school if they are a public-school student. This is her first year as principal at this school. Teachers, staff, and students were merged from her former school, where she also served as principal, with teachers, staff, and students at her current school. With the transition, Delores indicated that she "[has] to [establish]… a greater school culture." She has incorporated team building and established expectations for staff and students. Delores described herself as "a coach," not "the boss." She described her relationship with teachers as follows:

> "I always say I'm a leader among leaders because I [believe] that teachers in the classrooms are the ones [who] are the boots on the ground making the decisions. You have to let teachers help you lead because even though you can tell them what to do, they are [going] to close the door and implement what you said in a way that makes sense to them. So why not get their input on certain things?"

Delores did not hesitate to share how much she loves her students. She understands their needs and strives to ensure that their needs are met. Due to the pandemic, she said that most, if not all, students are behind. She would identify them all as at-risk because they have not had the same opportunities to learn because of COVID-19. Delores expressed that she diligently tries to greet students and parents at parent drop-off and pick up. She enjoys this brief interaction with the parents and believes that this time provides the parents the opportunity to get to know her. Parent engagement activities have been impacted due to the pandemic since the school has not hosted any on-site meetings and events.

Having served mainly as a middle school principal, Delores described being a

principal at an elementary school as “different.” While talking with Delores during the third interview and observation, she displayed a passion for ensuring the safety, health, and well-being of her students, teachers, and staff. As the principal, Delores wanted to ensure her students were engaged in their learning. However, she remained concerned with the mental and emotional well-being of her teachers, staff, and students. She stated, “You are principal; that’s the title, but the role is supportive in every aspect.” The most rewarding moments for her have been watching the students grow and rise to high expectations. She enjoys witnessing the students engage in diverse peer groups, grow as a group, and realize that they are destined for success beyond elementary school. Delores finds that growing and inspiring leaders are also very rewarding. She shared that she works to grow leadership capacity in members of her leadership team, instructional coach, assistant principals, and teacher leaders. “I don’t get upset when members of my leadership team get another job or do something different because I feel like that’s an extension of me. [Meaning] I’ve taught them, helped them, or mentored them,” Delores stated. Delores shared that she does not believe in making rash decisions. She prefers to stop, listen, and gather information before responding or reacting when dealing with difficult situations. She relies on prayer to guide her decisions, especially during times when an immediate reaction is required. “Every day, be a person of integrity and know your core values because somebody is always watching,” Delores expressed.

Clara

Clara is a sincere, helpful, and endearing African American elementary school principal. Once a conversation was started with Clara, it flowed as if we had known each other for some time, although the initial conversation was the first time our paths had

crossed. Clara was willing and eager to participate in the research. The superintendent in her school district agreed, without hesitation, for Clara to participate. Two of the three interviews were conducted through Google Meets. Clara was sitting in her office for the first interview. For the second interview, she was in her car because she was getting ready to visit her husband in a physical therapy rehabilitation hospital. The third interview and observation were conducted at her school.

Clara was born in a small town in Southwest Georgia. She lived in this small town with her mother, father, and six siblings. Clara's childhood community was primarily African American, and "everybody was neighborly." Clara described her neighborhood as a place where all of the children played together, and everybody knew who the parents of the children were. "There was a church on almost every corner," she said. Both of her parents were college graduates. Her mother graduated from one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Clara's mother was a teacher who taught for over thirty years. Even though her father graduated college, he worked as a brick mason. Clara admitted that her parents encouraged her and her siblings to attend a Historically Black College and University after graduating. However, she felt her parents' main concern was for them to graduate from any college. Like their mother, four of her siblings were HBCU graduates. Clara paused to speak lovingly of her husband and share that one of her children currently attends a Historically Black College and University, and her other child is still in secondary school.

Clara did not witness children being reared in single-parent households when she was a child. Her maternal and paternal grandparents were married, and her mother and father were raised in a two-parent home. Clara expressed the love, respect, admiration,

and overall relationship she had with her grandparents, whom she described as "hard workers." Clara credits her mother and father as big influencers throughout her childhood and adulthood, but "mom was that big influencer." During her childhood, "… when they told you to do something, you just did it; they knew you had respect for them and what they said." She recalled that each child had chores to do while growing up, including "washing the dishes, folding the clothes, and assisting with keeping the house clean." Clara said they rarely got punished or a spanking because they followed through with what was expected. She described the age of the last four siblings as "stair-steps" because there was a year's difference in their ages. She believes in having a close relationship with her family to this day.

Clara spoke of several additional African American females she admired when she was a young girl and young adult. She spoke of her admiration for some of her former African American teachers but was quick to point out that her mother was the one she admired the most. Specifically, Clara expressed great pride in noting that her mother was a member of several community organizations and clubs. Clara had the pleasure of observing her mother's involvement in the organizations. Although she admired her mother for being actively engaged in those organizations, when Clara became an adult, she did not follow in her mother's social and civic footsteps as she did when choosing her career path. She shared having many African American female teachers during her elementary and secondary educational experiences, including an aunt. Many of these women lived in her neighborhood, and she would also see them at church. She identified a fifth-grade teacher and a second-grade teacher from her community who impacted some of her life choices. In describing the fifth-grade teacher, she stated, "There was something

about her teaching style and the way she made it obvious that she cared about her students." Clara further stated, "There was something about the way she ran her classroom"; she said this about the second-grade teacher, "I remember we had centers in the room, and she just made learning fun."

Another group of African America women she admired was women in the church. She described those women as being "great mentors even when [she] didn't know they were mentoring [her]." Clara called the women of the church by name when she talked about their influence on her life. As she continued to reflect on the impact her church had on her, Clara made it known that her participation in church and her belief in God was important to her. She said, "I wouldn't be where I am today without my parents and the church." Clara added, "My parents made sure I participated in church. I served as an usher, sang in the choir, and participated in Sunday school." Clara remains grateful for the acts of love and kindness displayed by the ladies in the church. Some of the words Clara used to describe them were "caring," "genuine," "classy," "non-judgmental," and "willing to serve." More than once, she would say, "Those women in the church cared about everybody."

Clara's educational experiences at the elementary and secondary school levels were great and very rewarding. Her teachers were wonderful, and even though her mother was a teacher, Clara did not feel any extra stress, nor did she feel as if her teachers were expecting anything more or different from her because her mother was a teacher. Clara's parents stressed to her and her siblings the importance of getting an education. She remembered her parents telling them about the importance of learning as much as possible to overcome obstacles. Clara remembered teaching and nursing were

the main career choices that educated minority men and women made back in the sixties. Her mother wanted to ensure that Clara and her siblings took advantage of opportunities she and her father did not have as children. The conversation shifted slightly as Clara began to talk about her college experience, which she also loved. She attended and graduated from the same college as her mother. She expressed that she always knew she wanted to be a teacher. She stated, “I always wanted to kind of follow in my mom’s footsteps.” While in college, Clara pledged and was inducted into the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. After graduating with her bachelor's degree from one HBCU, she enrolled in another HBCU and earned her master's and educational specialist degrees. According to Clara, when she enrolled in college, she was financially supported by both parents. She noted that some of her relatives would send her letters and cards to encourage her and let her know they were proud of her.

Clara has thirty-one years of experience working as an educator. All these years have been in the small rural community where she was born, reared, and attended school. Clara has worked in the same building for most of those thirty-one years. She has taught grades kindergarten, first, second, and third. Following many years of working as a kindergarten teacher, she was promoted to an assistant principal’s position at the same school. The former principal at that school was a mentor to Clara. The former principal assisted and motivated Clara. She has watched the former principal’s career journey from a school leadership position to a district office leadership position, and she has witnessed this individual serve in many capacities. Clara indicated that she learned a lot from what this individual taught her and even more from “just observing” her leadership effectiveness.

Clara is the principal at a primary school that enrolls students in grades pre-kindergarten through first grade. Her school is located by a highway on the outskirts of the rural town. The student enrollment is approximately 286. The majority of the student population is African American. White and Hispanic students attend Clara's school. She has nineteen teachers on her staff, and most of her staff are African American. The drive to Clara's school was peaceful, with a relatively low volume of traffic. Also, finding the school was easy. Designated parking is available for visitors at the front of the school. A portion of the front of the building was marked off with construction cones and construction tape. The front office secretary is the one who allows visitors to enter the building after visitors ring the buzzer and identifies themselves using an outside speaker.

Upon entering the school, a sign indicated the school was under construction. It did not take long to realize that the school has a "construction" theme, and construction cones and tape were used as symbols to indicate "learning under construction." The two ladies at the front desk were amiable and welcoming. One of the ladies was the assistant principal, and the other was the school secretary. The office of the school's bookkeeper was located outside of the principal's office. Clara's office area was welcoming, but it was not as decorated as other offices. There was instructional material in unopened boxes in her office that had just arrived at the school. The attire of the staff was more like work casual. Clara acknowledged the uniqueness of her school, saying, "A lot of them [the staff] are home people." Being born and reared in the small rural community where she has worked with, for, and around a lot of the same people for thirty-one years, Clara stated, "… everybody knows everybody or everybody knows somebody that you know." She further acknowledged that there was little to no teacher or staff turnover at her

school.

Clara expressed that her thirty-one years in education have come with good and bad experiences, but overall, she has loved working with children. She spoke of a time when she worked with a district-level administrator who was a "micromanager," as she described. Clara remembered feeling as if she had to be very careful and detailed whenever she met with this administrator. She explained having to "prepare…so that when or if [she] was challenged, she would have something to support her decision…why she made different decisions…, or why she was doing [certain] things." Clara went on to say that she just had to make sure "[she] was on top of things because unfortunately, you [an African American female] don't get away with as much." She continued to explain how she, an African American female, was made to feel like she was viewed as "an angry Black woman" whenever she disagreed with a colleague. As a result, Clara does not believe in micromanaging her staff. She described her staff as being professionals. She also stated that there is positive staff morale at her school. She shared, "I believe in professional freedom…free to do whatever you want to do in your classroom as long as it's ethical, does not permit one to deviate from the content of the curriculum to dismiss established content goals, and as long as students are learning." She continued by stating, "… teachers are expected to teach the curriculum and use the resources." As part of her leadership style, Clara noted that she is one who "goes directly to an individual" she might have a concern about. Because of her transparency, she believes her staff is committed to doing whatever it takes to meet the needs of the students.

"You always learn…" was a key point Clara made about being a principal. "I don't care how long you are in; until you retire, it's always going to be something you

can learn to do to improve yourself and to improve student outcomes." She views how well she is as a principal based on the success of her students. She said that she learned that fairness does not look the same for everybody. Clara admits, "The job can be stressful if you allow it; you have to balance it." She acknowledged that the current school year had been the most difficult for her due to her husband being hospitalized, changes in upper-level leadership, and the pandemic. Nonetheless, Clara finds joy in coming to work each school day and notes that the children are the most rewarding for her as principal. "Just watching the children blossom…really see light bulbs come on", she elaborated. She shared that she only has them [students] for up three years if they attend pre-kindergarten at her school. Clara also mentioned how rewarding it is to work in a school where community support is excellent. She said the strong family support that she and her staff receive. "I could not ask for better parent and community support," she shared.

Clara said she "prays" when faced with difficult situations on the job as principal. She stated, "Everybody has a story." She listens because she wants to make every person's situation a priority. Clara also recognized that she has to put her personal feelings to the side and "check [herself] to make sure [she] does not take it personally when someone is having a bad day and reacting negatively." Clara stated that she has become "a little more tolerant" of something because of the pandemic. She has had to adjust to meet the needs of some of her teachers and staff who were impacted by the pandemic. She recognized that some of her teachers and staff had fears, and she worked to accommodate them. "I do whatever I can do to help somebody," Clara stated. She believes that her teachers and staff "have to take care of [themselves] and [their]

families" for them to be able to perform at their best level for the students.

She expressed positioning herself to pay it forward for other African American women who aspire to become school principals. Her message of encouragement to those individuals is not to give up, to have faith, and learn how to listen. Clara added, "be vigilant…read and soak up as much knowledge as you can and stay abreast of new things…stay abreast of the latest and greatest trends in education". Most importantly, "don't give up." Clara told herself, "I'm going to teach forever," and she was happy as a teacher. Once she acknowledged the leadership abilities that someone else saw in her, she said she "did things a little differently to be marketable." She had a cheerleader. Hence, she wants to be an "encourager" and a "cheerleader" for someone else trying to become a principal.

Dennie

Dennie is a diligent, dedicated, and loyal African American elementary school principal. Dennie and I met over 15 years ago and worked together at the same school for two years. Through her participation in this study, I learned new things about Dennie. Two of the three interviews were conducted after school hours through Google Meets. The third interview and observation were conducted on-site during the mid-morning hours of the school day.

Dennie was born in a city in Southwest Georgia. During her childhood, she lived in an African American middle-class neighborhood. Many of the neighbors were college graduates, and some were teachers. Dennie shared that she grew up in a close-knit family household with her father, mother, and siblings. She mentioned that her grandparents lived in the same neighborhood, one block from her parents. She spoke of her paternal

and maternal uncles and aunts' close contact with the family and their frequent travels and visits to see the family. Dennie's parents were teachers who worked part-time jobs and full-time jobs. Both had graduated from a Historical Black College and University. Dennie shared, "Growing up; it was understood that you were going to do something after graduating from high school. You might not go to college, but you were going to do something." Her oldest brother went into the military, Dennie enrolled in college, and her youngest brother had difficulty deciding what he wanted to do. For Dennie, her life choices from childhood to adulthood were primarily influenced by her parents and what they stood for. She described her mother as being a "really strict disciplinarian." Even so, Dennie recalls that while growing up, her mother was "as gentle and loving as we [siblings] wanted her to be and as firm as she [mother] felt the need to be." Dennie stated, "We had to follow the rules and do our best to live up to our mother's expectations." Having a plan to put into action after graduating from high school was one of her mother's primary expectations.

Additional reflections focused on her mother's weekly routine when preparing for the week. From preparing for the school day to the end of the school day, Dennie's mother "had a specific plan when [they] got home from school." She recalled the rides home from school with her mother and siblings. They did not have to do homework immediately after they got home from school. "Right after school, [they] relaxed some; but…it was understood that while [mother] was cooking dinner, you were doing homework. Clothes were laid out every Sunday [for the school week]". Dennie said her mother was not the type of lady then nor today that would "just hop up and do everything for her children. She made sure that we knew how to help take care of ourselves". Her

mother still expresses the need to have a plan, even in the most straightforward situations and settings. Dennie chuckled as she shared that as strict as her mother was, her insistence on having a plan did not phase her baby brother too much. She stated, “My baby brother had no plan for after graduation.” My mother could not get him to understand that if he did not want to go to college, he would have “to go to the military or technical college and take care of [himself].”

Dennie’s description of her father was a lot less lengthy. She shared that, unlike her mother, her father was the calm parent. He was “less vocal and mostly really quiet.” She further shared how her father was when she was growing up in the same way he is today. Dennie’s father was a teacher and coach at one of the schools in the community. He attended and graduated from an HBCU. She mentioned that her father was highly respected and had a way of reaching his students and athletes. “They [athletes and students] just warmed up to him and trusted him to help guide them.”

In addition to her parents, Dennie’s church family also had a great deal of influence on her and was another strong pillar in the community. She recalled two of her daycare teachers who were members of the church she and her family attended. Growing up, she did not just see these ladies at church; she also saw them out in the community. She stated, “They had a lot of influence on my decisions.” Dennie explained that the women had the exact expectations for her as her mother did. She felt that eyes were on her all of the time, and she did not want to disappoint. Dennie delved deeper and added that the way the women watched over her was not because they did not trust her; “They just wanted the best for me in all areas of my life.” The church promoted the importance of graduating and going to college. Her church took the youth on college tours to HBCUs

and shared information about practically all aspects of college. Dennie recalled the time after a college tour when her youngest brother finally decided to go to college. She shared that her brother's nurturing from one of the church's groups for young men had as much of an impact on her as it did on her brother. Dennie's brother chose to attend the same HBCU their father graduated from. Overall, Dennie expressed her appreciation for the actions of the caring adults in her church and for the prayers and guidance she and her brothers received as children and young adults. Dennie said the ladies in the church made you feel as if you could do anything. She said this about Ms. C., "She kind of just pulled you into stuff and pulled you out of your comfort zone; she kind of made you…of course, you weren't going to tell her no". When it came to church programs, the ladies in the church worked and assisted the youth in learning and saying speeches from memory. Because of the persistence and expectations of her mother and the church women, Dennie learned the art of public speaking with confidence.

When Dennie spoke of her educational experiences, she noted having a good experience while in elementary and secondary school. She started having "great teachers from elementary through her graduate studies." She also said that she "experienced being surrounded by a lot of people who pushed the importance of education." While in grade school, Dennie participated in a tutoring program sponsored by the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. During tutoring sessions, Dennie indicated that she watched her mother and the sorority sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha work so well with the children who participated in the program. Still, Dennie shared that she did not recall being influenced enough to change her decision about not wanting to become a teacher. Dennie shared that even though she witnessed many successful African American females who were teachers

in her hometown and community, she had no aspirations of becoming a teacher. “I was adamant about not going to college to become an educator,” she stated. Dennie also remembered and spoke of conversations the school bus driver would have with students. The bus driver, Mr. H., would tell them, “Make plans to go off to school and get a college degree. You owe it to yourself to…get your education”. She said he talked about it all of the time.

When Dennie graduated high school, she followed her plan of action and enrolled in college with her parents’ financial support. Once again, she described having a good college experience. Dennie noted that her preference was to attend an out-of-state Historical Black College and University. Still, she chose to follow in her mother’s footsteps and attend the same postsecondary institution her mother attended. Dennie mentioned her membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated and her very active involvement in community affairs through the school and sorority. She believes that it is her civic duty to help with voter registration and help educate citizens on voting rights. She shared her role as a former parent involvement coordinator, noting that she assisted parents through education as they advocated for their children. Dennie also shared that her passion evolves around “educating, empowering and helping people to better help themselves.” Dennie whole-heartedly believes that sororities and fraternities are pillars in her community and that the members' work is instrumental in making positive changes in the community and instilling hope in youth. She specifically noted that in her community, the work of her sorority and another sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, Incorporated, helps young girls become their best selves and strong, independent young ladies. She graduated with a degree in computer information systems. After graduating

from college, Dennie worked in a hospital setting, and she “hated it.” Dennie’s mother recognized her knack for working with children. Her mother watched her work with children during tutoring, vacation Bible study, and other activities at the church. At her mother’s advice, Dennie left her job at the hospital and went back to college to get certified to become a teacher.

As mentioned, Dennie did not start out being an educator. She said, “I was wrestling with my own decision. In the end, I decided to go do what people [had] been asking me to do from the start.” The experience of having great teachers and seeing teachers who loved children had the most significant impact on Dennie’s decision to change her career and return to school in pursuit of a degree in education. Dennie’s postsecondary degrees include a bachelor's degree in computer information systems, a master's degree, an educational specialist degree, and a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership.

Dennie has thirty years of experience in education. She taught fifth grade in her first year of teaching. Most of her educational experience has been at the middle school level, where she has worked as a middle school teacher and middle school parent involvement coordinator. Dennie has been an administrator at the elementary school level for eight years. She was an elementary school assistant principal for three years, and she is currently in her fifth year as an elementary school principal. Dennie commented that the elementary school level has a special place in her heart. She said, “I love the elementary school setting, and I especially love the zeal my students have for learning.” The transition from being in middle school to elementary school was not difficult for Dennie, but she relied on her mentors’ advice and leadership. Whenever she needed help,

guidance, or reassurance, she called on her mentors. As she continued to speak, Dennie named three African American female principals who mentored her; two were retired principals, and the third was the researcher. To show her gratitude for the guidance she received from her mentors and others, Dennie uses every opportunity that comes her way to "pay it forward" by being a mentor to her former assistant principal and teacher leaders in her school.

Dennie is the principal of an elementary school outside of the community she grew up in and gained work experience as a teacher. Her school is located in a small town in Southwest Georgia. Dennie decided to pursue becoming a school principal because she felt that African American children needed to see a school leader who looked like them. Using the words of a principal she admires, she mentioned that students at this school "cannot be what they cannot see." [They] "need to see people who look like them, sound like them, and can relate wholeheartedly to them." Dennie spoke of her aspirations to make a difference in the lives of her students by helping them recognize and reach their fullest potential and by setting high expectations and modeling success. Dennie described herself as a servant leader. She said, "If anything needs to be done at the school…, I'm not above getting it done, cleaning up, or whatever". She believes in giving a lot of herself to her students, staff, and whoever needs her. The student population at Dennie's school is approximately 50 percent White, 25 percent African American, and 25 percent Hispanic.

When driving to Dennie's school, I turned off a Georgia highway onto a street that took me directly in front of the school. The school is located in a residential neighborhood with houses situated on the side and back of the school. The school is a

two-story building with a very lovely circular entrance. The visitor's parking is directly in front of the school. As I approached the front entrance doors, the school secretary was visible. I spotted a buzzer for visitors to use to inform the secretary of their reason for the visit. However, the door was not locked when I arrived at the school. The secretary beckoned for me to enter as she spoke, using the speaker to welcome me. When entering, two ladies in the main lobby area were talking encouragingly to a little boy. He looked as if he was a pre-kindergarten student. After letting the secretary know that I was there to meet with Principal Dennie, I sat and listened while I waited. The little boy was not feeling well and was waiting for his mother to pick him up. He had on his mask, and so did I. The school had signs posted instructing all to wear masks. The two ladies reassured the young student that he would be fine. Before they turned to leave, one of the ladies asked the student if he would be fine sitting by himself. He softly answered yes. He and I started talking, allowing him to lead the conversation. The student shared that he was not feeling well, but his mother was coming to get him. He told me that he was five years old. He continued to chat and ask me questions centered on my reason for being at the school. The secretary called his name, and they started engaging in conversation. The school atmosphere was trusting, friendly, accommodating, and personable. Students and staff appeared to be happy. When Dennie walked out to greet me, the little boy grabbed his book bag as his mother entered the building. Dennie knew precisely who the little boy was. She spoke to him and his mother calling both of them by name.

Before Dennie became the school's principal, she was the assistant principal. She left to work as principal at a different elementary school and returned to the school to serve as principal. I complimented Dennie on the pleasant environment of the school and

the warm reception I received. Dennie smiled and agreed that her school was welcoming. She made it known that there is work to be done to improve teacher and staff morale. She identified the COVID pandemic as one factor that has impacted staff morale. Dennie shared that she ensures her teachers and staff have her full support and that everything is not "a gotcha situation." Dennie elaborated on what she meant by the phrase, noting that she does not lead any of her staff on or brush off a request they might have. If she says she is going to do something, she delivers. Dennie acknowledged that many of her students had some learning deficits due to the pandemic. However, the Hispanic students at her school are the students she identified as being at-risk the most because some are ELL (English Language Learners). She shared parents had been an active part of her school, but parent activities had to be conducted through a virtual platform or a drive-by event due to the pandemic. With this change, there was a reduction in the number of parents participating in parent engagement meetings and activities.

As an elementary school principal, Dennie "feels like it is [her] responsibility to ensure that students are getting what they need academically, socially, and personally too." She continued by saying, "kids need to know that they're loved and that there are people who believe in them." She believes these last two things are her responsibility as well. Dennie continued by adding that her teachers and staff do what they can to help maintain a "loving and caring school atmosphere." For Dennie, this is a "big deal." She recalled a recent time when she expressed and showed appreciation for her teachers and staff. She stated that having "empathy when they had been dealing with situations in their homes due to COVID." Dennie elaborated on the importance of being empathetic when her teachers and staff have situations they are dealing with in their lives. She organized a

"fellowshipping" opportunity to give them time to sit around, relax, and laugh with each other.

Dennie commented that as principal, she works to build relationships with teachers, staff, and parents. She works harder to build such relationships with her students. Dennie attends most student events during the school day and after school. Part of her reason for moving to the community where she works was to see more of her students and parents, including seeing them in local stores and restaurants. She felt it was important for the students to see her in the community. Once again, she smiled as she shared having unexpected parent conferences inside a store or out in a parking lot.

When faced with difficult situations, Dennie emphasized that she believes in direct communication. When a disagreement occurs between two staff members, she meets with them simultaneously in her office to help restore the relationship by respectfully communicating and arriving at a resolution. She also believes in listening to parents and giving them time to vent. She stated that she works with parents to be respectful of all involved, even when parents are upset. Dennie further said, "They just want to be heard…communication is probably number one when you're trying to work through difficult situations". Dennie shared that, at times, she uses her husband as a sounding board and not her mother because she knows her mother will worry about her. At this point, she shared not having any birth children, noting that she and her husband have a blended family of three children and grandchildren.

Dennie passionately spoke of her conviction to "reach back and pull up" other African American women who desire to be school principals. She also believes that "today" is not too early to guide young African American girls toward the field of

education with the hope that they will be inspired, early on, to be school leaders. She wants them to feel comfortable coming to her for guidance and mentoring. She stated, "Somebody helped me, so I want to help others." Regarding leaving a legacy, Dennie is hopeful that the leadership and mentoring she provides will be appreciated many years later. She is optimistic that her students will "learn to try their best every day" and that the lives of her teachers and staff, in years to come, "will be better because [she] crossed their path."

Carolyn

Carolyn is a dutiful and zealous African American elementary school principal. She and I met while working together in the same school district. We did not work closely with one another, but we would see each other in meetings. Two of the three interviews were conducted through Google Meets. Carolyn preferred to do the first two interviews in the evening after leaving school. The third interview and observation were conducted on-site during the mid-morning hours of a school day.

Carolyn was born and reared in a small town in Southwest Georgia, where she currently resides. She described where she lived as a child as "in the city limits in a trailer park." Until her fourth-grade year in school and before her parents' divorce, she lived with her mother, father, and older sister. As a child, Carolyn was old beyond her years. Her mother would say she "was born an adult." She shared that before her mother and father divorced, she would ask her mom, "What are we doing?" She described her father as an "alcoholic and womanizer." Carolyn would question her mother's choices while married to her father. She would tell her mother, "You're unhappy." Carolyn's mother said those words were "an epiphany for her." She made it known to her mother that the

way they were living was not okay. Carolyn spoke of how she saw the stress her mother was carrying, so she took it upon herself, as a young girl, to help her mother decide how they would leave the situation with her father. She said, "I called my uncle…and said, hey…told him who I was, and he was laughing." She continued, "Well, mama was going to leave, and we needed somewhere to live." Her uncle agreed with Carolyn that her mother would pay him $200 a month to live in a trailer on the land. She went on to get approval for her mother to use her uncle's truck and got her uncle to agree to help them move. After her mother got home from work, Carolyn told her what she had done. Her mother called the uncle to confirm, and following the confirmation, her mother agreed with the arrangement. After her parents divorced, Carolyn said, "They moved to the country where [her] mother's side of the family-owned several acres of land." The country neighbors were predominantly family members and other African American families who lived on the property. The area of the property where Carolyn's mother moved the family was owned by her uncle. She lived there from her fourth-grade year in school until she graduated from high school and went to college. Carolyn noted that "upper-class White families" lived approximately two miles "up the road." Carolyn could not recall witnessing any social justice work or movements growing up in her community.

Carolyn's best friend lived down the street from her. Her friend's mother was an African American educator. In addition to her friend's mother, Carolyn recalled other African American women educators in her community. She compared the educated to the uneducated, stating, "There was a very distinct difference between educated African Americans and uneducated African Americans." Carolyn knew she wanted to be "an

educated African American but not necessarily an educator."

Carolyn said she was very active in her community from elementary to high school. She shared being selected to represent the schools in her community during special events. She then mentioned her participation in a teen program headed by African American women who were members of the sorority Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. She spoke of some of her African American peers' ill feelings towards her. Carolyn specifically mentioned that these peers thought of her as "the token Black girl" because she was one of few African American students selected to serve in various school activities. The school was a safe place for Carolyn because, at home, she felt the marital pressure her mother was under with her alcoholic father. She loved reading, and she recalled thinking, "If I could be a straight 'A' student that would make things easier for my mom, and that would be one less thing for my mother to be stressed over."

Carolyn recalled again how her mother worked so hard; she loved her mother, but she did not want to become an adult in the same situation as her mother. She said, "I did not want a man like that." Carolyn's husband is from her hometown and is a business owner. They have one daughter who is in college. She expressed that it was not until she was married and had a child that she became aware her mother had gotten pregnant with her sister when her mother was in the twelfth grade and dropped out of school. Carolyn said her mother was "embarrassed and never wanted to tell her." After finding out, Carolyn tried to convince her mother to go back to school and earn her GED, but her mother chose not to finish the program. Instead, her mother "quit working on it and went to work in a factory."

Carolyn lovingly spoke of her godmother, who she claimed to be very influential

in her childhood and adulthood choices. Her godmother, who she also called "aunt," was "the strongest person [she] knew," and like school, her godmother's home was also a safe place for her. Carolyn's godmother was a retired teacher who helped take care of Carolyn when she was a child. She recalled her sister being in the hospital and having surgery when they were both young girls. She further recalled her sister having several out-of-town doctor's appointments. During these times, Carolyn stayed with her godmother. She described her as "the one who impacted my life…and who I wanted to be as a person". She credited her godmother for influencing her to go to college. Carolyn shared that her godmother always told her about the importance of getting an education. She noted that her godmother said to her mother, "Carolyn is very smart, and she's gonna make something of herself." That remark stood out to Carolyn. Carolyn indicated that her godmother made her read the dictionary or encyclopedia and research answers to questions. Carolyn's mother did not influence her in this way. "Sweet and naïve" is the way Carolyn describes her mother. Her mother was reared by her grandmother, who did not allow her to go anywhere. Carolyn believes her mother's upbringing and lack of knowledge about college were reasons why she was not influential. Carolyn's mother was always happy when she came home with straight A's, and her mother made sure Carolyn had money to purchase books at the book fair whenever it went to the school.

Carolyn attended college at a predominately White institution. She recalled that, unlike in her high school years, she did not have to worry about her college peers having issues of ill feelings towards her. She stated, "I won't say that I didn't experience it, but if I did, I brushed it off and moved on; it just didn't stay on my mind." While in college, her godmother supported her as much as possible, but the need existed for her to work a full-

time job. Carolyn expressed wanting to make her mother and godmother proud. She said that she often thought of her godmother's zeal and persistence to become a college graduate during a time when few African Americans from her childhood community went to college. She mentioned that this thought was part of her motivation to become a college graduate. One of her older cousins was in college at the same time as Carolyn. Carolyn was further encouraged by how academically driven her cousin was as a college student. She and Carolyn would compare their grades and challenge each other to continue striving for excellence. Carolyn's major in college started in education, but she changed her major to social work. She earned an undergraduate and graduate degree in social work and landed her first job as a school social worker. Carolyn shared that her childhood experiences guided her path to majoring in social work and becoming a social worker before becoming an educator.

While working as a social worker, an African American woman recognized Carolyn's leadership abilities and talent in working with children. This woman encouraged Carolyn to return to school to pursue a degree in educational leadership. While working as a school social worker, Carolyn was asked if she would be interested in working as an assistant principal. She accepted the offer. It would not be long before she would become a school principal. She has been an elementary school principal for five years. To date, she has nineteen years of experience in education.

Carolyn is a rural elementary school principal located in a small-town residential community in Southwest Georgia. The school is located a short distance away from the community where she was born and reared. Carolyn pursued becoming a principal because "[she] knew [she] needed to impact change." She described her role as an

elementary school principal as a "calling." She shared:

> "I feel called to serve the students who are often overlooked; these students are black and brown and from low-socioeconomic populations. I…[have] an opportunity to be a voice for my students. When policies and procedures are discussed, I always consider and voice how they might impact the low-socioeconomic student population. I seek to make things better in education by removing barriers."

Carolyn noted finding value and reward in witnessing the progress of her students. The most fulfilling part of her position as principal is seeing students who were considered the most challenging make academic progress. Carolyn works diligently to establish and maintain a good relationship with her students. She greets them each morning with a smile, a greeting, and a message to "have a great day." She remains visible throughout the school day as doing so allows her to see more of her students, teachers, and staff. "Students want to know you care." Carolyn interacts with the students, and she makes time to eat with them in the cafeteria.

When driving to Carolyn's school, I turned off a highway and went through a neighborhood on my way to her school. Her school is located in an area where houses and apartments are located across the street from the school. The school is not far off the main highway. I passed the school playground before turning in the school's entrance. The school grounds were beautiful. Carolyn's school is a one-story school that is not in a congested area. There is a large playground for the students. The visitor's parking is located in front of the school. A buzzer system was in place for visitors to let the office staff know the reason for the visit before being allowed to enter. Upon entering, I noticed

the cleanliness of the floors and the building. The atmosphere was welcoming. Since it was mid-morning, there was not much traffic in and out of the office. The school secretary welcomed me, and I explained more in detail that I was there for a scheduled meeting with the school principal. While sitting and waiting, I witnessed the interaction of those who came in the door. Visitors were not in and out of the building due to the pandemic, but staff members walked in and out of the office area. The secretary was extremely helpful and worked to ensure the staff's needs were met. Carolyn walked out to greet me and walk me into her office.

Carolyn described the parents of her students as being "relatively supportive." She continued to say that parents just want to be "respected and heard." She provides parents with such opportunities and believes that doing so goes a long way. Carolyn stated, "Even if [parents] do not agree with a decision, they leave feeling respected." She wants parents to know and understand that she cares about their children and will always be fair. "Each interaction with a parent demonstrates my commitment to the well-being of students." Carolyn continued by emphasizing the need to work through challenges. "As a principal, it is not unusual to find yourself managing issues presented by students, parents, teachers, and staff while focusing on academics simultaneously." Carolyn used this opportunity also to describe her teachers and staff. She described them as a group of people who "work hard and play hard." She feels that building personal relationships with each staff member is essential. Building these relationships makes it easier to provide staff with "corrective feedback." Carolyn added that she handles difficult situations by addressing them "head-on." She continued to say, "face to face conversations alleviate the likelihood of miscommunication in most cases."

Carolyn views herself as a change agent. She stated, “From day one in my role as principal, my impact on others as an African American woman has been important to me.” As a school principal, she believes it is her responsibility to ensure that African American students have the opportunity to see and be taught by someone who looks like them. She doubled the number of African American teachers at her school in the first two years of her principalship. Carolyn’s mission is to provide more professional development and leadership opportunities for African American teachers to “hone their skills and move up the ranks as positions become available.” She continued to say, “It is vital that African American women see [themselves] as allies and not competitors.” Carolyn advised those wanting to become a principal to “work hard and never give up; do not become complacent in your current situation.” As a leader, Carolyn feels that African American females have to “dot all your I’s and cross all your T’s.” She said, “You have to work harder to stay” in the leadership position. She expressed how she has witnessed White males “do the bare minimum, and they’re still able to maintain their position without compromise.” She continues to advise other African American women to take charge of their professional learning and invest in it. She urged them to “have an impeccable work ethic.” Carolyn stressed, “dress professionally and conduct yourself beyond reproach. The plight will always be difficult for African American women”.

Chapter V

Results

The number of African American females serving as principals of schools is disappointing in comparison to their White female counterparts (NCES, 2011; Horsford and Tillman, 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and efforts of six African American female principals on their journey to become principals of their respective rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. The African American female participants shared their personal and professional experiences from a perspective that they have been identified because of the intersectionality of race and gender. Therefore, the personal narratives of the six African American female participants provided unique details as well as overlapping experiences of their lives from childhood through adulthood. Findings from this research addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the personal and professional life experiences that impact the educational experiences of African American female principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

RQ 2: What perceived barriers did African American female principals encounter in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

RQ3: What strategies did the African American female principals use in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

All six participants were selected from four school districts located in Southwest

Georgia. Two participants each were selected from two school districts in Southwest Georgia, and one participant each was selected from two other school districts in Southwest Georgia. This procedure allowed the researcher to gain insight into the vast experiences of participants with common factors as well as gain insight into the varied experiences of participants. This also highlighted the scope to which African American females in Southwest Georgia can offer a different lens to a woman's pursuit of becoming a principal in Southwest Georgia. The six subjects in this study participated voluntarily and were provided an Informed Consent form before the initiation of each interview. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Table 1 details the demographic information of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Profiles

Pseudonym	Age Range	Years of Experience in Education	Years of Principal Experience	Highest Degree Level	Entire Career in Southwest Georgia
Debra	50-55	31	18	EdD	Yes
Rosemary	35-40	12	4	EdD	No
Delores	50-55	20	5	EdD	Yes
Clara	50-55	31	5	EdS	Yes
Dennie	50-55	30	5	EdD	Yes
Carolyn	45-50	19	5	EdS	Yes

The researcher collected data through a review of documents obtained from the district, school, and state websites, observation memos as outlined by Patton (2002), and three individual interviews as outlined by Seidman (2006). The researcher established an

interview protocol for the in-depth interviews and thoroughly explained the interview process. The researcher's goal of the in-depth interviews was to conduct the interviews so each participant would feel as if she was engaged in a casual conversation, but a general interview guide was used by the researcher (Patton, 2002). Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of each participant's narrative. The researcher used the computer software, Descript (Mason, 2017), to convert the recorded interviews into transcriptions after each interview. Transcriptions were shared with each interviewee to ensure the accuracy of the information and to allow each interviewee to express what needed to be corrected, added, and/or omitted (Seidman, 2006).

Discussion of Themes

Personal narratives reveal cultural and societal patterns through the lens of individual experiences (Patton, 2002). Two categorizing strategies in qualitative research are coding and organizing data into broader themes (Maxwell, 2013). "The task of the narrative researcher…is to make sense of the telling rather than the tale. This is done both by recoding and interpreting how an individual has lived and made meaning about her life and by creating interpretive text that explicates how and why individuals construct stories about themselves to serve particular purposes and fulfill particular needs brought by one's social positions and personal desires" (Merriam, 2002, p. 311). Developing a manageable coding process is the first step of analysis (Patton, 2002). Organizing and preparing the data, obtaining a general sense of the information, coding, identifying themes, and data interpretation were the steps the researcher took in the data analysis process (Butina, 2015). The five categories that emerged from the narratives of the six

participants in this study were: a) family, b) community, c) importance of education, d) role models, and e) religion. Each of these categories was highlighted, then copied and pasted into a spreadsheet. After sorting the information in a Google Sheet by color, subcategories were identified. The participants' responses were then grouped according to the study's research questions. Table 2 represents a list of codes developed from reviewing participants' responses and the categories that emerged from those responses.

Table 2

Open Coding Symbols

Code	Code Description	Category
C	Childhood	Family
SPH	Single Parent Household	
MFH	Mother and Father	
GP	Raised by Grandparent	
SRT	Small Rural Town	Community
OCL	Outside of City Limits	
MC	Middle-Class Neighborhood	
CM	Community Members	
MFE	Mother and Father Educated	Education
M/FND	Mother and/or Father didn't graduate	
IF	Important to Family	
EE	Educational Experience	
IT	Impactful Teachers	
C/U	College/University	
M	Mother	Role Models/Mentoring
T	Teachers	
UP	University Professor	
AAW	African American Women	
WE	White Educators	
WC	Women in the Church	
PF/CA	Paying it Forward/Change Agent	
P	Pastors	Religion/Spirituality
GUP	Growing up in Church	
WC	Women in the Church	
IC	Importance of Church	
LS	Leadership Style	Leadership
RTS	Relationship with Teachers/Staff	
RS	Relationship with Students	
RP	Relationship with Parents	

After a thorough assessment of codes and categories, four themes emerged. The four themes were: a) leadership, b) family and community, c) education and mentoring, and d) religion/spirituality. Participants' transcripts, observation memos, and documents were thoroughly reviewed to finalize the themes. Table 3 provides an example of the chunking process.

Table 3

Example of Theme, Subcategory, and Supporting Statements

Theme	Subcategory	Supporting Statements
Leadership	Leadership Style	"Democratic" "Open door policy" "Fair, consistent, and consistently fair" "Being able to impact everybody, I think is the most rewarding for me." "The role is supportive in every aspect." "Not a micromanager"
	Relationship with Teachers and Staff	"And I always say I'm a leader among leaders because I always felt…the teachers in the classroom…are the ones [who] are the boots on the ground that's making the decisions." "Love for her…teachers and staff." "Encourages paraprofessionals and teachers to go back to school." "Believe in professional freedom…free to do whatever you want to do in your classroom as long as it's ethical."
	Relationship with Students	"We just don't know what they (students) are facing." "Treats them like they're [her] own children" "[She] understands their needs and strives to ensure those needs are met." "Kids need to know that they're loved."
	Relationship with Parents	"Greet parents at parent drop-off and parent pick-up." "The pandemic has impacted parent engagement at the school." "We have good parent support." "Parent activities had to be conducted through a virtual platform or a drive-by event." "They just want to be heard." "Each interaction with a parent is an advertisement."

Leadership

African American female educational leaders did not just limit their leadership to within the school building, but they have consistently engaged in their communities and activism because they viewed this work as an extension of their commitment as educational leaders (Peters and Nash, 2021). Their approach to leadership included an ethic of caring (Bass, 2012). All six participants demonstrated and expressed their love for and sense of loyalty to their position of principal. They all expressed an attitude of thankfulness for the opportunity to serve as principals of elementary schools. They all have an awareness of the requirements and dedication it takes to lead a school of students, teachers, staff, and parents; therefore, they understand the instructional leadership, professionalism, and duties of their principalship.

All of the six participants described their leadership style; neither participant wanted to identify as a 'micromanager.' Debra described herself as a "democratic" leader. She did not like her teachers and staff to view her as "the boss." Debra believed in being "fair, consistent, and consistently fair." She listened to stakeholders and respected those whom she leads. Rosemary emphasized, "I am not a micromanager." She believed in setting high expectations for all whom she leads. She wanted all of her students, teachers, and staff to be successful. Delores described herself as a "coach." She described herself as "a leader among leaders." She described her teachers as being "boots on the ground" and she believed in letting the teachers help her lead. Clara said she "believes we are all professionals," and she "believes in professional freedom." She continued to express the importance of her staff being on time to work and at their assigned duty posts. She stated, "I do think you need to address the person [who] needs to be addressed" whenever there

is an issue instead of talking to the entire staff. Dennie described herself as "a servant leader." She continued to say, "if it's anything that needs to be done at the school…I'm not above doing anything…I do believe in giving a lot of myself to my staff, to whoever…." Carolyn described herself as a "strategic" and "servant" leader. "Relationships are important, but everything [she] thinks of has a strategy behind it and the logistics, making sure things run efficiently so that teachers can be most effective in the classroom." She believed that things should be "very structured and orderly" because students need structure and consistency to feel safe in the school setting.

The participants described their relationships with teachers and staff, students, and parents as most important and they considered the relationships they had established with those stakeholders as being really good relationships. Each participant gave the following statements to define their relationships with the teachers and staff of their respective schools:

- Debra listens to her teachers and staff and respects their ideas and opinions. She works to build relationships with them. She values knowing their families and other aspects of their personal lives. She feels "everyone in the school is very important. It takes all of us working together to lead the school in establishing a positive school culture and climate for student success."
- Rosemary encourages her teachers and paraprofessionals to go back to school and earn higher degrees. She wants her paraprofessionals to become teachers. She sees what they have to offer, and she appreciates them. She believes in "being able to impact and influence those who work under [her] leadership." She

believes in engaging in close and meaningful relationships with her teachers and staff. Rosemary also believes in "treating people the way they want to be treated."

- Delores believes in getting input from her teachers and staff. She described her teachers as "boots on the ground" in the classroom. She relies on the input of her teachers and staff on certain school issues. She also believes in knowing her teachers and staff on a personal level and knowing about the monumental events taking place in their lives and the lives of their family and friends. Due to the restructuring of schools in her school district, this year is her first year with a combined faculty and staff; therefore, she is working on team building with her faculty and staff as well as getting to know new members of her school family.
- Clara believes in the ability of her teachers and their professional knowledge until it is apparent, she cannot. She trusts them to be professionals. Clara has worked with the majority of her staff for most of her career. She has grown up around some, attended school with others, and lived in the same community with most of them; therefore, she knows their families. However, she makes sure to check on them and encourages them to strive for greatness. She loves her teachers and staff.
- Dennie makes her teachers and staff feel fully supported. She never wants them to feel as if they are in "a gotcha situation" or environment. She works to support them and follow through to fulfill their requests or needs. She never wants her staff to feel as if she overlooks them. Dennie enjoys "fellowshipping" with her teachers and staff by providing them with opportunities to sit among each other, laugh, and relax. This opportunity was of most importance to her because she recognized the effect the pandemic has had on her teachers and staff.

- Carolyn values building relationships with her teachers and staff. She believes the value of having a good relationship with her teachers and staff makes it easier when it is time to give "corrective feedback." She recognized the time and effort of her teachers and staff. She said they "work hard and play hard."

All six of the participants valued their relationship with their students above all other relationships. They believed in their students and held them in high regard. As principals, they had high expectations for their students and expected their teachers and staff to have the same level of expectations for students. All six participants addressed the impact of the COVID pandemic on students. Due to the pandemic, "at-risk" is the category that which all six participants placed their entire student population. As Rosemary so eloquently stated, "A lot of people might call it learning loss. I don't. You can't lose something you were never exposed to." Debra described the pandemic as a time of "newness." Delores stated that the students have not had the same opportunities to learn as they did before the COVID-19 pandemic. Clara described this school year as "stressful" due to the pandemic and the hospitalization of her husband, but the most rewarding part of her job is the children. Dennie starts each morning with an announcement that catches the students' attention. She stresses to them their value and importance. In alignment with their care and love for students, their main obligation, outside of ensuring students' success, was also student safety.

All participants also valued their relationship with the parents of their schools. Even though parents and visitors were not allowed in their buildings due to the pandemic, all six participants made sure they found ways to get to know the parents and build relationships with them. The participants also offered virtual parent involvement

opportunities. Parents were able to participate in parent conferences through virtual platforms or via telephone. One of the most important and exciting duties for Debra was student drop-off and pick-up. She would "greet parents at parent drop-off and parent pick-up" and address any concerns. This time was her time to establish a relationship with her parents which was so important to her. She expressed the joy and comradery she felt during that time of the day. Delores also greeted the students and parents at drop-off. This time for her was a brief interaction, but she felt that it provided the parents an opportunity to get to know her. For some of the parents, Delores was a new principal because of the restructuring of her school. Clara is from her community and has worked as an educator in the same building for thirty-one years. Therefore, the majority of the parents knew her. She felt that she had a good relationship with the parents of her school. Debra and Dennie were experiencing their first year at their respective schools. Since this school year was their first year at the schools, they both hosted drive-by parent events for the parents. Dennie wanted them to know who she, the teachers, and the staff of her school were. Debra decided to embrace this time of "newness" and allow this opportunity to be identified as a "new and improved" way to involve parents. The schools also shared other ways parents could get involved since they could not physically come into the school buildings. The parents had the opportunity to drive through the entrances to meet the school faculty and also pick up items for parents and students. Carolyn described the parents of her school as "relatively supportive." Carolyn went on to discuss her understanding of the constraints and difficulties that some of the parents faced daily. She felt a sense of empathy for parents who were having financial difficulties and hardships.

These principals presented admiration and appreciation for the parents of their students. They acknowledged how difficult it must be for parents being that they were not able to visit inside of the schools due to the pandemic. Carolyn acknowledged that parents just want to be "respected and heard," and she allowed them to communicate with her. She recognized the importance of how she interacted and communicated with parents. Carolyn stated, "Each interaction with a parent is an advertisement." Rosemary also acknowledged the support of her parents during this time. She appreciated parents demonstrating a commendable level of respect for the safety protocols that had to be implemented due to the pandemic. They understood their children had to wear masks for their safety as well as the safety of others. Delores also bid the parents of her school a good day when they dropped their children off at school. All six participants expressed their appreciation for the parents. However, admittedly, they expressed that establishing as well as continuing to build relationships with parents was difficult due to the pandemic.

One of the six participants has served as a principal for eighteen years. Four of the six participants have served as principals for five years. One of the six participants has served as principal for four years. Three of the six participants could retire because they have thirty or more years of experience in education. Neither Debra, Clara, nor Dennie spoke of retiring even though they have enough years to retire. They all demonstrated tenacity and commitment to continuing to serve the students, parents, teachers, and staff in their communities even though they all alluded to this past school year being the most difficult year of their careers due to the pandemic. Carolyn has nineteen years, and she did not express a desire to work in any other capacity other than as a principal. However,

Delores with twenty years of experience in education, and Rosemary with twelve years of experience in education both spoke of enjoying their work at the school level but have a desire to someday impact teaching and learning by working at the district level. Tables 4 and 5 provide information about each participant's school academic ratings and demographics. Delores and Clara are currently serving in schools that were restructured by the school district. Therefore, some data are not available for 2019.

Table 4

Data about Participants' Schools

School	Title I	CCRPI	School Star Rating	Overall Performance	Academic Growth	Third Graders Reading at or above	Financial Efficiency Star Rating
Debra's ES	Yes	78.6 C	5 stars	Higher than 62% of schools in the state and higher than the district	Higher than 57% of schools in the state and higher than the district	51% reading at or above grade level target	3 stars
Rosemary's ES	Yes	67.8 D	3 stars	Higher than 28% of schools in the state and similar to the district	Higher than 7% of schools in the state and lower than the district	40.7% reading at or above grade level target	2.5 stars
Delores's ES	Yes	66 D	NA	NA	Elementary student score is higher than 5% of districts	46.6% reading at or above the grade level target	3 stars
Clara's ES	Yes	37.1 F	4 stars	Higher than 1% of schools in the state and lower than the district	NA	NA	NA
Dennie's ES	Yes	67.7 F	4 stars	Higher than 28% of schools in the state and higher than the district	Higher than 16% of schools in the state and similar to the district	30.6% reading at or above grade level target	NA

Carolyn's ES	Yes	58.6 F	4 stars	Higher than 9% of schools in the state and lower than the district	Higher than 4% of schools in the state and lower than the district	43.2% reading at or above grade level target	2.5 stars

Note: Tables 4 are from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019) reports and the Georgia Department of Education (2019) College Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI).

Table 5

Demographics of Participants' Schools

School	Total Enrollment	African Americans	White	Multi-racial	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	EDD	SWD	ELL
Debra's ES	587	96%	2%	1%	1%	0%	100%	1%	1%
Rosemary's ES	662	90%	4%	4%	2%	0%	100%	10%	2%
Delores's District	NA	49%	36%	3%	11%	1%	47%	10%	6%
Clara's ES	216	79%	9%	3%	9%	0%	100%	9%	6%
Dennie's ES	583	42%	28%	2%	27%	1%	53%	8%	26
Carolyn's ES	570	42%	28%	5%	24%	0%	53%	12%	21%

Note: Tables 5 data are from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2019) reports.

Family and Community

According to Newcomb and Niemeyer (2015), African American women indicated their experiences with family and their respect for the culture of the community influenced their leadership. The most dominant theme revealed through this study was the role family and community played in the participants' pathways to their principalships in Southwest Georgia. Each participant identified aspects of family and community as key factors that impacted their personal as well as professional experiences. Of the subthemes identified within the family and community theme, all six participants expressed the importance of their childhood and the community's impact on their personal and professional choices and experiences. Three of the six participants grew up in a two-parent household with their mother and father. Two of these three participants' families were able to support them financially when they went to college, and one of the three participants worked at a fast-food restaurant to support herself while in college. One of the six participants grew up in a single-parent household with her mother. Two of the six participants grew up in a household with one or both of their grandparents and their mothers. The participants valued the love and support of their families, and they expressed the importance of family. "Family is so, so important," stated one participant. Each participant's family dynamics were different in many aspects yet similar in others.

Debra grew up in a two-parent household. Her mother and father were both supportive, but her mother was the most integral in stressing the importance of education. Neither of her parents graduated from high school, but "they did their best." Debra referenced having to wear "hand-me-downs" as a child. Debra had a love for her parents and her siblings, especially one of her brothers who did not make positive life choices.

Debra shared a story about one of her brothers who made poor choices in school. While in high school, he did things like "skipping school." This choice led to other choices; as an adult, he made a choice that landed him in prison. Debra stated, "Every family may have a bad apple." Nevertheless, she loved this brother dearly. She said she often shares this story with students hoping that it will encourage them to make positive life choices.

Clara also grew up in a two-parent household. Her mother and father were both college graduates of a Historically Black College and University. Growing up, Clara was raised around grandparents and other relatives who were married. Her mother and father were both influential in the path Clara took in life, but her mother had the most influence. Clara's mother was an elementary school teacher. She looked up to her mother, so much that she too became a teacher. Her parents established expectations for their children to meet, and Clara and her siblings strived to meet them. Her parents realized the importance of education for their children to have opportunities in life. She stated, "They influenced us to read and to learn as much as [we] can…they wanted us to do as much as we could and take advantage of opportunities that they may not have had."

Dennie was another participant who grew up in a two-parent household. "I grew up in a pretty close-knit family," she described. Both of her parents were college graduates and teachers. Her parents graduated from a Historically Black College and University. Her mother taught high school English and her father taught physical education. Her parents' expectations of Dennie and her two brothers were simple and direct. "You were going to do something. You may not go to college, but you're going to do something after you graduate from high school. Whether it be…military or college. It was just understood that everybody had a plan for something they were going to do."

Dennie credits her parents as being the most influential in her life. Being that her mother was the "strict disciplinarian," her mother was the planner. "[She] had a plan and she was strategic about what she did."

Rosemary's mother gave birth to her when she was a teenager, so Rosemary's grandparents played a vital role in her upbringing. When she was born until the age of seven, she lived in the household with her paternal grandparents until they passed away. She then went to live with her mother and maternal grandmother. However, Rosemary described her mother as doing "a great job" as a parent and always having high expectations for her. She continued to say, "She expected nothing but the best." Rosemary described her mother as a "go-getter" and she has patterned herself after her mother. Due to having Rosemary during her teenage years, Rosemary feels her mother diligently instilled in her the importance of getting an education because she did not have the opportunity to continue her education as a teen mother. However, around the age of fifteen, there was a rift in Rosemary's relationship with her mother. At that time, her aunt who was her uncle's wife, "took [her] in" and became very influential in her life, and she also became friends with a young man whom she later married when she was twenty years old. Rosemary has patterned the values and expectations for her children after those her mother set for her. "You have to work hard for what you want in life."

Delores's parents divorced when she was around eleven years old. After the divorce, Delores and her mother lived with her paternal grandmother who was a special education teacher. She recalled her grandmother "working hard with kids." The home environment was "real structured," and education was the focus. Delores remembered how her mother would "struggle and…continuously bounce back and continue to keep

her head above water to try and make it work for her family." Delores described what she witnessed her mother experience as "influential" to her. Education was important to her family, but Delores struggled in school during the time her parents divorced. Delores described going to school as "a way out" when she was going through difficult times. She continued, stating, "Education was your way out."

Carolyn's parents divorced when she was in the fourth grade. Carolyn witnessed the stress her mother endured while in what she described as an "unhappy" marriage to her father. Then, Carolyn (the child) planned their move to what she described as "the country." She lived in a very rural area in Southwest Georgia. Nonetheless, Carolyn was very active in her school and community. While a student, her teachers selected her to participate in after-school activities in the community. Carolyn considered school to be her "safe place." She did not learn of her mother not graduating from high school until she was married with children of her own. Therefore, Carolyn associated this with her mother not stressing the importance of education through words, but through deeds. Carolyn described her mother's reaction to her bringing straight A's home on her report card as "happy." Her mother also supported her by making sure Carolyn had money to purchase books at school book fairs. Carolyn credits her godmother for encouraging her to value education, do well in school, and further her education by going to college.

All of the six participants grew up in rural communities. Five of the six participants grew up in small communities in Southwest Georgia. One of the six participants grew up in a small rural community in South Georgia that sits directly north of what's considered Southwest Georgia. Two of the six participants grew up outside of the city limits, which both Debra and Carolyn referenced as "the country", and neither of

their parents graduated from high school. Two additional participants of the six grew up in what they described as “middle class” neighborhoods; Clara and Dennie’s parents were college graduates and employed in their areas of study. The additional two of the six participants grew up in the household with their mother and grandmother in small rural towns. Rosemary described her community as “drug-infested,” and Delores described her community as “lower to middle-class.”

All six participants spoke about the influence and interaction of African American women in their community. Three of the six participants mentioned the work of two African American sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, in their communities. Two of the three participants lived in the same community, and they were both engaged in community events sponsored by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Delores and Carolyn participated in youth programs the sorority sponsored, and they credited the sorority for encouraging them as young ladies to give back to their community and participate in community service activities. They witnessed these women work to make a difference in their community. One of these three participants lived in a community where both sororities were very impactful in working with the community’s youth. Dennie witnessed her mother and her mother’s sorority sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha offer free tutoring to students in the community. She also participated in Delta Sigma Theta’s Debutante Cotillion. On the other hand, Rosemary did not witness nor participate in sorority-sponsored activities or events in her community. However, she credited a member of Delta Sigma Theta for encouraging and guiding her when she was a young first-year teacher. She made such an impact on Rosemary that Rosemary decided to become a member of the same sorority. Five of the

six participants are members of a sorority that is in the National Pan-Hellenic Council, a council consisting of nine historically Black sororities and fraternities (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2021). Rosemary, Clara, and Delores are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, Dennie is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, and Debra is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated. Even though Carolyn participated in and witnessed the community service, work, and interaction of African American women who were members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, she decided not to pledge membership in a Greek organization.

The household and community of the participants greatly impacted their personal and professional choices in life. After graduating from college, Debra, Rosemary, Delores, and Clara returned to the communities where they grew up and started teaching in the school districts where they graduated from high school. Dennie and Carolyn did not start their careers in education. However, once they decided to become educators, Dennie taught in her community in the school district from which she graduated. Of the six participants, Delores and Clara are elementary school principals in the community where they grew up. Rosemary said she started teaching in her community because "[my] community actually encouraged [me] in a sense, wanting better, wanting to do so much better to the point of where I could actually give back to my community. To be able to encourage other young ladies, like me, that may see what I saw growing up." Furthermore, Debra mentioned that some members of her community did not expect her to succeed because of her family. She said, "because of my family, I don't think they thought that I would be who I am today." All six participants experienced and expressed a greater level of appreciation for their family and community. Both family and community

impacted who they were at the time of the interview. Table 6 provides information about the participants' households, social class identification, and the 2020 census of the county where they grew up (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Table 6

Participant Household and Community Demographics

Participant	Household Make-up	Social Class	Community Population (2020)
Debra	Mother and Father	Lower Socio-Economic Class	9,185
Rosemary	Mother and Grandmother	Lower Socio-Economic Class	29,616
Delores	Mother and Grandmother due to divorce	Lower to Middle Socio-Economic Class	29,367
Clara	Mother and Father	Middle Socio-Economic Class	21,755
Dennie	Mother and Father	Middle Socio-Economic Class	45,798
Carolyn	Mother due to divorce	Lower to Middle Socio-Economic Class	29,367

Education and Mentoring

Women aspiring to top-level roles in educational leadership should identify a mentor and surround themselves with a group of people who will testify to their leadership ability (Sperandio, 2015). Through the stories of the six participants, it became evident based on their experiences that education and mentoring went hand in hand. All six participants associated their elementary, secondary, post-secondary, and career experiences with someone whom they described as a mentor. For different reasons and maybe from different perspectives, all parents of the six participants stressed the importance of education.

As a first-grade student, Debra was mesmerized by the first teacher she had ever encountered since she did not attend kindergarten. She described her as “an African American woman with a beautiful spirit and the most beautiful penmanship.” Upon meeting her, Debra said that is when she knew she wanted to be a teacher. Debra also had

a high school teacher who showed interest in her and encouraged her by telling her and her mother that she was a young lady who was "going places." This teacher did not allow what others in the school or community thought about Debra due to her family's reputation, to impact how he believed in her. His words of affirmation have stayed with her from that day until this present time. Overall, Debra did not have a negative educational experience in elementary and secondary school. She felt as if some teachers may have thought of her as one who would not succeed, but she held on to the positive interactions and words of those who believed in her.

Debra had mostly African American teachers in elementary and secondary school. However, she credited her mother, brother, first-grade African American female teacher, White male high school teacher, and pastor as those who recognized her capability and pushed her to be successful. Debra was also thankful for the recruiter who came to her high school to share college information with the students. She told Debra how she could go to college because Debra did not know how to get into college. The recruiter was an African American female from a Historically Black College and University. Debra enrolled and attended that same university. Throughout her time in college, Debra did not have the financial support of her parents, so she worked at a fast-food restaurant and lived with her older brother and his wife.

Moving into her career as a second-grade teacher, Debra had a principal who recognized her leadership abilities, so she encouraged Debra to go back to school to get a degree in educational leadership. This principal opened a door for Debra to serve as the assistant principal at the school where she was principal. Debra credited this principal for mentoring her and recognizing her ability to lead others and for giving her a chance on

the pathway which led to her principalship. She described it as "[standing] on someone else's shoulder." Debra believes in "paying it forward." At the time of the interview, she was currently helping her assistant principal in the same way the principal assisted her. Her advice to those African American females who desire to be a principal is to "wait, I say, in the Lord." She does not advise them to get bitter if they have not been given the opportunity to work as a principal. Debra's advice to them was to find every opportunity to learn and grow.

During her elementary and secondary educational experience as a student, most of Rosemary's teachers were African American, but it was a White female who had the greatest impact on Rosemary in high school, which led to her going to college. Rosemary gave her high school counselor full credit for starting her on her pathway to college. At the age of fifteen, something happened that changed Rosemary's relationship with her mother. At this time, her high school counselor listened to her as well as encouraged her. She helped Rosemary during a very difficult time as a teenager. Her school counselor helped her study for the graduation test and apply for college. Rosemary did not have the financial support of her mother while she was in college, so she would do other students' hair to make money. Her aunt and a friend, now her husband, would support her and give her advice.

It was not until she took an elective in college that she "fell in love" with early childhood education. She was excited when she spoke about two professors at the HBCU she attended. Those two ladies sparked an interest in Rosemary that encouraged her to become the lady she is today. Rosemary described them as "perfect." She could relate to them. She also said, "My love for them made me have a great love for education."

Through taking their courses, Rosemary learned how to work with others, something she was not accustomed to doing. She felt these ladies believed in her.

After graduating from college, Rosemary returned to her hometown to teach as a long-term substitute. This experience shaped her career as a teacher. She taught in the same school for a little over four years with two of her former African American female teachers before being hired as an instructional coach in a larger school district. Her principal at the school where she was hired as an instructional coach was an African American female who supported and encouraged Rosemary, and Rosemary genuinely respected her. After serving as an instructional coach for one year, the school district recognized her leadership abilities and asked her to go to another school in the district as an assistant principal. Rosemary credited those three African American women, her two former female teachers, and the principal who hired her to be an instructional coach, for contributing to her success. She followed their pathway to success and continued to follow the pathway of the principal who hired her as an instructional coach. Rosemary served as an assistant principal for three years before becoming a principal.

Rosemary believed in creating opportunities for others to advance because those opportunities were created for her. She encouraged paraprofessionals to obtain a degree and their teaching certificate. She has spoken at pinning ceremonies at her alma mater for students graduating from the college of education. Rosemary wanted to create opportunities for them that lead to teaching positions. She advised African American women who seek a principalship but have not been given the opportunity, to "check yourself." She continued, that they may need to do something different for their desires and abilities to be recognized by others. Rosemary added that they may need to put

themselves out in the forefront a little more, be presentable as well as approachable, and consider realigning their goals. She felt that they should be confident enough to say those who would not hire them are “missing out on an opportunity;” however, do not compare your pathway to that of someone else.

Delores started attending elementary school in one location until the age of eleven, moved to metropolitan Florida for two years, then to Southwest Georgia for the remainder of her middle and high school years. She described her elementary and secondary school experience as “difficult” due to the divorce of her parents when she was a young child. She recalled having issues learning math and science while in elementary school. Her middle school years were a time when she was trying to fit in, so she was not applying herself academically but socially. High school was difficult for Delores because she became pregnant while in high school, but she did graduate. She could not recall receiving much support or encouragement from the majority of her high school teachers except one, her home economics teacher.

Being a teenage mother, after graduating from high school, Delores entered the workforce. She described the work she did as “factory work.” Delores did not go directly to college because she had to take care of her son. During a visit to her son’s school, Delores's encounter with a little girl in the front office sparked an interest in her that never left. She wanted to go back to school to become a teacher, and she did. She earned her bachelor's degree in six years but continued to go to school for fifteen years straight until she earned her doctoral degree. Delores was determined to make a difference not just for her son and herself but also for the children of her community. Delores had the support of her husband and sons while she was in college.

The high school home economics teacher who took a particular interest in Delores made her feel like she was more than a teenage mother. She challenged Delores to believe in herself and saw how much potential she had. As Delores reflected on her high school experience, she could not recall having many teachers who “looked like” her; those African American teachers she did see did not take a keen interest in her. However, she saw some of the same African American teachers doing positive things around the school and community.

When she first enrolled in college, she attended a predominantly White institution her freshman year. After that year, she enrolled in a Historically Black College and University. At this time, she met educators and students who “looked like [her].” She also established relationships with professors who became her mentors and role models. After graduating and working as a teacher, Delores established a relationship with a White female in her school district who recognized Delores had leadership qualities and abilities; therefore, she became Delores’s mentor. She shared educational leadership correspondence as well as encouraged her to attend educational conferences. Another district leader recognized Delores’s leadership qualities and decided to take her under his wings. He was a White male leader in her school district. He gave her the first opportunity to serve as an assistant principal and groomed her on the pathway to her principalship. Delores acknowledged her high school economics teacher, the college professors at the HBCU she attended, the White female district leader, and the White male school principal for encouraging and mentoring her on the pathway to her principalship.

Delores's advice to African American females pursuing the pathway to become a

principal was to understand the position. She stated that it is not just a title, and continued to say, “The role is supportive in every aspect.” Delores is encouraged when a member of her staff has the opportunity to obtain a higher position either at her school or somewhere else. She felt that is an extension of her because that is evidence of her having an impact on them. Delores stated, “I’ve taught them, helped them, or mentored them.” “Every day, be a person of integrity and know your core values because somebody is always watching,” she advised.

Clara admired several of her teachers, including her mother. She described these teachers as African American women whom she has admired since her childhood, but her mother is the one she admired the most. Clara lived in the same neighborhood as some of these teachers. She identified her fifth-grade and second-grade teachers as two teachers who impacted her life choices. She loved the teaching style of her fifth-grade teacher, and it was obvious to her that she cared about the students. Clara described her second-grade teacher as one who “just made learning fun.” She went on to describe her elementary and secondary school experiences as great and very rewarding. Even though her mother was a teacher, she did not feel stressed, nor did the teachers make her feel as if she was held to a higher standard.

When it was time for her to decide on which college she would attend, she decided to attend the same college as the woman she most admired, her mother. She attended a Historically Black College and University. Clara went to college knowing she wanted to be a teacher. During her college years, she was financially supported by her parents. Her relatives would also send letters and cards to encourage her and let her know how proud they were of her.

After graduating from college, Clara returned to her hometown to work as a teacher. While working as a kindergarten teacher, Clara started being very observant of the principal. She watched the principal of the school and decided to lean on her as a mentor. Learning leadership effectiveness by "just observing" was one of the ways Clara learned from her mentor. Clara indicated that the principal taught her a great deal about being an educational leader. She witnessed the principal move from a principalship to a district office position. Clara witnessed her mentor serve in various capacities which inspired her to do more.

Clara taught for several years before advancing to an assistant principal and then principal within the same school. She credited her mother, the great example of other teachers in the community, and the principal who hired her as a teacher for inspiring her on her pathway to the principalship. For those African American women who desire to become a principal, Clara advised, "don't give up." She continued to express the importance of staying vigilant and learning as much as one can and staying abreast of the trends in education.

Both of Dennie's parents were teachers. Hence, she often was surrounded by educators. During elementary and secondary school, Dennie was surrounded by adults, from her parents to the bus driver, all of whom stressed the importance of getting an education. Dennie reflected on her teachers when she was a four-year-old; she stated she had "great teachers from elementary school through her graduate studies." African American educators were prevalent in the schools Dennie attended.

Like Clara, Dennie's mother was a teacher who graduated from a Historically Black College and University, and Dennie attended the same HBCU her mother attended.

Even though her mother was a teacher and often being surrounded by educators, Dennie decided to take a different pathway when she attended college, so she majored in computer information systems. After graduating, she did not last long in her career choice before she enrolled back in school to earn her teaching certificate.

Once she started teaching, she loved it. Most of her career had been at the middle school level, and Dennie has taught most of her career. She has been in administration at the elementary school level for eight years. Dennie was encouraged and mentored by three African American female principals once she started on her pathway to her principalship. She sought advice and guidance from these women. Two of the principals have since retired, and the third principal was the researcher. “They provided me with help, guidance, and reassurance,” she thankfully expressed.

Because of how those three African American females poured into her, Dennie expressed her duty to “reach back and pull up” other African American women who desire to be a principal. To do this, she stated that she believes in guiding young African American girls toward the field of education with the hope that they would want to one day be educational leaders. Dennie stated she desires to leave a legacy encompassed by leadership and mentoring; she desires to start with the students, teachers, and staff of her school. She hoped that in the years to come, their lives “will be better because she crossed their paths.”

Carolyn described herself as being “born as an adult.” Her mother did not stress the importance of education to Carolyn due to not graduating from high school herself. However, Carolyn was an active student from elementary to high school. She participated in various school and community events in her community. Nevertheless, Carolyn was so

engaged and selected as a school representative, but some of her African American peers viewed her as a "token" Black girl. Regardless, Carolyn was intentional in participating in community service and school events. She wanted to build up her resume for college. She had a plan because she wanted to be "an educated African American [woman] but not necessarily an educator."

Carolyn did not describe her elementary and secondary educational experiences in great detail. After graduating from high school, Carolyn attended a junior college. After two years at the junior college, she transferred to a four-year predominately White institution, majoring in social work. While in college, she did not have the financial support of her mother or family. However, she stated the things that bothered her before she left for college, no longer bothered her. She described herself as "goal-oriented" because she wanted "a better life than what [she] grew up with." Carolyn went on to earn a master's degree in social work from another predominately White institution.

Because her degree was in social work, Carolyn's first job was that of a school social worker. She truly enjoyed working as a social worker. Carolyn never taught before becoming a school leader. While working at the school where she served as a social worker, Carolyn's leadership qualities were noticed by an African American woman who told her she needed to pursue educational leadership. This African American woman poured positivity into Carolyn; Carolyn went on to earn her specialist degree in educational leadership. She did not pursue it, but she was approached and asked if she would be interested in serving as the assistant principal of the same school where she worked as a social worker. Carolyn accepted the offer. After working as an assistant principal for three years, Carolyn left that school to accept a principal position.

Carolyn expressed a sense of gratitude for the African American woman who helped her recognize her leadership ability. She affirmed the principle of giving back and supporting others on their pathway to principalship. One thing Carolyn expressed as a takeaway for other African American females who desire to become principals was, "dot all of your I's and cross all of your T's." She continues to advise them to "hone their skills and move up the ranks as positions become available." It is also important for "African American women to see [themselves] as allies and not competitors." Carolyn stressed the importance of having an impeccable work ethic and "dress professionally and conduct yourself beyond reproach" on the pathway to a principalship.

Religion and Spirituality

African American female leaders lean on their spirituality as the foundation of their leadership and decision-making (Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). All six participants referenced their spirituality as a key factor in their achievements on their pathway to the principalship. Their religion and spirituality were very important to each participant. They were all brought up in the Christian church, and while growing up in the church, the women of the church were great examples for each of the women.

Debra smiled as she reminisced about her admiration for the mothers of the church. She expressed how they dressed and carried themselves as "ladies." Participating in church programs helped Debra practice speaking in front of others. From a young child, church members acknowledged her accomplishments and demonstrated how proud of her they were for her hard work and dedication. Debra credited her spiritual upbringing for molding her into the person she is today.

"Church was everything and the center of everything" for Rosemary. As a child and into adulthood, Rosemary attended church every Sunday. She was active in the church throughout her childhood. Rosemary credited the church as being integral in shaping her integrity. She grew up having respect for everyone in the church. As a child, she felt that some of the church members had hearts big enough to love all children regardless of their backgrounds.

Delores was brought up going to church and participating in church events. She remembered how caring the ladies of the church were during her childhood and when she became a pregnant teenager. They did not look down on her. She felt the love of those African American women in her church. They hugged her and made her feel that everything would be fine. Those women in the church made sure everyone was fed and did not go without food. Delores recalled how "fashionable" those ladies were in church as well as how they ensured other young ladies and girls in the church were modestly dressed. Delores described those ladies in the church as "role models."

In her community, "there was a church on every corner," Clara stated. She too admired the women in the church. Clara described these African American women as "great mentors." However, as a young lady, she did not recognize she was being mentored. Clara felt as if she would not be as successful as she currently is without the church. The church is very important to her. Her parents made sure she participated in church. She served as an usher and sang in the choir. Clara remained grateful for the acts of love and kindness the women of the church showed her. Some of the words she used to describe them were "classy," "caring," and "non-judgmental." She continued to say, "[they] cared about everybody."

Dennie's church family had a great deal of influence on her also. She viewed the church as a "strong pillar in the community." Not only did she not want to disappoint her parents, but she also did not want to disappoint her church members. She felt the "eyes" of the African American women in the church were watching what she did as her mother would. Her church promoted the importance of education. Her church took the youth on HBCU college tours. She felt the church just wanted what was best for her and the other youth. Through participating in church programs, she learned to confidently speak in front of the public. She appreciated the caring African American women in the church who made the youth feel as if they could do anything.

The church was important to Carolyn; even though her mother worked on Sundays, she would request for the church van to pick her up to go to church. Carolyn also described the church as "the pillar of the African American community." She continued to express how they went to church if nowhere else. As a child, she served on the usher board and sang in the choir. Carolyn recalled how the elderly African American women in the church cared for every in the community and the church. Attending Sunday school was important to Carolyn. Reading and studying the Sunday school lesson was what she was tasked to do, and she enjoyed it.

Their faith and spirituality were important to all six participants. They expressed their love for God and how they reverence Him for their accomplishments. Debra elaborated on her relationship with God and how her spirituality has helped her remain humble. Rosemary had no problem talking about God in her role as a school principal; she explained that she prays and calls on Jesus when faced with difficult situations at work. Delores credited her religion and love of God for her accomplishments. She relied

on prayer to guide her decisions. Clara made it known that her participation in church and her belief in God was important to her. She too prayed when she was faced with difficult decisions on the job as principal. Dennie appreciated the prayers and guidance others provided on her behalf. Prayer guided her when making difficult decisions also. Carolyn did not reference prayer or her relationship with God, but she was greatly impacted by her childhood experiences in the church. Two of the six participants were not only elementary school principals, but Debra was an evangelist, and Delores was a licensed ordained elder at the time of their interviews.

Participant Experiences, Perceived Barriers, and Strategies

The individuality of each participant's narratives exposed identified experiences, perceived barriers, and strategies. Although individual accounts were detailed, most narratives had resounding similarities. When participants recounted their stories from childhood through adulthood, all accounts revealed personal life experiences that guided them on their pathway to becoming principals. Regardless of the family dynamics or socioeconomic status, all participants shared that their parent or parents stressed the importance of education. None of the participants identified any perceived barriers encountered or experienced during their career as an educator that hindered them along their pathway to becoming a principal. The six participants in this study did not identify with barriers that blocked their success (i.e., district support, gender roles, or leadership roles) that Horsford and Tillman (2012) identified in their study. Each of the six participants had someone who recognized their work ethic, leadership qualities, and abilities, so they helped lead them to their pathway of principalship. None of the six participants spoke of any concerns about their school districts not supporting them or

feeling as if they were set up not to succeed (Peters, 2012). Also, none of the African American female participants in this research expressed feeling as if their race and gender held them back from getting their positions as elementary school principals (Reed, 2012). However, there were some personal experiences individual participants perceived as barriers; therefore, participants established strategies to overcome those perceived barriers. The six participants built and sustained mentoring relationships (Horsford & Tillman, 2012).

A thorough analysis of all data collected revealed each participant's perceived barriers and established strategies. All participants shared an established strategy identified in each of the themes discussed in this chapter. All of the six participants' leadership has been impacted by the pandemic. Dennie elaborated on how the pandemic has impacted her relationship with the parents of the school. Participants identified perceived barriers in the theme of family and community. Debra's parents did not graduate from high school, and they could not provide her with guidance about attending college. Carolyn's mother also dropped out of high school, and her mother did not tell her about how important it was to get an education. Carolyn and Delores experienced the divorce of their parents when they were young. Rosemary was the offspring of teenage parents, and Delores had a child while she was in high school. Four of the six participants identified perceived barriers in the theme of education and mentoring. Debra, Rosemary, Delores, and Carolyn did not have financial support from their families when they went to college. While she was in high school, Carolyn experienced being called racist comments by her same-race peers. None of the six participants identified any perceived barriers within the theme of religion/spirituality. Regardless of the perceived barriers the

participants encountered, they all strategized to achieve their goals. Collins' (2000) fourth dimension, "the ethic of personal accountability," aligns with the six participants' perseverance and strategic plans to achieve their goals. All six participants were accountable for their knowledge. All of the six participants also expressed their need and desire to mentor other African American females whose goal is to become a school principal; the participants want to initiate, cultivate, and maintain mentoring relationships with other African American female school leaders (Grant, 2012).

Table 7

Participants' Experiences, Perceived Barriers, and Strategies

Participant	Greatest Barrier/Theme	Greatest Strategy/Theme
Debra	Overcoming her family reputation in the community/Family and Community	Worked to put herself through college and was able to live with her brother and his wife/Family and Community
Rosemary	Relationship with her mom diminished during her high school years/Family and Community	Built a relationship with the school counselor who helped her get into college/Education
Delores	Teenage mother and lack of teacher support during high school/Education	Embraced the support of the high school home economics teacher/Education
Clara	Micromanagement by administration/Leadership	Support from the community/Family and Community
Dennie	Pandemic impacting school moral/Leadership	Parent engagement activities through virtual platforms and drive-by events/Leadership
Carolyn	Experienced racism from other African American students/Education	Participated in various school and community activities/Education

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented findings revealed through interviews with six African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. Data collected through interviews, documents, and observation memos, revealed the narratives of these six participants from their experiences during their childhood to their current experiences as principals. While none of the participants in this study revealed any perceived barriers they experienced while desiring to become a principal during their educational careers, some of their narratives revealed perceived barriers they experienced during their childhood and teen years. However, those participants overcame those perceived barriers and persevered to become African American female principals of elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. Regardless of the perceived barriers experienced during that time, others recognized their ability to lead, mentored them along the way, and helped them on their pathway to the principalship.

Through close examination of the data, four themes emerged: a) leadership, b) family and community, c) education and mentoring, and d) religion/spirituality. These themes connect the participant's experiences to the body of existing literature. These findings highlight some gaps in the existing literature. The researcher discusses the conclusions and implications of these findings in Chapter VI.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

Women who aspire to become school leaders need to become knowledgeable of the paths successful women leaders have already traveled (Sperandio, 2015). There has been little research on the perspectives of African American females who have become school leaders (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). Therefore, scholars, principals, and other educational leaders need to understand the personal and professional life experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia because of the need to identify perceived barriers and strategies they experienced from childhood to adulthood. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and efforts of six African American female principals and their paths to leadership in their respective rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia. The researcher collected data from the six participants in this study. The participants shared their first-hand accounts of personal and professional life experiences, the strategies they employed to overcome perceived barriers, and the successes they experienced. The researcher discovered the different paths leading the six African American female participants to become elementary school principals in rural Southwest Georgia. The researcher's results of this study may provide information to females, both African American and White, who have experiences similar to any of the six participants. Schools and districts may find the results informative as they provide mentoring and professional development in their school districts. Analyzing data from these personal narratives contributed to the resolution of the following research

questions:

Research Question 1: What are the personal and professional life experiences that impact the educational experiences of African American female principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

Research Question 2: What perceived barriers did African American female principals encounter in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

Research Question 3: What strategies did the African American female principals use in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify six participants representing the significant population for this narrative analytical study. Each participant was an African American female elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia. Each participant had to have more than three years of experience as a school principal. The participants' schools were located in the Southwest Georgia RESA (Regional Educational Services Agency) district. These factors ensured the participants' experience and knowledge could be applied to the purpose of the study. The researcher collected data from multiple sources, including interviewing each participant three times, collecting and reviewing documents, and writing researcher observation memos to reduce the risk of validity threats and maintain triangulation (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher scheduled in-depth interviews with participants. The researcher conducted interviews using the general interview guide approach which made the participants feel as if they were engaged in casual conversation while the researcher led the interview (Seidman, 2006). The

researcher conducted data analysis throughout the study, beginning after the first interview concluded and continuing beyond the end of the last interview. The researcher analyzed all data through multiple successions of coding and analysis until clear themes emerged from the participants' narratives. Through the researcher's data analysis, the following four fundamental themes emerged from the participants' lived experiences: a) leadership, b) family and community, c) education and mentoring, and d) religion/spirituality. Each of the four identified themes included several subthemes. This chapter reviews each theme concerning the foundational research questions and related literature, the study's limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

This qualitative study shared the personal and professional lived experiences of six African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. The participants were selected based on their race and gender, years of experience as a school principal, and the location of the schools where they served as principals. Personal narratives are stories about their family and life history revealing patterns of their culture and society (Creswell, 2009). The researcher conducted a series of individual interviews with each participant. The researcher thoroughly analyzed the data collected from these interviews. The researcher followed the narrative thematic process to analyze the data; the data analysis process used by the researcher included organizing and preparing the data, obtaining a general sense of the information, coding, identifying themes, and data interpretation (Butina, 2015). Chapter V contained the researcher's findings of this study. This section answers the guiding research questions based on the researcher's identified themes and existing relative literature on the study.

Research Question 1: What are the personal and professional life experiences that impact the educational experiences of African American female principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

During the first interview, each participant shared their life story with the researcher. The participants' recalled stories of their childhood to the present time. They remembered stories from their childhood to stories of being the principal of their schools. The details they shared provided more than enough information to answer research question one. Each theme and subtheme provided awareness of the participant's experiences.

The researcher followed Seidman's (2006) interview series. During the interview centered on community and family, each participant revealed the household structure in which she grew up. Three of the six participants grew up in a two-parent (mother and father) household. Debra grew up in a lower socioeconomic home environment, and neither of her parents graduated from high school. On the other hand, Clara and Dennie grew up in a middle-class socioeconomic home environment, and both sets of parents graduated from a four-year college. Nonetheless, Clara, Dennie, and Debra graduated from college with graduate-level degrees and became principals of elementary schools.

Two of the six participants experienced their parents getting divorced. When Delores and Carolyn were born, their parents were married; however, their parents divorced during both Delores and Carolyn's pre-teen years. Delores lived with her paternal grandmother and mother for some time before she and her mother moved. Carolyn described her mother as being unhappy while married to her father. Carolyn inspired her mother to leave her father, and she did. Carolyn's mother left her father and

moved her and her sister to a mobile home. Delores and Carolyn experienced growing up in a lower socioeconomic household. Rosemary was the offspring of a teenage mother and father. After her mother gave birth to her during her teen years, Rosemary was brought up by her paternal grandparents until they passed away when she was seven years old. Then she went to live with her mother and maternal grandmother. Rosemary experienced growing up in a lower socioeconomic household.

All of the participants lived in majority African American neighborhoods and communities. One of the six participants described her community as "drug-infested," and the majority of the community members did not graduate from high school. Rosemary did not see examples of other African Americans in her community doing positive things like graduating from high school and going to college. She wanted to be the exception, so she returned to her hometown to teach in the community where she grew up. Black feminist thought has been used to provide insight on African American women working to improve and understand African American communities (Dillard, 2016; Givens & Jeffries, 2003). The other five participants did not mention anything disparaging about the communities where they lived. Growing up, Debra and Carolyn lived outside the city limits, and Rosemary, Delores, Clara, and Dennie lived within the city limits.

The participants emphasized their families valued education and stressed the importance of getting an education. Just like the parents of one of the participants in Santamaria and Jean-Marie's (2014) study, all six of the participants in this research spoke about how much education was valued in their families no matter the socioeconomic or marital status of the family. Delores stated, "Education was your way

out." All six participants experienced having predominantly African American teachers during their elementary and secondary educational experiences. However, White educators impacted Rosemary and Delores the most in high school. Clara and Dennie were always around teachers because their mothers were teachers. Some of the same teachers they saw at school visited their homes. Five of the six participants graduated from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Debra and Rosemary did not know how they would be able to go to college until someone (a college recruiter and school counselor) at their high school educated them on how they could go to college. Collins (2000) identified African American women activists as being teachers or those who advocated for African Americans to have educational opportunities. The lived experiences of African American female leaders can also provide a unique insight into the role of a school principal (Collins, 2015). Debra, Rosemary, Clara, and Dennie attended HBCUs. Delores and Carolyn attended Predominately White Institutions (PWI); however, Delores transferred to an HBCU after her first year attending a PWI.

Two participants attended college knowing they wanted to be teachers. Clara and Delores went to college, intending to become teachers. Debra started as a nursing major because she was under the impression she could "make money" as a nurse. After what she described as a negative encounter with one of her professors, she changed her major to early childhood education. Rosemary graduated from high school wanting to be a lawyer. After taking an elective in the college of education, she fell in love with early childhood education. Dennie majored in computer information systems and graduated with a bachelor's degree in that area. She worked in that field for a year before enrolling in college to complete her certification to become a teacher. Carolyn majored in social

work and worked as a school social worker after graduating from college. While working in the school setting, Carolyn was mentored to earn an advanced degree in educational leadership.

While working as educators, all the participants worked alongside someone who recognized their leadership abilities; hence, they were encouraged to pursue using their innate abilities to become school leaders. Debra had the most years (thirty-one years) in education and the most experience (eighteen years) as a principal. Even though Clara had thirty-one years in education and Dennie had thirty years in education, they both had only five years of experience as a principal. Rosemary was the youngest participant with the least number of years (twelve years) of experience in education, but she had four years of experience as a principal. All six participants expressed a genuine love for the stakeholders of the school. They loved being principals and felt the most rewarding thing about being an elementary school principal was being able to positively impact the lives of students. The following statements were only a few examples of how they echoed their love for their students: “Kids need to know that they’re loved,” “understand their needs and strive to ensure those needs are met,” and “treat them like they’re your own children.” The participants appreciated their teachers and staff also. Rosemary encouraged her staff to go back to school. She wanted to grow teacher leaders. Delores involved her teachers and staff in some of the decision-making. Debra felt the need to “love” her teachers and staff. She was their fourth principal in four years. Dennie was very empathetic to the needs of her teachers and staff. She recognized the impact the pandemic had on them. All six participants acknowledged the pandemic’s impact on their relationships with parents since parents or visitors were not allowed in the school. The six

participants had a significant amount of love, understanding, and admiration for their students, teachers and staff, and parents. This type of love, understanding, and admiration was instilled in them from their childhood into adulthood. Through the narratives of their lived experiences, the six participants expressed their love for family and community, which stayed with them from their childhood until they became principals.

Research Question 2: What perceived barriers did African American female principals encounter in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

None of the participants stated they encountered a perceived barrier in their journey to become principals. All of the perceived barriers experienced by the participants fell within the theme of "family and community." During their childhood and adolescence, they experienced perceived barriers that could have hindered them on their pathway to their principalship. One of the perceived barriers was the family structure. Two of the six participants were products of divorce. This result paralleled research showing children from divorced parents have a 12% lower probability of attending college and an 11% probability of completing college (Parker, 2022). Delores was a product of divorced parents. She spoke about how she started making poor choices in middle school and her grades were impacted by her choices Delores got pregnant while in high school and became a teenage mother. Therefore, Delores was not able to go to college after graduating from high school. She did not consider going to college. She knew she had to get a job to care for her so, so she started working in a factory.

Debra and Rosemary did not know how they would be able to go to college until someone at their high school educated them on how they could go to college. Debra was

a high school student during the 1980s. Her parents did not graduate from high school, and her family's name did not have a positive reputation in her small community. She did not know how she could attend college. Rosemary went to high school during the early 2000s. She grew up in a community where she did not witness many people graduate from high school, let alone attend college. Her relationship with her mother was damaged while she was in high school; therefore, she did not get guidance from her mother about going to college.

Four of the six participants did not have financial support from their families when they decided to go to college. Debra, Rosemary, and Carolyn had to work to support themselves in college. Delores attended college a few years after graduating from high school. She worked a full-time job in college because she had to take care of her son. Carolyn was identified as the "token" Black girl by her African American peers when she was in high school. Being called this by her peers was difficult for Carolyn. Debra, Rosemary, Delores, and Carolyn all grew up in lower socioeconomic households. None of the six participants allowed perceived barriers to become a stumbling block for them on their pathway to the principalship. None of the six participants identified a lack of district support, gender roles, or leadership roles as barriers to their success (Horsford &Tillman, 2012).

Research Question 3: What strategies did the African American female principals use in their efforts to become principals in rural elementary schools in Southwest Georgia?

The six participants' leadership abilities were recognized by others in their schools and school districts. Before getting to that point in their lives, four of the six

participants had to identify specific ways to attain their principalship. The participants' strategies fell under the "education and mentoring" theme. As mentioned before, Debra and Rosemary did not clearly understand how they could go to college after graduating from high school. Debra took the advice of a college recruiter and her older brother. The college recruiter shared with Debra the possibility of enrolling and staying in college until she graduated. Debra identified with the college recruiter as someone who looked like her, and she followed her lead. Debra's older brother allowed her to live with him and his wife while she attended college. While going through a difficult time as a fifteen-year-old in high school, Rosemary did not recognize the possibility of being a college graduate until her high school counselor took an interest in her. Rosemary's high school counselor helped Rosemary study for the high school graduation test and apply to colleges. With the help of the school counselor, Rosemary enrolled in college and graduated. Delores became pregnant as a teenager. After graduating from high school, she went straight into the workforce so she could take care of her son. Delores did not think about going to college until she entered the doors of her son's school and had a chance encounter with a little girl who was sitting in the office. After talking with the little girl about not using profanity and the importance of getting an education, Delores realized the little girl was listening to her. The little girl listened intently with tears in her eyes. Delores felt she had made an impact on the little girl; she recognized she was needed and decided that she wanted to be a teacher. After that moment, Delores decided to enroll in college. She persevered through school while raising her son and working to earn her bachelor's degree in six years. From childhood, Carolyn had been taking the lead in her life since pushing her mother to leave the "unhappy" marriage she was in with her father.

When she learned her mother did not graduate from high school, she understood why her mother did not encourage her to further her education as much as other adults in her life did. Therefore, Carolyn did not have someone in her home to advise her about getting into college. She said she was "navigating on her own" while trying to figure out how she would be able to go to college. Carolyn did the research, enrolled in college, and graduated.

Debra, Rosemary, Delores, and Carolyn grew up in lower socioeconomic households. Their parents were not financially equipped to support them while in college. All four of these six participants had to work while in college. Debra worked at a fast-food restaurant. Rosemary had a knack for doing hair, so she used that talent, and the girls in the dormitory paid her to keep their hair maintained. Delores worked in what she described as "factory work." Carolyn recognized her need to work to attend college, and she did. She mentioned she "had to work."

Debra, Rosemary, Delores, Clara, Dennie, and Carolyn identified the importance of having mentors or "role models." Each of them had someone, a principal, colleague, or district leader, who identified their leadership ability when they were teachers. According to Grant (2012), having a mentor can be considered as having an accountability partner who helps the mentee take responsibility for her actions. Collins' (2000) fourth theme, "the ethic of personal accountability" aligns with the six participants taking responsibility for their success and accepting feedback and guidance from their mentors. These mentors recognized their leadership abilities and encouraged them to become educational leaders. Two of the six participants acknowledged the school principal who hired them to work as teachers for pushing them to pursue educational leadership. Debra and Rosemary were

identified and mentored by their respective school principal as the person each wanted as their assistant principal. These two ladies, Debra and Rosemary, worked in the same school district, and they became principals after two years of working as assistant principals.

Two of the six participants were identified and then mentored by school and district leaders. Delores and Clara each worked with principals who mentored them, but there was someone at the district level who took an interest in them. Delores participated in educational leadership professional learning and gained additional knowledge about the job of a school leader. A female district leader provided her with these opportunities. While being mentored by the district leader, one of the principals recognized Delores' ability to lead, so he hired her as his assistant principal and mentored her to become a principal. Clara had worked in the same school for years under the leadership of the same principal as Delores. The principal recognized Clara was a teacher leader in the school. She encouraged Clara and worked with her to become the leader she was destined to become at the school. Clara followed the lead of her mentor principal and learned everything she could from her mentor principal. Clara continued her mentor mentee relationship with her mentor principal after she went to work at the district office. Clara became the school's assistant principal while that principal was there and then the school principal after the principal was promoted to the district office.

Two of the six participants were content in their line of work until someone saw something more in them. Dennie was happy in her career as a parent involvement coordinator. Even though that was her title, she engaged with teachers, parents, and students as a school leader would engage. A group of principals recognized her leadership

qualities and encouraged her to pursue an assistant principal position. Three veteran principals mentored her through the interview process and the day-to-day function of a school on her journey to become a principal. Carolyn had a master's degree in social work, and she enjoyed working as a school social worker until the day one of her colleagues pulled her aside and told her she had the qualities of a school leader. She was told of an assistant principal position opening at the school where she worked, and she should apply. This colleague was not a school leader, but she knew of Carolyn's work ethic and leadership abilities. Carolyn applied for the assistant principal position and got the job. Carolyn acknowledged the need for African American female principals to "dot all your I's and cross all yours T's…then work harder to stay" in the position.

Spirituality was continuously acknowledged by Debra, Rosemary, Delores, Clara, Dennie, and Carolyn as key to their success. This, along with their individual experiences in the church community contributed to the theme of "religion and spirituality." As noted in Witherspoon and Arnold's (2010) study, all six participants of this research viewed their principalships as a mission, and they felt their religion informed their educational and leadership decisions as well as their philosophies. All six participants attended and participated in the Christian church from their childhood to adulthood. Each of them credited their spiritual upbringing for guiding their pathway. These six participants identified with faith being rooted in race and culture of past events that African American women had to overcome like the Civil Rights Movement, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Reed, 2012). All six participants reminisced about the impact the women in the church had on them. Debra, Delores, and Rosemary credited how the ladies in the church dressed and the impact it had on them in how they professionally dressed. Dennie

appreciated having participated in church programs; learning and reciting speeches for Easter and Christmas programs helped enhance her ability to speak confidently in front of audiences. As a child, Carolyn was active in the church. Attending Sunday school and studying the Sunday school lesson was something she made sure she did. This task helped her to understand the importance of studying and learning. Rosemary, Delores, Clara, Dennie, and Carolyn all spoke about the love the women in the church demonstrated and showed to them.

The participants strategically aligned and pursued what was needed for them to be successful. Five of the six participants were brought up in Southwest Georgia where they continued to live, teach, and work as school leaders. Rosemary was from a small rural community directly north of Southwest Georgia, but she moved to Southwest Georgia where she has continued to live, teach, and work as a school leader. Four participants had to plan or strategize how they would enroll and earn a college degree because they were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Hence, their families could not support them financially when they went to college. All participants had an appreciation for their upbringing in Southwest Georgia, the Christian church, and the lifelong examples the women of the church provided for them. All six participants had mentors who guided them and, in some instances, pushed them to become principals. The role of the participants' mentors and being reared and living in Southwest Georgia were the common identifiers of their pathway to the principalship.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations identified in this study may impact the implications and recommendations found in this chapter's upcoming sections and should be considered

before additional research is conducted on this subject. Upon completion of the study, the researcher identified three primary limitations: researcher bias, limited accessibility to the participants due to the pandemic, and minimal literature related to the topic.

It is sometimes impossible for a qualitative researcher to eliminate her theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens; it is paramount to recognize them and avoid any adverse consequences of the researcher's opinions and conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher identified with the participants. The researcher is an African American female working as a principal of an elementary school in Southwest Georgia where she was brought up. The researcher could identify with four of the six participants because she, too, was raised by a single mother; however, she related to two of the six participants because she was reared in a middle-class socioeconomic environment. The researcher identified with two of the six participants because her grandmother played a significant role in her upbringing. There were other connections between the researcher and the study participants. For example, the researcher and one of the participants were once colleagues and the researcher was that same participant's mentor. The researcher was previously acquainted with two other participants through their affiliation in the same sorority. The other participant and the researcher were employed in the same school district. The researcher recognized and acknowledged the potential bias. The researcher followed the interview guides but informed participants when she added a clarifying question. Some participants had concerns about transcriptionists hearing the recordings of their interviews, so the researcher transcribed all interviews and provided the participants with case records after each interview. The researcher did not share her experiences about becoming a principal with the participants. The stories told and shared were those of the

participants, not the researcher.

Qualitative research usually happens in the field where participants' experiences occur (Creswell, 2009). The participants requested their first two interviews be conducted through a virtual platform because the study was conducted during the heightened time of the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the six participants were allowing parents or visitors to come inside their schools. However, the researcher was allowed to conduct the last interview and observation in the school. The researcher had to wear a mask and could not walk the halls of the school building as she would have been allowed pre-pandemic. The majority of the research occurred on the Google Meets platform. Subsequently, the researcher could not thoroughly witness the participants' day-to-day interaction with the stakeholders in their schools.

The literature focusing on African American principals in rural communities and Southwest Georgia was limited. The researcher found some dissertations focusing on African American female principals and African American male principals. Most of these dissertations did not focus on African American female principals in Southwest Georgia. This study focused on the experiences of African American female elementary school principals who were located in Southwest Georgia. A few pieces of the identified literature focused on principals in urban settings (Bass, 2012; Gooden, 2012; Peters, 2012). The researcher could not find literature that focused on African American female principals in Georgia.

Implications of the Study

This narrative analysis study was conducted to explore the personal and professional lived experiences of African American female principals in Southwest

Georgia. The purpose of the study was to examine their experiences and identify any perceived barriers the participants encountered and strategies they used to overcome those perceived barriers. After completing the data analysis, four main themes (leadership, family and community, education and mentoring, and religion/spirituality) emerged, providing the foundation for the implications of the study. The participants of this study identified positive encounters as well as times they had to persevere on their pathway to become principals. Implications from this research may be valuable to some African American females in Southwest Georgia and beyond who desire to someday work as a school principal.

Implications to School Districts

The six participants in the study represented four school districts. The researcher attempted to select two participants from each school district, but the lack of availability of participants from the fifteen school districts would not allow their representation. The researcher selected two participants from two school districts and one participant each from two additional school districts. Implications for school districts were found within two of the four themes: leadership, education, and mentoring. Each participant mentioned the impact of a colleague who saw leadership abilities and qualities in them. None of the participants mentioned being a part of a mentoring program led by district leaders. Districts should take advantage of opportunities to identify future principals by establishing some form of a teacher leader mentoring program. School districts can provide mentoring and leadership academies, i.e., professional learning opportunities, for teachers who want to become school-level leaders, assistant principals whose goal is to become principals, and principals who desire to work at the district level. Each teacher

leader or administrator can be matched with a mentor who could provide advice, guidance, and opportunities to observe.

Implications to African American Female Educators

African American females who desire to become principals should identify a successful leader, regardless of race or gender, who would be willing to assist them on their journey to becoming a principal. Each of the participants provided advice to African American women who desired to one day be a principal. There was a resounding, "Never give up," "work hard," "dress professionally," "hone [your] skills," and "trust…in the Lord." Most of the six participants persevered through perceived barriers from their childhood and adult experiences. African American females who desire to become principals should try to persevere by acknowledging their skills and putting themselves at the forefront by demonstrating their knowledge. To the best of their ability, they should continue participating in professional learning opportunities and strive to learn and demonstrate the knowledge and skills acquired to make a difference in their school and community.

Implications to Principals

Principals should work to recognize who the potential leaders are in their schools. Teacher leaders can be valuable to the leaders of the school. Most teacher leaders serve as members of the school leadership teams. Teacher leaders who desire to become a principal someday will have what some may describe as a front-row seat to witness what a principal's job entails. When this happens, the principal can then become a mentor or assign mentors to teacher leaders, which will build a pipeline of future assistant principals and principals. Principals can serve as an example and encourage others to someday be in

that position.

Debra, Rosemary, Delores, Clara, Dennie and Carolyn identified teacher leaders in their respective schools, and these teacher leaders served on the schools' leadership teams. All participants alluded to the importance of impacting and mentoring others to become school principals. The participants in this study all wanted to be change agents and "pay it forward." These African American females wanted to encourage and inspire those they lead to want to lead.

Recommendations

This narrative analysis contributes new information to the current body of literature on family and community, mentoring, spirituality, and the pathway to the principalship. Six African American female elementary school principals shared their personal and professional lived experiences to identify the perceived barriers on their pathway to becoming principals of schools in Southwest Georgia and the strategies which allowed them to be successful. Each participant's sense of education and mentoring contributed to the researcher's findings of this research. After the researcher considered all of the research data, the following recommendations for future research emerged, study limitations, and findings from existing literature.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Increase Sample Size

Future studies related to African American female elementary school principals' experiences pursuing becoming a principal should use a larger sample size. This study included six participants. This sample size was adequate for narrative analysis, but a larger sample size may provide additional data to add to the current literature.

Geographic Region

This study focused on the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. This area of Georgia is rural. The researcher recommends conducting this study in Georgia's metropolitan or urban areas. The results of this study could then be compared to the results of a study of the experiences of principals in metropolitan regions in Georgia. Since Georgia is a southern state, the results of both studies could be compared to determine if principals in the rural south have different experiences compared to principals in southern states.

Conduct Longitudinal Study of Teacher Leaders

Future studies can consider starting research study of teacher leaders who identified as potential candidates for assistant principals in a school district. The study could follow them through a district's leadership teacher to leader program. The study could focus on the experiences of the teacher leaders and perceived barriers and strategies encountered on their pathways. Ideally, some consideration could be given to focusing the research on African American female teacher leaders.

Conduct Study of Effective Mentorships

Future research studies could focus on school districts' effective mentoring programs that focus on mentoring African American females. School districts will identify African American teacher leaders who desire to be school leaders and match them with a mentor. The study will include African American and White mentors. The mentor mentee relationships will be studied.

Conclusion

This qualitative research focused on six African American female principals'

personal and professional life experiences in Southwest Georgia. Creswell (2009) identified the central idea of narrative analysis as narratives that can provide a translucent window of opportunity into cultural and social meanings. Narrative researchers who are committed to a feminist approach to research tend to agree with the three central theoretical goals (individual lives used as the primary source of data, narratives of self, allowed the researcher to generate social critique and advocacy, and there is a concern to deconstruct self as a humanistic conception) that structure narrative research (Merriam, 2002).

Participants in this study shared stories of their personal and professional experiences. While the participants experienced barriers that impeded their journey to becoming principals of schools in rural Southwest Georgia, they were able to reach their goals. Throughout the research, the four themes examined by Black feminist thought were relevant to the personal stories of the six African American female participants; their narratives were unique, and some of their experiences overlapped (Fuller, et al., 2019). Six African American female elementary principals in Southwest Georgia bridged the disconnect of their personal and professional lives when they shared their lived experiences by engaging in dialogues about their knowledge and by sharing their ethic of caring as well as their ethic of personal accountability (Clemons, 2019; Collins, 2000). Based on data gathered, the researcher concludes African American females pursuing principal positions need to embark on understanding the value and importance of quality education, diminishing perceived barriers by establishing strategies, and understanding the impact mentorships can have on their pathway to principalship.

None of the six participants identified barriers impeding their pathway to the

principalship. Why did six African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia experience such an easy transition into a principalship? Mentoring was identified as the key that opened the door for these school principals. Each of the six participants had a school principal, a colleague, or a district level administrator that recognized their leadership qualities and abilities. Not one of the participants were marginalized or made to feel as if their race or gender would hold them back from being a school principal.

Each of the participants acknowledged those who mentored them to their principalships. They all acknowledged the positive. Mentoring can be vital to the success of people who are striving to reach personal or professional goals. In education, mentors are at times identified to assist in the professional growth of other educators. Even though these participants identified mentoring as most impactful to them becoming principals in Southwest Georgia schools. Did the mentors pave the way for them because they saw there was a need for African American females to serve in elementary schools where the student population was majority African American? Most of the students at these schools were identified as "at risk" based on the state's CCRPI scores. Two of the six participants were moved to schools because their school superintendents needed them to help bring order to those schools. Some of the African American female principals in Southwest Georgia were identified to work in schools that were struggling in order to establish some type of structure or order to the schools.

African American females in Southwest Georgia who desire to become principals must exude a strong work ethic as all six of the participants demonstrated. They should conduct themselves "beyond reproach" and with professionalism in dress and demeanor.

Therefore, African American females in Southwest Georgia must work hard, never give up, and work so that someone notices their efforts and leadership qualities. When African Americans in Southwest Georgia does these things, a mentor (principal or district level administrator) may recognize her and mentor her to become a principal in a rural Southwest Georgia school.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER TO SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Sharonda Lynn Wilson
339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

October 17, 2021

Dear Superintendent of Schools:

As a candidate for the Ed.D. degree at Valdosta State University, Department of Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development Department, I am requesting permission to conduct research for my doctoral dissertation with your school system's principals this fall semester.

The study will invite African American female principals from the Southwest Georgia RESA district to participate. Using qualitative methods by means of interviews of select principals, the focus of the research will be on the experiences of the African American female on becoming a school principal in rural elementary schools. Through this study, the history of African American female educational leaders, their career choices, successes, barriers, and the impact of women in leadership will be identified. Racial and gender composition, as well as the intersectionality of race and gender, will be expounded on throughout the research.

Your assistance is requested in identifying any elementary school principals in your system who are African American females. Upon your agreement, an email invitation to participate will be sent to select principals from the RESA district. The goal is to invite 2 principals from your school system. The identification of all participants will remain anonymous. Privacy and confidentiality will be strictly observed.

In the event you do not wish principals from your system to participate, indicate by checking the designated box and return to my attention at your earliest convenience. I appreciate your willingness to assist me by providing this information. If you need to contact me for additional information, please do not hesitate, and I will address all questions and concerns.

Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

☐ ***I do not wish for our system principals to participate.***

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Sharonda L. Wilson at *slwilson@valdosta.edu*. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Sharonda Lynn Wilson
339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

Dear Dr. [redacted]

My name is Sharonda L. Wilson. I am [redacted] in Thomasville, Georgia, and I am currently a graduate student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research on the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. I am also an African American female elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia in the Thomasville City School System. I have been granted permission from Superintendent [redacted] to contact you.
My hope is that you are willing to assist me in completing the research for my dissertation by being one of the 6 participants in my study. If you are willing to be a participant, the following is what I will need from you:

- 3 interviews
- 1 30-minute in-school observation

I know that your time is valuable, and I truly understand. Therefore, the interviews and one observation can be scheduled according to your schedule. The interviews can also be either face-to-face or virtual. I will not have to interact with you or take up any of your time during the observation. I will truly appreciate your willingness to assist me to accomplish the goal of completing my doctoral degree.

I am attaching the *Consent to Participate in Research* form for your review. I will also provide a copy at the first interview for you to sign. Please know that each participant, school, and school system in the study will be given pseudonyms. Please reply to this email letting me know if you are willing to be a participant. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or at 229-289-7700.

Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

Sharonda Lynn Wilson
339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

Dear Dr. [redacted],

Thank you again for agreeing to be a participant in my research. Regarding my research that you have agreed to participate in, I want to share the information below with you. If possible, please let me know a day and time you are available for the first interview.

My name is Sharonda L. Wilson. I am currently a graduate student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research on the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. I am also an African American female elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia in the Thomasville City School System. I have been granted permission from Superintendent [redacted] to contact you. Dr. [redacted] also recommended you as a potential participant.

My hope is that you are willing to assist me in completing the research for my dissertation by being one of the 6 participants of my study. If you are willing to be a participant, the following is what I will need from you:

- 3 interviews
- 1 30-minute in-school observation

I know that your time is valuable, and I truly understand. Therefore, the interviews and one observation can be scheduled according to your schedule. The interviews can also be either face-to-face or virtual. I will not have to interact with you or take up any of your time during the observation. I will truly appreciate your willingness to assist me to accomplish the goal of completing my doctoral degree.

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Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

Sharonda Lynn Wilson
339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

Dear Mrs. [redacted],

My name is Sharonda L. Wilson. I am currently a graduate student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research on the experiences of African American female elementary school principals in Southwest Georgia. I am also an African American female elementary school principal in Southwest Georgia in the Thomasville City School System. I have been granted permission from Superintendent [redacted] to contact you.
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Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

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339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

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Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

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339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
slwilson@valdosta.edu
(229)289-7700

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My hope is that you are willing to assist me in completing the research for my dissertation by being one of the 6 participants in my study. If you are willing to be a participant, the following is what I will need from you:

- 3 interviews
- 1 30-minute in-school observation

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Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

Sharonda Lynn Wilson
339 White Blossom Trail
Thomasville, GA 31757
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My hope is that you are willing to assist me in completing the research for my dissertation by being one of the 6 participants in my study. If you are willing to be a participant, the following is what I will need from you:

- 3 interviews
- 1 30-minute in-school observation

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Sincerely,

Sharonda L. Wilson

APPENDIX C

LETTERS OF INFORMED CONSENT

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

[illegible]

[redacted]

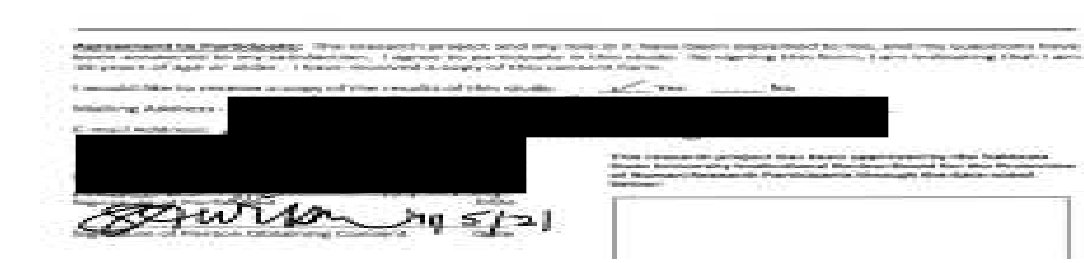
[redacted]

WALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

[redacted]

[redacted]



[redacted]

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

[redacted]

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

[redacted]

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW ONE QUESTIONS

Interview One Questions
The Experiences of African American Female Elementary School Principals in Southwest Georgia

Interview One: Community and Family

I am going to ask you some questions, but I want it to seem like a casual conversation. If some additional questions come out of our dialogue, I will ask and may follow up on the next interview. If you have any suggestions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know. The purpose of the questions in this interview is for me to gather background about you focusing on your experiences and interactions that may have led to you becoming an educator.

1. Where did you grow up?
    a. Describe the community where you spent your childhood and teenage years. Include the name of the city, and state.
    b. Describe the demographics of your neighborhood.

2. Describe your immediate and extended family.

3. Who were the people in your life that impacted your life choices during
    a. Your childhood
    b. Teen years
    c. Adulthood (going to college or becoming an educator)

    How did each one influence your life?

4. Describe the family values and behavior expectations growing up in your family environment.

5. How important was education to your family?

6. What kind of family support did you get when you decided to pursue your college education?

7. Did you witness African American females in your community who influenced your decision to become an educator? If not, who or what influenced your decision to become an educator?

8. Did you have African American female educators in your community, or did you have African American female educators as a student? If not, describe the educators you had in your community and as a student.

9. At what moment did you know you wanted to work in education?

10. How long have you been in education and what roles/capacities have you held?

11. How long did you work as a teacher before deciding to pursue educational leadership?

12. Were you encouraged or did you "see" great examples of educators?

13. Describe your mentors or influencers in your life.

14. Describe the various social justice movements in your city or neighborhood (Civil Rights Movement, Women's Rights, etc.).

15. Did religion or participation in church contribute to your academic, social, and moral development as a child or adolescence?

16. Did you play a role in your church and if so, what was your role in your church during your childhood and adolescence?

17. Did you observe caring adults in your church setting? If so, describe them.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW TWO QUESTIONS

Interview Two Questions

The Experiences of African American Female Elementary School Principals in Southwest Georgia

Interview Two: Education and Leadership

I am going to ask you some questions, but I want it to seem like a casual conversation. If some additional questions come out of our dialogue, I will ask and may follow up on the next interview. If you have any suggestions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know. The purpose of the questions in this interview is to gain information about you from student to leader.

1. Describe your educational experience from K-12 to post-secondary.

2. How did your early educational experiences impact your career choice, or did it?

3. What obstacles, if any, impeded or positively influenced your progress while in college? (e.g., racism, sexism, food insecurity, housing insecurity, economic disadvantages)

4. How did you overcome these obstacles?

5. Did any of these obstacles influence your career path?

6. Describe your professional experiences as an educator?

7. Why did you decide to become a principal, or did you make that decision?

8. Describe your leadership style.

9. Describe the school where you serve as principal and the demographics of your school.

    a. Students
    b. Faculty and Staff
    c. Community

10. Describe elements of your school culture and climate?

11. Describe what you identify as “at-risk” populations at your school.

12. How involved are the parents at your school? If you were principal of the school pre-COVID, describe parent involvement.

13. How has the pandemic impacted your leadership?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW THREE QUESTIONS

Interview Three Questions

The Experiences of African American Female Elementary School Principals in Southwest Georgia

Interview Three: The Principalship

I am going to ask you some questions, but I want it to seem like a casual conversation. If some additional questions come out of our dialogue, I will ask and may follow up on the next interview. If you have any suggestions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know. The purpose of the questions in this interview is to gain information about you as a school principal.

1. How do you view your job as an elementary school principal?

2. Tell me what you consider to be the most rewarding about being an elementary school principal?

3. Tell me about your leadership team.

4. Describe your relationship with your
    a. Staff
    b. Students
    c. Parents
5. How do you handle difficult situations on the job?

6. Now, as you reflect over your years as a principal, share with me how you see yourself being a change agent and/or "paying it forward" to other African American females who may be interested in one day being like you.

7. What advice would you give to African American women who desire to become a school principal, but have not had the opportunity?

APPENDIX G

IRB PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT/RESEARCH APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04235-2021 **Responsible Researcher(s):** Sharonda L. Wilson

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Michael Bochenko

Project Title: *The Experiences of African American Female Principals in Southwest Georgia.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *This protocol has been approved to begin in the following school districts effective 11.01.2021:*
  - [redacted]
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** recording of interviews provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from all devices. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings.*
- *To maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate file, from corresponding name lists, email addresses, etc.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant's understanding, and establishing willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- *Upon completion of the research study collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 11.01.2021
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16