After Opportunity Knocks: Factors Associated with the Persistence of Middle- and Late-career African American Female Principals

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After Opportunity Knocks: Factors Associated with the Persistence of Middle- and Late-career African American Female Principals

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AFTER OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PERSISTENCE OF MIDDLE- AND LATE-CAREER AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PRINCIPALS

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ASHLAND UNIVERSITY, 2016

Dr. James Olive

This study explored factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals. In addition to the central focus, this study also sought to determine what roles race and gender, identity shifts, psychological contracts and role definition played in the persistence of these principals. There is limited research surrounding the lived experiences of African American female principals with little emphasis on middle- and late-career females. This study employed a qualitative design utilizing five principals from the same midwestern state. All participants had served as principals for a minimum of ten years, and were involved in in-depth interviews. Once interview and document data were collected, several themes emerged: a) Personal characteristics, b) Servant leadership, and c) Spiritual Guidance. Issues surrounding the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals within past and present educational settings are discussed in this study, followed by implications, and researcher reflections.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and my Creator; my mother, Joyce, who continued to encourage me throughout the entire process and never doubted my ability to succeed; my husband, Walter for his love, patience and understanding; and my daughters, Cortney, and Chelsea who gave me light on the darkest days. Please remember to wait patiently for opportunity to knock and remember there is work to be done once you have walked through that door. I also dedicate this to my sister, Stephanie, who continued to inspire me; and, most importantly my father, Milton, for instilling in me the importance of high character, strong convictions, and unyielding courage. My God guided me toward this purpose, one that is greater than myself. All have helped me navigate this path, embrace the sweet sound of opportunity knocking, and given me the will to persist. For that, I am truly grateful.
Acknowledgments

I begin by giving special thanks to the women who agreed to participate in this study. Without them, I would not have been able to accomplish my dream. I learned something special from each participant, all of which provided me inspiration and motivation. A special thank you to Dr. James Olive whose tough love, unyielding support, and sense of humor combined to create the perfect recipe for my successful completion of this study. I also wish to thank Dr. Judy Alston and Dr. Rosaire Ifedl for enabling me to seize the opportunities presented before me. I could not have accomplished this without them.

Thanks to the entire Ashland University doctoral program faculty and staff, especially to retired professor, Dr. Carla Edlefson, who convinced me that I could accomplish this goal, and clearly saw something in me that I could not initially see for myself. Finally, thanks to Cohort 16 who provided me with great memories and lasting friendships.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In her 2015 acceptance speech as the first African American female to win a primetime Emmy award in the drama category, actress Viola Davis stated, “the only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity” (Gold, 2015). This study explored the factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals after they seized their opportunities to become school leaders. Although these women took advantage of the opportunities given them, they also impacted the lives of hundreds of children and their families by choosing to persist for over a decade.

The demographic profile of our nation’s schools is changing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In spite of the increasing cultural and racial diversity of student populations, there remains a disproportionate number of African American female principals employed in schools throughout the country, as compared to their White male and female and African American male counterparts. This skewed distribution of African American female school leaders suggests a need to explore the experiences and practices of these underrepresented educational leaders. According to Irvine (1988), principals who effectively lead schools with diverse student populations should demonstrate “resilience, patience, creativity, flexibility, the ability to inspire and motivate…and above all a desire to teach minority and at-risk students [as well as] understand Afro-American and other minorities’ cultural heritage and history” (p. 510).
Many of these African American females possess the ability to demonstrate such qualities, and their persistence is worthy of further study.

Because our nation’s schools continue to become more culturally and racially diverse (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), members of the educational community must examine the impact of that diversification on the relationships formed between students, parents, teachers and administrators. This examination can provide educational leaders and policymakers with a better understanding of the complexities facing today’s principals. It is also important to study the characteristics of the leaders charged with managing these schools, the unique challenges faced by many African American school leaders, and how some have persisted for extended periods of time despite these challenges. Although data reflect that nearly 82% of our nation’s public school teachers are White, and 76.3% are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), there are significantly fewer principals who are both Black and female. This is particularly important because, demographically, over 70% of students in the 66 largest urban school districts across the country represent Black and Brown populations (Council of the Great City Schools, 2013). In other words, the number of non-White educational administrators in our nation’s schools is disproportionately small. This disproportion increases when the number focuses solely on African American females. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that of the nearly 90,000 public school principals in 2011-2012, fewer than 12% of them were both Black and female (Table 1). Historically, African American school leaders have served as both advocates for, and role models within their communities (Tillman, 2008). Female leaders, specifically, have provided such services
to the community as well. The diminishing pool of African American school leadership candidates, coupled with fewer opportunities for advancement than their White counterparts, supports the justification for further research on the topic (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009). This study will contribute to existing research on female principals of African American descent who have served in their roles for a decade or longer. The characteristics, experiences, and practices of these women were examined in the context of their abilities to persist despite challenges related to class, race, and gender.

Because African American females are most likely to lead urban schools with high percentages of non-White, poor, or working-class students in urban settings, this study is particularly relevant when considering our nation’s changing demographics (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). When specifically addressing the needs of students of color, African American principals have the capacity to provide an understanding of, and empathy for, the experiences of these students. Additionally, it is quite probable that the presence of educators of color in all school settings can positively impact the assumptions, beliefs, and values of students. A recent study conducted by American and Johns Hopkins Universities found that Black teachers expressed higher academic expectations of their Black students than did teachers of other races. The study went on to suggest that Black female teachers were more likely than any other demographic to expect Black males in particular to graduate from high school (Johns Hopkins University, 2016). Another study found similar results, suggesting that own-race educators can positively impact student achievement (Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015). One such anecdotal example is reflected in a recent social media post.
made by a second-year African American female teacher who is employed in a predominantly White middle school:

Today, I had a student say he liked me as a teacher because I was black . . . he said it was weird because he never had a black teacher before, but in his words, “it's good though because it makes me think that I have a chance to be something,” I was taken aback a little, but also a little sad to think he thinks he doesn't have a chance because he's black.

A White colleague replied to the post:

We need to have more minority role models in all schools, not because they are good for students of their own race, or religious choice, but because they are a good role model for ALL students (personal communication, December 16, 2015).

This brief conversation underscores the need for further examination of the problem. Not only do the shared realities of African American educators and their students of color have the potential to positively impact academic achievement, but the presence of educators of color in all school settings can potentially provide more inclusive perspectives (Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2003). As the demographic profile of our nation’s schools continues to change, efforts to recruit and retain quality African American female principals must be increased. This study seeks to explore how such women have persisted over time.

**Statement of the Problem**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) over 50% of the nation’s school principals were female in the year 2011, yet only 10% of these were
African American men and women; of these principals, fewer than 12% were African American females. This number decreases to nearly 10% for principals who have persisted for 10 years or longer (Table 1). Unfortunately, of all new principals regardless of race or gender, nearly 50% will resign by their third year in the position (Tyre, 2015). This statistic is particularly problematic considering that it can take up to five years to improve the academic culture of a school (School Leaders Network, 2014). Viadero (2009) stated that “the principal pipeline seems to leak the most from schools with large concentrations of minority students and from low-performing schools,” and went on to describe how Missouri typically loses 50% of its principals within five years of employment, and 75% of New York’s principals rarely remain in their schools beyond six years (p. 3). Constant turnover of school leaders can impede the progress of their students; this may be especially true in low-income districts. The role of the principal is critical to the academic success of the students enrolled in his or her buildings; in fact, 25% of student academic achievement can be directly related to the quality of the school administrator (Tyre, 2015). Viadero (2009) stated that the highest turnover rates of principals were found in schools with “large concentrations of minority students,” and that many of these principals leave within five years (p. 34).

As the numbers of African American and other students of color enrolled in our public schools continue to increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), African Americans represent a relatively small percentage of principals. In one specific instance, Grubb (2002) factored both race and gender into the profile of South Georgia’s school principals in the year 2002 and found no African American female secondary principals, 12.5% African American female principals in elementary schools, and only
6% African American female principals in middle schools. Although these data reflect a small sample, they do suggest the need for more effective systems of recruitment and retention of African American females in school leadership positions. In order to support continued investigation of measures for recruitment and retention of African American females in school leadership and other positions, it is helpful to explore the characteristics, experiences, and practices of middle- and late-career female principals, and how they have persisted despite challenges related to race and gender.

Table 1

*Percentage of female public school principals by age, race, and years of experience: 2011-2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Principal Characteristics</th>
<th>Female. Hispanic, Regardless of Race</th>
<th>Female. White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Female. Black, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Female. Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All public Schools</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Years or more of Principal Experience</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 45 years</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 years old</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 years or more</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this critical ethnographic study is to better understand the factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals, and how they have experienced issues related to race, gender, identity and role definition. The factors are described through in-depth interviews and examination of artifacts. This study includes an examination of psychological contracts, identity shifts and perseverance strategies of these women, and serves to expand on the current literature. To address gaps in the limited research conducted concerning African
American female principals, this study focuses solely on middle- and late-career principals. Additionally, the study will introduce the use of psychological contracts and persistence strategies found to be used effectively for a decade or longer. Upon conclusion of the study, the data will serve to inform practices of school leaders and policy makers in order to improve the continued recruitment and retention of African American females as principals.

**Research Questions**

Using a critical lens, this ethnography sought to answer the question: What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals? In addition to the primary research question, several subquestions were posed: (a) How do issues of race and gender impact middle- and late-career African American female principals? (b) What identity shifts do middle- and late-career African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles? and (c) How do clearly defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

**Significance of the Study**

It is important to understand the factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals in order to better understand the challenges they face and eliminate barriers to their success. Few, if any, studies focus on late career principals and the strategies they have used to persist. This study sought, to not only better understand such challenges, but add to the existing literature by examining how psychological contracts, the use of identity shifts, and the significance of past experiences impact the retention of these principals. The significance of understanding
how these principals were able to persist for a decade or longer despite challenges related to class, race, and gender can result in a call to action within school districts. This study can serve to not only inform the practices of policy makers and educational leaders as they attempt to diversify the demographic profile of school principals, but can also offer validation to the African American females who currently occupy educational leadership positions within our nation’s schools.

The factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals are likely shared by many other women of color, yet there is limited research on the topic. Prospective and early career principals can consider the experiences of those who have come before them as they assume their leadership positions, and other middle- and late-career principals can use the study to validate their own efforts to persist. The language used to describe the stories of the participants can provide both guidance and direction for present and future principals, regardless of race or gender, and can add to the limited collection of research on the topic. Furthermore, research has suggested that principal turnover has a direct impact on teacher turnover, which, in turn, can impact student achievement (Fuller, 2012). The issue of turnover is especially of concern when addressing educators of color. According to Indersoll, Merrill and Stuckey (2014), although the number of new teachers from under-represented racial groups has risen slightly in recent years, retention rates of these individuals have continued to decline. Between 1980 and 2010, the rate of minority teacher turnover increased by 28%, a rate slightly higher than that of White teachers (Ingersoll, et.al. 2014). Additionally, higher attrition rates of principals led to turnover of teachers from all racial groups, rates that can negatively impact student achievement (Béteille, Kalogrides
By examining the factors associated with persistence, this study can articulate both strategies and characteristics deemed necessary in order to exceed a decade or longer of school leadership. Additionally, these experiences can be considered when supporting efforts to retain African American educators both within and outside the classrooms of our nation’s schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

Ethnographic studies are best conducted when research questions seek to gain understanding of social interactions, culture, and context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This qualitative, critical ethnographic study incorporates several theories to seek answers to the questions about middle- and late-career African American female principals. In order to effectively capture the personal and professional realities of the participants, social exchange and psychological contracts was examined. Social constructivist and theories of intersectionality also serve as theoretical frameworks because of their foci on the individuals’ views of reality as well as their ongoing efforts to manage multiple identities. Each subquestion is related to the primary research question and was framed using a different, yet related, theoretical framework in order to present a thorough examination of the experiences, characteristics, and practices of the female principals involved in the study.

The theoretical framework of this study draws from the following areas: social exchange theory and the associated psychological contracts, cognitive and social constructivism, intersectionality and identity, and critical race theory. Each theory, collectively addresses the characteristics, experiences and practices of middle- and late-
career African American female principals that enable them to persist and overcome challenges related to race, gender and culture.

The critical lens used in the study assumes the influence of a dominant ideology and an imbalance of power with regard to race, gender, and culture. This epistemological view suggests that racial, gender, and cultural barriers influence leadership behaviors and practices. Marshall and Oliva (2010) described critical theory as one that looks closely at social and economic structures, and how these can impact the degree to which educational leaders can function as agents of change. These educational leaders engage in their own unique processes of sense-making as they interact with students, teachers, and community members. This may be especially true for female leaders of color as they balance their racial, gender, and cultural identities; formed in part by specific social and cultural factors.

As a critical theorist, I believe that power relationships within society can, and often are reinforced within school settings. School leaders possess the capacity to influence these relationships through empowering those within their school settings to increase their social capital and capacity for change (Marshall & Olivia, 2010). Because of the critical nature of this inquiry, my voice [the researcher] will emerge at times throughout the study, particularly in the analysis section. Through exploring the world of the participating principals, I was able to identify with specific challenges, and describe how the participants’ personal characteristics aided them in persisting within their school settings. In addition to embracing critical theorist views, this study was also conducted with the overarching belief in the constructivist view that posits the important role of past experience in informing the practices and dispositions of educational leaders.
My assumptions are embedded in the research questions, and include the belief that class, race, and gender have likely posed obstacles to the participants’ success. These assumptions also led to my examination of this particular population of principals, and how their characteristics and past experiences may have impacted their abilities to persist for a decade or longer. Additionally, my focus on the personal and professional characteristics of these members of under-represented groups [African American females] in school leadership supported a “value mediated” epistemological approach as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 110), which allows for a blend of both researcher and participant values throughout the study.

**Social Exchange Theory.** Cherry (2015) described social exchange theory as one involving an exchange of perceived benefits and risks between parties as relationships are formed. In essence, the researcher argues that individuals analyze the costs and benefits of any relationship and as a result choose to continue or terminate depending on the projected outcome. In addition to measuring the costs and benefits, social exchange theory posits that individuals estimate the satisfaction and commitment levels associated with a given relationship. Two measures that individuals use to drive their commitment and satisfaction levels in a given relationship are the *comparison level* (CL) and the *comparison level for alternatives* (CLalt); each of which is used to determine the value of a given relationship (Thompson, 2008). If an individual concludes that a different relationship will provide them a better “deal” they will more likely sever ties and move to the new situation (Thompson, 2008, p. 93).

These African American females were required to make decisions about the relationships formed between themselves, their employers and their teachers. These
decisions impacted the quality of the relationships and contributed to their decisions to persist in their positions for a decade or longer. This does not imply that these principals remained in the same setting throughout their tenure. As settings changed, it is assumed that so, too, did relationships. Tenets of the social exchange theory can provide insight into the dynamics of the relationships within which each principal entered, and their individual levels of satisfaction and commitment as a result.

**Social Exchange Theory and Psychological Contracts**

In determining what psychological contracts emerged between African American female principals and their stakeholders, and how those contracts may have facilitated the longevity of their employment, social exchanges were examined. In each case, the African American female principals secured and continued their employment as principals for at least a decade. The manner in which information was exchanged and psychological contracts were formed informs the research question. Because these women sustained their tenure as principals, for a decade or longer, it is assumed that they, at some point experienced disruptions, whether planned or unplanned, in their role expectations. If the role definitions were somehow disrupted, negotiations between themselves and their districts were necessary. These negotiations likely involved various degrees of social exchange in order to redefine the expectations of both parties and sustain the principals’ employment.

**Model of Planned Renegotiation of Psychological Contracts.** The assumptions contained in Sherwood and Glidewell’s (1973) model of planned renegotiation in the creation of psychological contracts reflects those within social exchange theory. The model examines relationships between individuals and groups and
how these can provide stability in organizations. The four phases of the model include
(a) Sharing of information, (b) Commitment, (c) Stability, and (d) Productivity and
disruption (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1973, pp. 195-196). In each phase, of this cycle,
relationships are established and information is exchanged.

During the first phase of the cycle, a relationship is established between
individuals. Here, once initial contact is made, individuals generate impressions and
perceptions. Standards of behavior are communicated or implied. Each party formulates
impressions and determines the value of sustaining the relationship. The second phase
involves a commitment between parties. This commitment is based upon a shared
understanding of what each can expect from the other. According to Sherwood and
Glidewell (1972), “the more important the relationship, the more evidence of
commitment is required,” in order for shared expectations to be cemented into the
relationship (p. 36).

Once individuals commit to the relationship, it becomes stable and productive.
This phase is characterized by each party behaving in ways that are consistent with the
shared expectations reached in the previous phase. As long as the behavior of the parties
involved in the relationship are consistent with shared expectations, the relationship
remains stable. Inevitably, internal or external events will occur that will disrupt this
stability.

During the final phase of the model, one or more of the parties involved in the
relationship violates the commitment. In other words, the psychological contract is
broken. This disruption can be caused by external forces such as newly enacted policies
or by internal forces such as failing to share important information or developmental
changes in one of the parties (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1973). Examples of such disruptions can include enacting No Child Left Behind mandates, experiencing a reorganization of a district, or adding new responsibilities to a currently held position.

The significance of this model (Figure 1) as related to the research question rests with the fluidity of the relationships formed between African American female principals and their stakeholders or employers. These relationships, and the inevitable disruptions impacted the persistence and fortitude of these women in their leadership roles. How these middle- and late-career principals involved themselves in planned or unplanned renegotiation of these relationships reflects their demonstrated abilities to sustain their positions for a decade or longer.

![Figure 1. Model of Planned Renegotiation: A Norm-Setting OD Intervention](image)

*Note. From “Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators”, by PFEIFFER, J. WILLIAM, 1973 (HARD) Reproduced with permission of JOHN WILEY & SONS, INCORPORATED in the format Other Published Product via Copyright Clearance Center (Appendix A).*

**Constructivist Theories**

The means by which the question of how African American female principals construct their views of education through lived experiences is addressed through use of
constructivist theories. According to Charmaz (2006) constructivists focus on both why and how individuals see the world the way they do. Behaviors are the result of the individual’s construction of meaning. These meanings are derived from past experiences and how the individual has made sense of the outcome. The interpretive assumptions reflected in this study are also based on Vygotsky’s theory of social construction. This theory is based on the belief that knowledge and meaning are gained through the process of social constructions based on interactive experiences (University College Dublin, 2015).

**Social Constructivist Theory.** Theorist Lev Vygotsky argued that the acquisition of knowledge is contingent upon interaction between individuals (Bredekamp, 2014). Furthermore, his theory posits that this process of building knowledge is dependent upon the use of language, such as when individuals struggle with unfamiliar concepts. The struggle is minimized when the individual talks about the problem with another person. This exchange is based in large part on the cultural background of the individuals. Neff (2016) explained how Vygotsky viewed the construction of knowledge as supported by cultural influences that determine social rules, develop communication skills, and foster abilities to navigate social terrain. The important role of culture in the interactions of individuals within social contexts is relevant to the discussion of African American female principals. This role suggests that an individual’s family and community ties may influence their ability to communicate across cultures, and can be reflected in certain code switching and identity shifting behaviors displayed by participating principals. These behaviors may emerge and vary according to the past experiences of principals, and can provide insight into their personal and professional
characteristics. According to Vygotsky, this process of sense-making occurs long before adulthood, and “…any learning a child encounters in school has a previous history” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84). This study assumes that previous histories of cultural learning and interaction can apply to the behaviors of principals as well.

A central mechanism in social constructivist theory is *semiotic mediation* which refers to the social and psychological tools that individuals use to construct knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). This process is centered on the use of language and is defined as “something by someone to someone else by means of the modality of language” (Hasan, 2001, p. 3). These tools that enable an individual to learn and function in society are acquired through interacting with others in the family and community. By observing, experiencing and communicating cultural practices, individuals learn how to function in society. The collaborative versus individualistic nature of the past experiences of African American female principals can have an impact on the ways in which they have navigated their roles over time. How African American female principals have made sense of their experiences through use of interpersonal communication with others can be examined through use of social construction theory. The past experiences of African American females will reflect their uses of language as symbols for cultural transmission, and can be examined in the context of past and present experiences in order to gain insight into the development of certain personal and professional characteristics.

**Intersectionality, Race and Identity Theories.** Theories of intersectionality, identity, and critical race provide appropriate frameworks for the study of identity shifts related to class, race, and gender. Middle- and late-career African American female
principals often experience shifts in role clarity while fulfilling their leadership roles. How these shifts support their persistence and fortitude was examined through these theories. The central tenet of intersectionality theory includes the recognition that social identities are “neither exclusive nor discrete” and, therefore, they may overlap (Few-Demo, 2014, p. 169). At times these identities may also conflict, yet individuals continue to involve themselves in efforts to “negotiate systems of privilege, oppression and opportunity” throughout their lives by embracing and shifting their multiple identities (Few-Demo, 2014, p. 170). In this study, intersectionality theory was narrowed to include the specific experiences of principals who are both African American and female. This narrowed view is described as an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and involves the examination of unique standpoints characterized by the class, race and gender of African American women (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). How these women shift their identities in ways that benefit themselves and their students, and how the intersection of these identities pose both challenges and benefits was examined in the study.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory was originally developed as a means to critically analyze legal issues surrounding race, but has since expanded its application to a variety of disciplines (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2015). A major tenet of the theory argues that racism exists within society and is perpetuated by those who wield power, privilege, and influence. Additionally, critical race theorists dispute the meritocracy narrative that is shared by many of those in power and instead focus on the inequities that exist between members of dominant and disempowered groups (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2015). These inequities are viewed to be framed by racial bias and impede the ability of certain groups to succeed with merit. Although this theory
focuses on similar issues embraced during the civil rights movement, it expands to include “economics, history, context, group and self-interest and even feelings and the unconscious” (Delgado, Stefancic & Harris, 2006). The use of stories and lived experiences of those who benefit from and are oppressed by issues of race is a major facet of critical race theory in educational research (Leonardo, 2013). These experiences combine to illustrate the social realities of individuals of color, and how their racial identities impact their daily lives. These realities are viewed through a critical lens which challenges constructs promoted by those with power and influence within society. The females involved in the study have prescriptive stories to share regarding their characteristics, construction of experiences and practices, and how these have been impacted by their class, race, and gender.

**Researcher’s Lens**

Several years ago in the early phase of my doctoral studies, I recall a presentation made by several classmates. The overarching purpose of the presentation escapes me, but I vividly recall a discussion surrounding the absence of African American females as principals in our nation’s schools. I was taken aback at the small percentage of these women who currently served as educational leaders. Although my initial interest began with a focus on multicultural classroom teachers, I found myself repeatedly reflecting on the discussion about female principals of color. I became increasingly interested in the roles African American women played in leading our diverse student populations, and more importantly wondered why so few of them persisted in today’s schools. As a critical researcher, I wanted to learn about the issues of power, persistence, privilege, and penalty in the journeys of these women.
This study sought to capture the experiences of middle- and late-career females by providing rich descriptions of their personal and professional realities. As stated by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) ethnographic studies involve the examination of how individuals make sense of their interactions, and how this sense-making is communicated to others. Additionally, as a critical theorist, I believe that those in power control what is known, how it is taught and who teaches it. I also believe that in order to form a more just society, systems of power must be acknowledged and educators must involve themselves in what Milner (2007) described as interest convergence where those in power and those without power find solutions that will serve to empower, but not threaten. Because of this view, I believe that a reality exists that is still to be discovered by those who have lived it, but may or may not have acknowledged or voiced it. This reality involves the existence of varied perceptions formed, in part, by constructions of race, gender, and class. These perceptions are created based on past experiences, and I believe they guide the decisions made within and outside school settings. I aim to turn up the volume of the voices of these female leaders, and in so doing, wield my own power to influence what is known, who knows it and how it is shared with others.

I see my role as an educator and researcher as one that will help bring about “equity, fairness and social justice” (Ornstein & Levine, 2008, p. 191) by helping others discover these sometimes unseen realities. As Ladson-Billings (2001) suggested, education can be used to liberate and empower when approached with a critical theory lens. This study uses a critical ethno-methodological approach that will examine the participants’ perspectives through a critical lens. I approached this study with a set of beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that guided my inquiry. My world views likely
biased this study in some ways, but I see these biases as both real and necessary in order to fully examine the topic from a critical perspective. The research question itself implies a certain set of beliefs that assume the existence of racial, gender, and class barriers. I wish to use this interpretive study to learn how others interpret their experiences, and act on those interpretations. This study also explored the validity of the assumptions inherent in the research question(s). There was no expectation of correct answers to questions that may arise throughout the study (Willis, 2007) and therefore no predictability as the study unfolded. This lack of predictability resulted in a flexible approach to the interview protocol.

The world views of both the participants and me were different in many ways and shaped the way each of us sought answers to questions about the nature of our realities (Willis, 2007). My own experiences with class, race and, gender undoubtedly impacted the lens with which I viewed the data. My constructivist view is that all past experiences shape our present realities. As a middle class, African American female educator who grew up in racially-diverse neighborhoods, but predominantly White schools, I have witnessed and experienced the effects of power and privilege throughout my life. I have observed the impact of racial and cultural differences within organizations, and have also learned how to make the necessary identity shifts that enabled me to often succeed within the dominant culture and society. These sometimes unconscious shifts helped me understand the multi-layered nature of my existence. I have also witnessed those without such power or privilege struggle, and weaken both their identities and their wills to persist and succeed. I have yearned to see Black teachers and principals grace the halls of my schools, and even at a young age wondered why they did not. These experiences
have biased my views, and I have disclosed these biases in order to avoid the “dangers seen, unseen and unforeseen” described by Milner (2007) as well as to lend trustworthiness and credibility to the study.

**Definition of Terms**

- *African American and Black*- used interchangeably, referring to individuals who are of African descent
- *Black and brown*- refers primarily to African, Latino, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, and Native American populations with darker complexions
- *Code switching*- the practice of shifting the languages used or self-expression during conversations (Thompson, 2013, p. 1)
- *Coming of age*- used to describe when a person becomes an adult, and in this case referred to principals that began their tenure in the early 1960s (Merriam-Webster, 2015)
- *HBCU*- historically Black Colleges and Universities
- *Othermothering*- refers to the practice of a principal (or other non-family member) seeking to embrace the students’ needs with an emotional connection similar to that of a biological mother (Case, 1997)
- *Person of color*- covers any and all peoples of African, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Asian or Pacific Island descent, and its intent is to be inclusive (Malesky, 2014)

**Summary**

This chapter provided a statement of the research problem, the purpose, and significance of the study and both the primary and secondary research questions. As
noted, in addition to the primary research question, this chapter outlined three subquestions related to the primary purpose of the study. These secondary questions, along with the primary question, were tied to multiple theories. The theoretical framework and definitions of terms were provided, followed by a detailed description of the lens with which the researcher explored the collected data. The next chapter provides a thematic review of related literature. The review provides a historical context with which to gauge past and present experiences, leadership practices, psychological contracts, and critical race theory.
CHAPTER II

Introduction

Some research has suggested that minority students can benefit from being assigned to a teacher who shares their same race (Clotfelter, Ladd & Vigdor, 2007; Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015). These direct or indirect benefits can be gained from some of those teachers who can serve as high quality academic “role models, mentors, advocates…cultural translators” and can even result students’ improved academic performance (Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015, p. 44). This study assumed the same can be true for school administrators with majority non-White student populations (Lyman, 2000). Siddle Walker (2003) spoke of the important role of a principal’s culture in supporting student success, and Lomotey (1993) concurred adding that the perpetuation of African-American culture with a focus on positive self-image were found to be shared characteristics of effective African American principals.

The changing demographics of our nation’s schools and the disproportionate number of African American female principals led to the exploratory research question: What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals? In addition to the primary research question, several subquestions were answered: (a) How do issues of race and gender impact middle- and late-career African American female principals? (b) What identity shifts do middle- and late-career African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles? and (c) How do clearly defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?
This qualitative study investigated the underlying forces present in the experiences of six African American female principals. Issues of power, privilege, and penalty were examined as well as the strategies employed by these middle- and late-career female principals as they persisted and overcame challenges related to class, race, and gender.

Prior to beginning the study, a review of literature surrounding the historical context of African American female principals was conducted. Additionally, several theories were examined in order to provide a framework for the study. These theories included: identity theory, critical race theory, cognitive and social constructivist theory, intersectionality theory, and the model of negotiating psychological contracts. Each theory served as a foundation upon which to explore the contexts in which today’s African American female principals operate. The research questions made it possible to explore the characteristics, practices, and lived experiences of middle- and late-career African American female principals, while also discovering the motivating factors involved in their persistence. The historical framework served to provide a context within which former and current principals operate. Using a critical lens to examine select social, cultural, psychological, and leadership theories served to unveil how the lived experiences of African American female principals have assisted them in making sense of their conditions in order to better meet the needs of their students. These theories also provided insight into effective practices employed as these principals met and overcame many challenges derived from the intersections of race, gender and culture that are unique to their positions and identities.

Tillman (2008) asserted, “[t]here is limited evidence…pointing to the leadership styles, accomplishments, and lives of Black female principals” (p. 188). This statement
suggests a need for more research on the subject of African American female principals. Williams (2013) concurred that there is an inadequate representation of literature meant to capture the African American female principal experience. It is unclear if the lack of scholarly literature surrounding Black female educational leaders is a result of the degree of interest expressed by researchers, or in the choices made by scholarly journals to publish such findings (Tillman, 2008).

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the shared realities of African American female educational leaders. By reviewing the associated literature, the patterns of behavior and experiences of African American female principals could be viewed through a critical lens. This lens encompasses the history, power relationships, lived experiences, and strategies used by women to address and overcome challenges. In order to increase the trustworthiness of this study, a wide range of credible sources related to the research question were examined.

Additionally, because the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout the literature, this review used both terms as well throughout the discourse. Throughout this document, the phrases “persons of color” and “Black and Brown” refer primarily to African, Latino, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, and Native American populations. These phrases are also used interchangeably.

According to Williams (2013), there is a need for a more expansive collection of literature surrounding African American principals. This need is especially true for representative females from that population. As our country’s racial and cultural population continues to diversify, we must examine the impact of this diversification on the relationships formed between students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Recent
data reflects that nearly 82% of our nation’s public school teachers are White, and 76.3% are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Demographically, over 70% of students in the 66 largest urban school districts across the country represent Black and Brown populations (Council of the Great City Schools, 2013). This study is intended to focus on the characteristics, experiences, and practices of one segment of the school leadership population. African American females who currently or previously served in school leadership positions as principals were the focus of this study. These principals have persisted in their positions beyond ten years, and have presumably overcome obstacles related to both their race and their gender. How the characteristics, experiences and practices of these women have enabled them to persist beyond a decade was explored. This study used a combination of critical race, intersectionality, identity, and constructivist theories, coupled with a model of planned renegotiation through psychological contracts. Additionally, this study provided insight into the complex realities many of these women have experienced as they served as educational leaders in select public schools.

**Literature Review**

This study contributes to the existing literature surrounding middle- and late-career African American female principals, and provides insight into their unique experiences. By specifically focusing on middle- and late-career principals, this study sought to better understand what characteristics, experiences, and practices have enabled these women to persist for a decade or longer, despite obstacles related to class, race, and gender. This chapter has a review of literature surrounding issues related to the characteristics, experiences, and practices associated with African American female
principals. The first section provides a historical context of the education of African American students prior to and after desegregation, and the impact of judicial decisions related to desegregation had on the careers of African American principals. Situational and servant leadership practices are described, as well as the process of engaging in psychological contracts in the work environment. The chapter concludes with a review of critical race theory.

**Historical Context**

In examining the characteristics and experiences of African American female principals, an overview of recent history provides the necessary context. Although, historically, African American school leaders have had a significant impact on the education of Black students (Gaetane, 2013; Loder, 2005a; Loder, 2005b; Reed, 2012; Tillman, 2004; Tillman, 2008; Williams, 2013), the availability of literature addressing this topic remains relatively low. There are even fewer sources devoted specifically to African American female principals (Gooden, 2012; Tillman, 2004).

Prior to 1954 and after the civil war, African American students were prohibited from attending schools with White students (Tillman, 2004). As a result, schools were segregated along racial lines. These all-Black schools were primarily led and taught by highly qualified African American men and women. According to Tillman (2004), these educators established a “tradition of excellence” through their teaching and leadership. Additionally, these principals successfully secured financial, social, and physical resources, built relationships within the Black community and served as advocates for the children in their schools (p. 282).
Contrary to the often deficit-based portrayal of African American principals in modern media and literature, mid-century principals regularly served as change agents and capacity builders for the Black communities in which they lived (Gooden, 2012). During this era, educators in the Black community were not only highly respected, but represented a large segment of the Black middle class. Specifically, principals were looked upon to provide guidance and direction to students and parents alike, and served as key leaders for teachers and families through their supervision, counseling, and advising (Tillman, 2004). Although nationally the percentage of African American female principals still remains significantly low in comparison to Black and White male and White female principals, they have historically served as major contributors to the education of African American students, and role models throughout their communities (Tillman, 2008).

The *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* ruling marked a major turning point in the utilization of African American principals throughout our nation’s schools (Loder, 2005a; McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2007; Reed & Evans, 2008; Tillman, 2004). Demands for civil rights of certain groups, particularly persons of color, began to surface during the late 20th century. The civil rights movement forced a number of judicial and legislative actions that were meant to address the multitude of perceived racial inequities. Two significant attempts to provide more equity in the lives and education of persons of color included the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* in 1954. In both instances, the Supreme Court of the United States served to not only interpret the Constitution regarding equality of education, but also impacted the overall quality of life in African American communities.
(Tillman, 2004; Tillman, 2008). This impact was felt by all states to some degree, and although southern states presented the strongest resistance, most racially-diverse schools were eventually able to provide valuable opportunities for interaction between racial and ethnic groups. The schools were unable to overcome the racial inequities reflected in the housing patterns that existed in their districts (Wells, Holme, Revilla & Atanda, 2005). The sometimes complex intersection between property rights and racial equity impacted the capacities of many families of color to achieve the quality education they sought for themselves and their children (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The social, political, and economic capital of these underrepresented groups were also impacted. These decisions touched the lives and careers of teachers and administrators alike. In fact, most African American female principals have either directly or indirectly been affected by judicial decisions made by the Supreme Court of the United States in recent decades (Stevens Jr., Wood & Sheehan, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Prior to the desegregation mandate issued by the Supreme Court in 1954, schools serving African American students were staffed by African American teachers and principals. These often highly-skilled individuals embraced their roles as leaders and members of the community and served in segregated school settings (Tillman, 2008). Following the Brown decision, large numbers of African American male and female educators were displaced as a result of mandatory desegregation. Significant declines in Black teachers and principals were witnessed following this decision, amounting to a 73% decrease between the years 1963 and 1970 (McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2007). This steep reduction in the number of Black principals during that era impacted the communities in which they resided. The teaching profession, which had historically been
one that provided a means for African American women to accomplish the upward mobility to which they aspired was no longer a viable option. Black communities lost a great deal of power and influence as well (Tillman, 2008). These losses included a lack of voices that were traditionally heard within schools and were committed to educating Black children. These communities also lost a great deal of their capacities to impact local schools in a positive manner (Tillman, 2004).

Tillman (2008) explained that, following the Brown decision, African American principals were consistently replaced by White teachers and principals who were believed to be more qualified and worthy of working in the racially desegregated schools. For example, between the years 1967 and 1971 the number of Black principals in North Carolina dropped significantly from 670 to 40 (Tillman, 2008). This impact was especially felt in southern states where some estimate that the number of Black principals in the south was reduced by up to 90% (Irvine, 1988). One Black Texas educator who was displaced as a result of this ruling stated:

We had a lot of [B]lack middle school and elementary school principals that were placed in an assistant principal’s position and …Basically they ran errands—they ran errands! Basically, if you were the librarian or you were the principal, you became an assistant. There were no [B]lack principals…The most negative thing that I experienced was being placed in a sub position coaching with the experience that I had.” (Fuglei, 2013, Concordia Online Featured Blog).

These practices were especially harmful to African American females who were faced with obstacles related to both gender and race. Mullen and Robertson (2014) referred to these obstacles when they stated that African American females faced a type
of “double jeopardy” in their professions. Either their race, gender or a combination of both may have contributed to the challenges these women experienced (p. 37).

Throughout the period following mandated school desegregation, race-related issues rose to the forefront and Black educators continued to argue for the placement of Black administrators in the public schools. These educators argued that even if it meant reducing integration efforts, the schools needed to retain these administrators (McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2007).

As recently as the 1999-2000 academic year, only 17.8% of the nation’s principals were African American, which suggests that the practices of racial discrimination witnessed in the period following Brown may still be a reality in some regions (McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2007). This historical context sheds light on the past and present conditions facing many African American female principals, and the accompanying challenges that still persist for them. These challenges include: shrinking budgets, limited resources and an ongoing cultural disconnect between urban schools and their district administrators (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Loder, 2005b). There is still much replacement work to do to increase the numbers of non-White female principals (Tillman, 2008). Because the research question is being viewed with a critical lens, the examination of African American principals in history is appropriate. Comparisons can be made between pre-and post-civil rights era principals, as well as the roles these principals play in their communities.

In addition to the landmark Brown v Board of Education desegregation ruling in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled one year later that while school systems would be required to end practices of segregation, they could do so “with all deliberate speed” (The
Leadership Conference, 2015). Rendleman (2004) explained that, per Justice Thurgood Marshall, school districts could create their own timetables for enacting the mandate or, in other words, they could proceed as slowly as possible. Districts were able to establish their own pace toward achieving desegregation, while maintaining control of the teachers and administrators that would staff the schools (Center for American Progress, “all deliberate speed”, Monday April 12, 2004). As districts slowly grappled with the new mandate, hundreds of African American female principals quickly lost their jobs (Tillman, 2008).

Adding to the significant impact of court decisions on the systems of education in our nation, several court rulings addressed the heavy reliance on property wealth to fund our nation’s schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These instances focused on de-facto housing patterns that often gave districts with higher property values more resources. In *San Antonio v Rodriguez* (1973), a Texas court ruled that the state would be allowed to base funding for school districts on property values (Texas State Historical Association, 2015), and that the use of property wealth to determine funding was constitutional. This ruling served to impede the ability of low income families to receive the human and knowledge capital necessary for high quality education (The Leadership Conference, 2015). Conversely, another such case in 1991 (*DeRolph v State of Ohio*), resulted in a dissimilar ruling. The Ohio supreme court stated, "public education is a fundamental right in the state of Ohio… the state legislature had to provide a better and more equitable means of financing education" (Ohio History Central, 2015). In other words, the court ruled that all students in the state were not receiving a quality education due to the inequitable allocation of resources. The state of Ohio appealed the initial ruling, yet in
four subsequent instances the courts ruled in the plaintiff’s favor and upheld the original ruling that the state’s heavy reliance on property taxes was unconstitutional (Ohio History Connection, 2015). In both cases, and others throughout the nation, school funding was found to be a major contributor to educational equity, and a predictor of quality. This equity is, in part, measured by the caliber of personnel assigned to schools, including principals. African American female principals have been customarily assigned to such schools with inadequate funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, because schools did and continue to use property taxes as the major source of funding, the housing and employment patterns of citizens within specific communities dictate the quality of education that students receive in those districts (Darling-Hammond, 2010). African American female principals who are customarily assigned to schools in low income areas are faced with the challenges posed by these and other similar court decisions.

Although the expectation of schools to provide desegregated educational settings for students remains intact, disproportionate numbers of low income, Black and Brown students remain in our urban schools (Mullen & Robertson, 2014). In fact, the landscape of our nation’s schools reflects a de-facto manner of segregation similar to that which existed during the pre-Brown era. Tillman (2008) asserted that, in most cases, these schools are led by African American principals; a large number of whom are female elementary school administrators. The majority of African American female principals are employed in urban districts where most of their students represent Black or Brown populations. Additionally, Gooden (2012) concurred by stating that even as the numbers of African American female principals has slowly increased, they continue to be
systematically placed in low income, underperforming urban schools with insufficient resources to meet the challenges of the assignment. Although the majority of African American teachers in our nation’s schools are women (90%) the numbers of Black women entering the teaching force continues to decline. This decline may be, in part, due to a lack of experienced mentors available to encourage them into the field, and may also result in impacting the proportionately small numbers of African American females who eventually become principals (Fuglei, 2013; Tillman, 2008). Irving (1988) concurred with the belief that declines in the number of Black teachers can and will impact the future placements of Black principals. She noted that because school principals are expected to have prior teaching experience, the numbers of eligible individuals to assume principalships was related to the numbers of teachers in the field.

In a separate but similar study, Loder (2005b) examined the differences in generational perspectives of African American female principals from pre- and post- civil rights eras. The study found that there were marked differences in the perceptions of class, race and gender barriers between female principals that came of age prior to and after the Civil Rights Movement (Loder, 2005b, p. 260). The term is used to describe when a person becomes an adult, and in this case referred to principals that began their tenure in the early 1960s (Merriam-Webster, 2015). The perspectives and attitudes of African American female principals as they experienced significant reforms to the Chicago Public Schools was the focus of this qualitative study. The literature addressed the many challenges faced by women who serve as principals in urban schools. This qualitative study sought to describe the experiences of African American female principals’ development throughout the post-Civil Rights era. The legislation resulted in
increased autonomy for African American families to share in district-wide decision-making. While parents gained more control over hiring decisions, numerous power struggles between parents and African American principals emerged (Loder, 2005b). The significant changes to the Chicago Public Schools as a result of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 forced many of these women to abandon their efforts to “bring love, mothering and nurturing to their students” and instead adapt to a shared role with parents (p. 316). The African American females that came of age prior to the Civil Rights Movement found the shared governance approach more difficult than those who did so after the Movement. The study found that many principals struggled with balancing the combined challenges of meeting district needs and the needs of the local community. The nuanced relationships formed by principals and parents often stood in stark contrast to the educational systems prescribed by the state. This added challenge of carefully blending their own middle class experiences with those of families with different income and economic levels is described by Ladson-Billings (2001) who spoke of an “underclass that is less trusting of schools and education” than the educators of color with which they operate (p. 14). The complexities of school reform and shared governance with African American parents posed new challenges to these often over-extended African American female principals who were more accustomed to leading within their communities rather than sharing in that leadership.

**Past Experiences**

“You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 105). African American female principals are required to navigate through many complexities associated with public school leadership. Past experiences of these
principals can impact their leadership choices and their perspectives (Loder, 2005a; Loder, 2005b). Included in their quest to embolden teachers toward providing the quality education their students deserve, these principals may also seek to improve the conditions under which they, their students and their teachers, operate. These improvements are assumed to create environments that will support academic achievement. Utilizing their past experiences and personal realities undoubtedly enabled these principals to cement who they were and sustain what they knew. The skills, dispositions, past experiences, and perspectives reflected by these women can facilitate their efforts to create better conditions for their students. These conditions can, and likely are, in part, shaped by their own past experiences.

Williams (2013) provided an in-depth examination of educational leadership and the experiences of African American female principals. This qualitative study directly addressed the challenges, opportunities, and barriers faced by African American female principals and provided insight into those experiences. In light of the unique historic realities experienced by many African American female principals, Williams (2013) interviewed seven African American female principals in order to better understand their shared experiences. In this study, it was found that some of the principals had experienced feelings of marginalization and powerlessness throughout their tenure. Additionally, like many Black principals before them, these women continued to carry with them the self- imposed personal responsibility for ensuring that the children of color whom they served received the quality education of which they were deserving. Williams (2013) was interested in understanding how these women understood their roles, managed their schools, and experienced power relationships. Female principals
were encouraged to articulate their experiences, struggles and efforts to make sense of the situations in which they found themselves.

Gaetane (2013) spoke of such challenges and barriers and the multiple identities and roles associated with African American female principals. Townsell (2006) echoed those challenges as she described the intersections of class, race, and gender in her journey. One important component of successful leadership reflected in literature concerning African American female principals was the strong desire to establish caring relationships with students and parents. The desire to “stay focused on the students” enabled one principal to keep challenges in context (Townsell, 2006, p. 8). Additionally, societal assumptions about the intellectual capabilities and pre-determined stereotypes challenge many female principals of color. This responsibility is often accepted despite the continued disproportionate allocation of human, financial, and physical resources. There are some who believe that the levels of support and direction provided to these female leaders continues to be low and insufficient (Irvine, 1988; McCray, Wright & Beachum, 2007; Tillman, 2004, 2008). These levels are partially the product of the key legislative decisions that resulted in determining who will attend and lead the nation’s schools. The study of the characteristics, experiences, and practices of African American female principals is, therefore, relevant to this discussion.

In their study of African American female principals’ identity development, Mullen and Robertson (2014) sought to examine the shifts in identity that these women experienced over time in their leadership positions. Drawing from critical race, social identity, and Black feminist theories, the study sought to critically examine the leadership identities of these women. In addition to exploring leadership, the study also provided
women the opportunity to share gender and race-related experiences. The researchers asked how African American female principals constructed, navigated, and shifted their identities in the midst of institutionalized sexism and racism. In describing their findings, Mullen and Robertson (2014) found that some African American female principals felt pressure to demonstrate their competencies while they also sought to “dispel negative perceptions of their gender and/or race” (p. 3). As a result, the demeanor of each participant regularly changed in order to fit the situations in which they found themselves. These changes were in response to their beliefs that community stakeholders would have different expectations of them than institutional stakeholders.

The African American females described by Mullen and Robertson (2014) also experienced numerous identity shifts in their roles. When racial and gender-related barriers arose, these women expressed a need to change their behaviors to fit the situations in which they found themselves. These situations included working with parents, teachers, or institutional personnel. They also indicated shifting their identities to fit within the racial compositions of the groups they were involved in, including refuting stereotypes and helping parents believe that they “truly understood their struggles.” Often these strategies included attending to their physical images and attire by adapting to the situation at hand. These adaptations were often unknowingly learned from past experiences and served to increase their cultural capital (Mullen & Robertson, 2014, p. 7). Some examples included principals who relaxed their natural hair in order to reflect the straight hair with which others were comfortable when working in predominantly White settings. Conversely, others in predominantly Black settings felt unspoken permission to “go natural” and wear textured hair without fear of repercussions.
Additionally, Reed (2012) described how the appearance and lifestyles of Black female principals are often scrutinized. One principal stated:

They talk to me about the way I dress. I always look professional. They talked to me about the way I wore my hair. They didn’t like that I had a long pony tail. I had a tattoo. I need[ed] to cover that up or wear pants… (p. 52).

Another principal stated, “As a female, single African American principal, there’s a greater spotlight on everything that I do and everything that I say” (p. 52).

The journeys shared by several African American females were also described by Loder (2005a). In this study, the author focused on women born both prior to and after the Civil Rights Movement. The differences in how these women perceived and overcame barriers were addressed and the contrasts of life stories and professional opportunities were presented. This compelling study provided valuable insight into the lived experiences of African American females, and how one historical event impacted their abilities to persist and ascend. Using a life course framework which underscored the concept of watershed moments that distinguished lived experiences prior to and after a significant event, this qualitative study examined how 20 African American female principals embraced their roles within very different social contexts (Loder, 2005a). These women’s stories reflected at times stark generational differences in their experiences prior to and after the Civil Rights Movement.

Contrasts in the experiences of these women were described in the study. The women who came of age prior to the Civil Rights Movement entered the teaching profession primarily due to the limited career options available to them. Although these women did not express experiences with overt racism or sexism, they were conscious of
the invisible hand of these two social and political practices (Loder, 2005a, p. 260). Several of these women spoke of a higher spiritual calling that led them to teaching despite aspirations to explore other career options.

Conversely, the women who came of age after the Civil Rights Movement expressed no direct experiences with institutionalized racism or sexism. These women spoke of their decisions to become teachers in ways that were both confident and self-assured, using expressions that reflected what Loder (2005a) described as “language of privilege” (p. 261). This language included terms such as aspiration and choice, absent from the discourse reflected by principals from the prior generation. The study results suggested that younger generation African American female principals may have lacked the institutional memory of the struggles toward social justice that their predecessors experienced (Loder, 2005, p. 262). As a result, these educators may have felt a sense of alienation or powerlessness regarding their abilities to comprehend and reform current discriminatory practices within their institutions.

Leadership Practices

**Servant leadership.** Several studies point to the importance of spirituality in the lives of African American female educators (Loder, 2005a, 2005b; Mattis, 1997; Turner & Bagley, 2000). These spiritual foundations have historically left women seeing their work and the associated challenges as part of a divine calling toward servitude (Loder, 2005a, p. 260). Gardner and Mayes (2013) detailed the challenges faced by educators who work in low-performing schools with under-represented populations. Strategies and practices found to positively impact the academic achievement of low-performing students were outlined with a focus on the need to serve community members. The
pattern of disproportionately placing African American students in special education programs was a focus of the study, and the authors argued for the incorporation of all stakeholders (parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators) to be involved in the educational process. Passionate, caring principals were seen as an important component in appropriately assessing these students. This mindset was mirrored by African American principals in similar studies (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Loder, 2005a, 2005b). Additionally, classroom instructional practices provided by culturally-competent practitioners who were encouraged to collaborate with other teachers were viewed as effective strategies for improving the academic performance of African American students. The school administrators worked as servant leaders, and were thought to play a key role in ensuring that “all stakeholders participate in helping students function” both within and outside of their communities (Gardner & Mayes, 2013, p. 25). Witherspoon and Arnold (2010) described the caring nature of African American female principals and provided examples of how spirituality and strong values served as shields from many of the challenges and obstacles faced by these women. In one example of how these women confronted the challenges of under-performing school status a principal stated, “These kids are smart. I am tired of people worrying about what the kids don’t have and think about what they bring to the table. They can’t help who their parents are” (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 227). This statement underscores the pattern of African American female principals’ desires to move their students forward despite their unfair circumstances. The focus on social justice and activism emerged repeatedly in the literature, and can be applied to the practices of many African American female principals.
The principals’ views of the role of mother and the associated values of care and nurture often guide their leadership (Loder, 2005a). Case (1997) studied how principals demonstrate a sense of deep care and concern for the children within their school settings, and often focus on the psychoeducational needs of the child in order to support their academic success. This concept, termed as *othermothering* refers to the practice of a principal (or other non-family member) seeking to embrace the students’ needs with an emotional connection similar to that of a biological mother. Additionally, she maintained that throughout her research there was a tradition of acknowledging the importance of community involvement in many African American female educators. She termed this involvement *community othermothering*, and suggested that these educators often linked the lessons they learned from their own mothers as well as community members with their practices as educators (Case, 1997, p. 37). These practices and emotional bonds reflect the servant leadership approaches common to many African American female principals (Case, 1997; Williams, 2013).

Effective educational leaders perfect the craft of *bridge building*. Ellison stated, "Let’s not play these kids cheap; let’s find out what they have. What do they have that is a strength? What do they have that you can approach and build a bridge upon? Education is all a matter of building bridges” (Ellison, 2015). Nearly 50 years later, Merchant and Shoho (2010) concurred when they discussed individuals in school leadership positions that have taken on the role of what they described as *bridge people* who work to make valuable personal connections in order to improve the lives of those they serve. Although not specifically directed to African American females, the individuals described were principals who had experienced challenges and obstacles in their ascent to leadership
roles. Instead of feeling bitter, each had developed a strong sense of self and an ability to effectively communicate with members of different groups in order to create a sense of community in their schools (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). The building of strong relationships is consistent with themes related to care, communication and community engagement, and have been found to be consistently demonstrated by African American female principals (Tillman, 2008).

**Situational leadership.** Mullen and Robertson (2014) provided a comprehensive examination of female educational leaders and how class, race, and gender can impact their identities as well as their achievements. With regard to gender and race identity, six African American female principals were interviewed about the challenges they faced regarding class, race, and gender, and how they found it necessary to shift their identities in order to successfully overcome these challenges. Each female was assigned to schools with predominantly African American student populations. All principals described the need to shift toward situational leadership styles in order to fit the particular setting in which they operated. This situational approach involves the ability to assess the needs of the individuals involved, and apply either directive or supportive approaches based on developmental levels of those involved in the organization (Northouse, 2013).

Some African American educators routinely adapt their practices and attitudes to reflect the climate of their schools. This shift in demeanor routinely reflects the practice of *code switching* in order to seamlessly fit into the current environment (Thompson, 2013). In their study of African American teachers and principals in predominantly White school environments, Mabokela and Madsen (2007) found that several themes emerged. The female educators in their study found it necessary to confront the
sometimes “inhospitable environments” that existed within their settings by developing effective transitional strategies that would enable them to teach effectively despite added sources of stress and tension (p. 1172). Additionally, both male and female African American educators expressed frustration with the unspoken expectation that they represent the schools’ African American students, and take responsibility for the challenges they faced. These frustrations needed to be tempered and redirected away from the unrealistic expectations of others with which they worked. The third theme involved the perceived expectation of their White colleagues that they were somehow under-qualified for their positions. The female educators felt a need to consistently prove their competence in filling their roles as educators, which at times impacted their practice and placed pressure on them to perform well. The experiences of these educators is consistent with other literature that described the need for African American educators to adapt their roles, practices and attitudes in order to fit into the unique situations in which they operated (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Reed & Evans, 2008).

Crow & Scribner (2014) discussed the professional identities of urban principals and concluded that they often experienced these as both dynamic and fluid, depending on the social context of their roles. The identities of these principals, they suggested, are “far from being static, [and] change throughout the individual’s lived experience in the work setting” (p. 296). In addition to the dynamic nature of the professional identities of principals, these are also believed to be developmental in nature. Changes in environment can influence the development of identities of principals in the work place. Developmental changes can also be influenced by situations, conflicting ideas about
standards of behavior, and role negotiations in the presence of others (Crow & Scribner, 2014).

Alston (2005) described the situational challenges experienced by many African American female educational leaders. The term *tempered radicals* was used to portray these female leaders as they sought to devise strategies that both supported their organizations while also advocated for the needs of their communities; a task that often required these leaders to address and resolve conflicting agendas. In other words, these women may have found themselves grappling with personal ideologies that were at odds with the existing culture of the organizations in which they worked. The result of this situation requires leaders to adapt their messages and behaviors in order to create climates that reflect interest convergence. These situational leadership approaches may be seen as important in the sustained success and persistence of Black female educational leaders.

**Psychological Contracts**

Sherwood and Glidewell (1972) studied relationships between organizational members and the psychological contracts formed as a result of those relationships. They argued that when individuals enter into an organization, written and unwritten contracts are established and relationships are formed. The entry into an organization involves both implied and expressed expectations between parties. If these expectations are not met, it may be necessary for the parties to renegotiate the agreement in order to maintain stability in the relationship. Planned renegotiation within organizations serves to embrace relationship changes in a manner in which members adapt to the internal and
external forces that cause disruptions. These negotiations are the foundation of the norm-setting organization development model developed by Sherwood and Glidewell (1972).

According to the model, individuals interact within organizations in an effort to establish stability through shared expectations and role clarification. When situations arise where these expectations are disrupted, individuals are forced to either renegotiate the standards of behavior or succumb to the disruption by terminating the relationship. These shared expectations, which are often unspoken and inferred, create psychological contracts between members and employers. Additionally, Sherwood and Glidewell (1972) outlined four phases of the negotiation process that results in establishment of psychological contracts: (a) Sharing information and negotiating expectations, (b) Commitment to the established expectations (c) Stability and productivity as a result of the implied commitment, and (d) Disruption as a result of internal or external violations of the commitment (pp. 35 – 37).

Middle- and late-career African American female principals have sustained various organizational relationships for at least a decade, and have established psychological contracts within their districts. The process by which these principals approached and overcame challenges can be viewed through a lens that examines both the shared expectations and subsequent changes in role clarification experienced throughout their tenure as principals.

Several additional studies have been conducted concerning the psychological contracts that are formed between employees and employers (Lee & Taylor, 2014; van den Heuvel, Schalk & van Assen, 2015). Although not specifically related to African American principals, these and other similar studies examined the “exchange
relationship” between members within organizations (Lee & Taylor, 2014, p. 95). In a recent study that focused on the contracts formed within organizations, Lee and Taylor (2014) found that some managers serve as both agents as well as principals in their roles within the organization. An agent was defined as an employee, whereas a principal was defined as an institutional representative. These findings suggested that managers or principals (such as building principals) will, at times, work to establish psychological contracts with employees or agents (such as teachers) who support the goals of the organization. They may do so while also working to promote their own self-interests. These self-interests may not always be in concert with those of the institution. When this dynamic occurs, the employee may experience inconsistent messages about the relationship. These inconsistencies can impede the employee’s ability to perform at a high level. Middle- and late-career African American female principals have undoubtedly experienced relationships with managers. The clarity of the district’s goals and the motivations of the managers will have had an impact on their abilities to lead effectively.

Much of the literature surrounding psychological contracts between individuals and organizations points to the significant role of the supervisor in forming such relationships (Conway & Briner, 2002; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). These studies are particularly relevant to this study in that the participants served as both employees as well as supervisors. According to Lee & Taylor (2014), as a major force in determining a person’s positive or negative work experiences, the immediate supervisor wields power over the employee’s views of the organization. This power can contribute to the longevity of employment, or can hasten termination of the contract. Their study of the
nature of such relationships between supervisor and employee unveiled an argument that supervisors can serve two roles: reinforcing the psychological contract between their employees and the organization while also forming contracts that serve their own purposes.

As African American females assumed and continued their roles within their organizations, they likely experience numerous shifts in the psychological contracts between themselves, their organizations, their superintendents and their teachers. As van den Heuvel, Schalk, and van Assen (2015) suggested, the psychological contract can shift as a result of several variables, one of which includes the trustworthiness of information shared throughout the organization. One can assume that despite predictable disruptions in shared expectations and experiences, these middle- and late-career female principals developed a certain degree of trust in their employers, employees, and organizations that enabled them to persist for over a decade.

The development of a professional identity involves social construction, negotiation, and connecting with others in the work environment. Crow and Scribner (2014) described this process as one that involves four aspects: a principal’s own personal stories, how each principal sees him or herself, how others see the principal, and how the needs of the organization shape and adapt the principal’s role definition. The social negotiations involved in the formation of a principal’s identity, they suggested, involves a process that reflects both the perceptions of the principals as well as those of the teachers employed in their schools.
Critical Race Theory

Hartlep (2009) examined Critical Race Theory (CRT) in its past, present, and future contexts. The author evaluated current research and provided a historical overview of the theory. The five major tenets of CRT are described: (a) racism as an ordinary construct in our society, (b) interest convergence, (c) how our society has constructed the issue of race, (d) use of stories to perpetuate racial inequities, and the (e) “notion that Whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation” through shifting power relationships that sustain their privileges (Hartlep, 2009, p. 6)

Examining Critical Race Theory and its implications for human resource development, Rocco, Bernier, and Bowman (2014) also discussed the social constructions, legal implications and power structures associated with race, class and gender. The researchers sought to inform human resource and other professionals about the “existence and consequences of power” in the workplace (p. 467). Using a critical lens, the authors argued that issues of race and power exist within organizations, and encourage maintenance of the status quo. The discussion included how one of the tenets of CRT (interest convergence) motivates members from both dominant and under-represented populations to ignore issues of power and privilege in order to reap the perceived benefits of existing practices. This practice may be of particular importance when exploring the experiences of African American female principals.

Issues of race were also addressed by Leonardo (2013) in examining the intersection of research methodologies and the study of race in education. In his article, the author argued that an invisible racial contract exists between Whites and other groups of color within our society. This contract reflects the lived experiences and realities of all
persons involved yet perpetuates practices that maintain the status quo. Leonardo (2013) described how many deeply-held belief systems exist within our school systems which can result in inequitable treatment of some students and teachers, and can cause students of color to “lie outside of [the] learning paradigm” (p. 608). In other words, institutionalized systems of racism can lead to academic under-achievement in many students of color enrolled in our nation’s schools.

Chapman (2013) approached the issue of race and “challenge[d] the ideology of colorblind racial contexts” (p. 611). Although the focus of this article was on predominantly White, suburban schools which are in direct contrast to the urban schools with predominantly Black and Brown students over which the principals in this study lead, it sheds insight into the presence of race in all educational contexts. The study examined the common practice of ignoring issues of race in predominantly White school settings. The study found that students of color continued to be affected by institutionalized systems of racism, particularly in predominantly White settings. These students were often discouraged from identifying these systems as such, lest they appear to be militant or irrational. Additionally, the predominantly White schools involved in the study were found to (often unknowingly) promote attitudes of privilege while discouraging racial discourse (Chapman, 2013). The findings suggested that when schools reflect climates that discourage honest discussions about race, students of color suffer and the burden for resolving these complex issues rests with policy makers and educational leaders.

The intersection of critical race theory and cultural capital provided Yosso (2005) a context within which to examine the experiences, challenges and barriers faced by
African American female principals. The author challenged traditional deficit views of communities of color and instead shifted to an examination of the wealth of knowledge and resources students can gain from their communities’ cultural strengths. The author described how “the potential of community cultural wealth [can] transform the process of schooling” for students of color (p. 70). Using tenets of Critical Race Theory, the article described how educators and policy-makers can improve the experiences of students of color in school settings by using five themes to inform practice: (a) the role of race in the function of society; (b) the existence of a dominant ideology; (c) the need for social justice; (d) the importance of experience in building knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary nature of the study of race (Yosso, 2005, pp. 73-74). By incorporating these themes into daily practice, it was felt that educational leaders could move issues of race to the forefront, and subsequently identify strategies to confront them in productive ways.

Critical Race Theories were examined by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in their effort to describe how educational systems continued to be impacted by the social realities of those in power. The authors suggested that individual realities regarding race are unique and are based on past experience, and those realities shape the stories that are told and the behaviors that accompany those narratives. According to the authors, when researchers allow persons of color to find and share their voices, the process can serve as an effective mechanism for challenging the status quo. Ladson-Billings and Tate asserted that the issue of race permeates all educational institutions and is a central factor in the inequitable conditions found throughout our nation’s schools. They also challenged the view that issues of race could and should appropriately be placed under the umbrella of *multiculturalism* or *diversity*. Race, they suggested, was a force more
powerful than other differences, and deserved a singular focus. Specifically the article described the historical value of property rights in the shaping of the nation. The intersection between the protection of property rights (intellectual and tangible) and human rights, they suggested, resulted in the perpetuation of educational inequality by holding property rights in higher regard than those of the rights of human beings.

Summary

This chapter contained a review of literature surrounding issues related to the characteristics, experiences and practices associated with African American female principals. The overall framework relied upon theories of social exchange, constructionism, critical race, and intersectionality.

The first section provided a historical context of the education of African American students prior to and after desegregation, and the impact of judicial decisions related to desegregation had on the careers of African American principals. The historical literature included the exploration of generational divides between early and late career African American female principals, and how these divides impacted their attitudes and behaviors. This overview of historical factors included decisions that shaped the futures of many African Americans.

In the next section, how past experiences and identity formation can impact the behaviors of African American female principals is examined. Situational and servant leadership styles were explored in the next section, with links to the practices of principals. The following section shows how theories of psychological contracts and planned negotiation can apply to the perseverance strategies used by middle- and late-career African American female principals. The final section provides insight into
critical race theory and its use in examining issues of race as applied to educational leadership.

Several patterns emerged throughout the literature. Select studies identified how African American female principals commonly attempt to establish some connection to the Black community. Also, these women demonstrated a strong commitment to empowering students and families, as well as the ability to effectively communicate and adapt across racial and cultural settings. Critical race theory served as a foundation for several of the studies, as did the focus on barriers associated with the class, race and gender of the participants. The importance of critical race theory in exploring the experiences of African American female principals was discussed followed by an overview of the theoretical framework within which the study. A final thread that connected much of the literature involved identifying the ways in which historical periods or events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas impacted past and present African American female principals. In future chapters this study contributed to the limited literature surrounding middle- and late-career African American females by providing a focused exploration of the characteristics, experiences and practices that enable them to overcome challenges related to class, race and gender. The following section began by providing an overview of the theoretical framework that guided this study. The rationale and research design are provided, followed by a summary of the issues involved in driving the framework.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

A qualitative design was selected for this study because it provided the opportunity to collect rich, descriptive data from participants’ own lived experiences. According to Tillman (2008), “qualitative methods represent an effective approach to conducting research about Black principals” (p. 196). In order to explore completely answers to questions that involve characteristics, experiences, and practices, I felt it was important to derive as many answers as possible directly from the participants.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), these exploratory questions are best used when investigating an area or population that is deemed to be under-researched. Gaining information directly from the participants, and using their past experiences as a conduit for further exploration is paramount to the ethno-methodological approach (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This study involved an exploration of the characteristics, challenges, and persistence of African American female principals in public school settings. Using a purposive sample (N=5), these former and current principals was invited to participate in the study based on the settings in which their schools are or were situated, the race, gender of the participants, and the number of years they have served as principals. In addition to the participants’ class, race, and gender, their interest in the subject matter will facilitate their willingness to participate in the study. The availability of the principal to participate during the specified timeframe will also be a factor. Upon acceptance of the invitation, and prior to beginning the research study, the participants was given an Informed Consent to participate in a Research Study form (Appendix B).
This form outlines the research questions, the processes involved in the study, and the interview protocol.

At least one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. My role as a researcher was that of a participant as observer (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), which allowed me to interact with individuals as I observe. The lived stories of the participants are described through a narrative format, whereas attention was also paid to the principals’ demonstration of interpersonal and cross-cultural practices in their schools. The inductive nature of the process will lend itself to a critical ethnography.

As is consistent with ethnographic studies, the data collection process will involve interviews, document analysis and select observations. This triangulation of data, was employed in order to increase the validity of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The interviews were conducted in a site deemed to be most comfortable for the participants. The interviews and observations involved the use of manual field notes, and interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, documents specific to the school and district were analyzed in order to provide a cohesive portrayal of the context within which the principals operate.

**Research Questions**

Using a critical lens, this ethnography will seek to answer the question: What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals? In addition to the primary research question, several subquestions were answered: (a) How do issues of race and gender impact middle- and late-career
African American female principals? (b) What identity shifts do middle- and late-career African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles? (c) How do clearly defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

Setting

The study was conducted using both face to face and online interviews in settings of the participants’ choice. Because the five participants was dispersed within one midwestern state as well as one western state, there was no direct observations of school settings. Each participant had been employed as a principal in one or more settings for no less than 10 years, and artifacts were examined from their current or former public school settings to supplement the interviews. One midwestern participant retired after 30 years of service as a public school principal, and provided artifacts from her past experiences.

Sample Data and Collection Protocol

Five participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. In order to gain the richness and breadth of leadership experiences over a prolonged period of time, the participants had completed at least 10 years as a public school principal. Each participant was asked to recommend an additional principal from the same region, who met the class, race, and gender criteria for the study. The participants were selected due to their availability, willingness to participate, and interest in learning more about the subject. Once all participants were secured, using purposive sample (N=5), principals were asked to commit to the study for the duration of the process, which included follow-up interviews. Some participants have had casual relationships with the researcher, whereas others will have had no prior relationship with
the researcher at the time of the study. Upon acceptance of the invitation, and prior to beginning the research study, the participants was given an *Informed Consent to participate in a Research Study* form (Appendix B). This form will outline the research question, the processes involved in the study and the interview protocol.

**Interview Protocol**

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, all participants were asked the same set of interview questions (Appendix C). The interview protocol does allow for flexibility in questioning which led to follow-up questions specific to the answers provided by the participants. The purpose of the interview process was to collect in-depth responses to questions that would result in a rich collection of data. These in-depth interviews supported the purpose of the study by unveiling patterns of experiences and thick descriptions that resulted in what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) referred to as “knowledge-producing conversation(s)” (p. 105).

**Procedure**

Upon receipt of the *Informed Consent to participate in a Research Study* form (Appendix B) each participant was scheduled for an online or in-person interview. The actual location of the in-person interview was determined in large part by the participants. Online interviews were conducted using a digital meeting program, and the participants were asked to secure a computer with web cam availability in order to provide the researcher with opportunities to observe their behaviors.

Because the use of direct quotes and observations is a key component of a qualitative ethnography, school observations were arranged with the local participants, with the researcher serving in a participant-as-observer role. Each school observation
were conducted during regular school hours, as arranged with the participant. In lieu of actual observation of the settings outside of the state, participants were asked to provide photographs of the setting and personnel. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to accurately capture the essence of the participants’ perceptions.

**Data Analysis**

Two different sources of data was examined during the analysis phase of the study: interviews, and supporting documentation. This process of triangulation was intended to provide what Denzin & Lincoln (1994) described as “convergence in research findings” (p. 51). The result of examining documents and multiple interviews were the emergence of themes related to characteristics, persistence, challenges, race, gender and class. These themes were then analyzed in order to seek answers to the research questions.

**Interviews**

Throughout the interview portion of the study, the principals were encouraged to feel at ease, and to speak freely. Each interview was transcribed manually by the researcher, and each participant was given a copy of the draft of their own interview, and asked to provide feedback. The interview protocol consisted of 35 open-ended questions. The process of coding began with open coding and later included axial and specific coding. The ultimate goal was to identify patterns that could lead to inferences about how these themes relate to the research questions. A combination of descriptive, analytical, and literal codes was used. Additionally, memos were written to assist the researcher in identifying patterns related to the research topic.
**Documents**

Documents specific to school settings were examined throughout the course of the study. These artifacts may include the school website, report card, parent involvement documents, newsletters, displays, and mission statements. Participants from remote locations may be asked to provide other supporting documents as needed.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of this study is reflected through its credibility, transferability and dependability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was promoted in this study through the use of participants who have direct knowledge of the topic being addressed. The qualitative design is consistent with other similar research on the topic, and included both iterative questioning and member-checking. All participants were given an opportunity to review the transcripts from their interviews; this member-checking process ensured that the data is deemed accurate by both the researcher and the participant. Triangulation of data through interviewing, examination of artifacts, and select observations added to the credibility and dependability of the data.

Transferability of the data was achieved through rich, contextual descriptions as suggested by Shenton (2004). These descriptions assisted the reader in formulating opinions about the relevance of the data in other, similar settings. Additionally, the methodology involved in the study was clearly detailed and the same questions were asked of all participants in order to promote dependability.

Regardless of any past relationships between researcher and participants, all were asked the same set of questions, and were given the same information about the purpose of the study. Additionally, the use of a single person (the researcher) in the coding
process lent trustworthiness to the study since all prompts were viewed through the same lens.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Several threats to the credibility of this study were identified. Because direct observations were conducted with only some of the participants, the study is primarily limited to individual interviews and document analysis. This lack of consistent triangulation may pose limitations to the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, the use of online interviews for some participants possibly reduced the quality of communication, and there was the potential threat of technical difficulties. The participants in this study were selected through a process of purposive and snowball sampling. Because participants were asked to make recommendations about other principals who were interested in becoming involved in the study, the sample will consisted of participants who were familiar with at least one other person in the study. This familiarity could pose limitations to the diversity of perspectives explored in the study. Additionally, because participants resided in different parts of the state, scheduling constraints posed challenges to data collection.

Delimitations include the benefit of observing gestures, tone, and body language of the participants throughout the data collection process, regardless of whether the interviews were conducted remotely or in person. These samples consisted of participants who were not only available and willing, but who also met the special criteria for study. The selection of participants from varying schools, districts and states served as a delimitation by providing a wider breadth of experiences and perspectives that can offer greater transferability.
Summary

This chapter contained an overview of the methodology and analysis procedures associated with the research study. The chapter began with a summary of the methodology, followed by a list of the primary and secondary research questions. A review of the sample data and collection protocol and the interview protocol was followed by a summary of the procedures associated with the study. Finally, there was an overview of how data was analyzed as well as how issues of trustworthiness, delimitations and limitations would be addressed. The following chapter will profile the participants, address the findings of the study and summarize the methods used for analysis of those findings.
Chapter IV

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that have enabled middle- and late-career African American female principals to persist in their positions. The following research questions served as the foundation for the study:

1. What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?
2. How do issues of race and gender impact middle- and late-career African American female principals?
3. What identity shifts do middle- and late-career African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles?
4. How do clearly-defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

Five African American females who have served as principals for a decade or longer were interviewed and select artifacts were examined in order to more clearly understand those factors (Table 1). This chapter begins with a detailed description of each participant, and introduce each one with a direct quote made by her at some point during our interview. Following participant descriptions, this chapter contains results of findings using descriptive and some analytical data. Throughout the in-depth coding process, I identified specific themes and connections between the research questions and the data. This was done to more clearly identify factors related to the persistence of these principals.
A purposive sample based on years of service in the principalship, gender, and race was used. I also used a snowballing method where principals who had committed to participate in the study were asked to provide recommendations for additional candidates. Although several principals initially agreed to participate, two later declined for personal reasons. These participants were replaced by reaching out to a network of education professionals through social media, and requesting referrals from participating principals.

I had not met four of the participants prior to the interviews, but did have an informal working relationship with one principal. The range of time in the principalship spanned from 11 to 24 years.

Each principal initially was contacted via e-mail, and interviews were conducted using both in-person and online formats. Each principal was provided with a copy of the interview protocol and secured a signed a consent form prior to beginning the collection of data. Upon completion of the interviews, I provided each participant with a copy of the transcript in order to provide them an opportunity to member check the details. I conducted follow-up interviews with several participants in order to clarify or expand on certain research questions.

Participants’ experiences in the field of education ranged from 22 to 34 years, and between seven and 17 years in classroom settings, where they taught a variety of subjects. One participant was a former speech therapist. All participants had served as building principals for at least 10 years, with one principal having served for 24 years, and all participants’ experiences included working in urban settings (Table 2).
Participant Profiles

Table 2

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym Name</th>
<th>Years in Profession of Education</th>
<th>Years as a Classroom Teacher</th>
<th>Years as a Principal</th>
<th>School District Type</th>
<th>Grades Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14 (full)</td>
<td>Urban/Rural</td>
<td>K - 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11 (full)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>3 - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24 (full)</td>
<td>Urban/Rural</td>
<td>K – 12 Speech Therapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10 (full)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>7 - 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14 (full)</td>
<td>Urban / Charter</td>
<td>Kindergarten 8th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive Data

Cynthia: “It was always ‘school is what you need to do,’ that’s how you succeed in life.”

Cynthia is a petite, energetic, middle-aged woman. At the time of the initial interview, she was dressed casually in shorts and a t-shirt after having just completed another school year. She was friendly, and her short, dark hair provided an attractive contrast to her light complexion. As she began her interview, her eyes peered thoughtfully through her wire-rimmed glasses and she appeared at all times to be highly reflective as she thoughtfully pondered each question. Cynthia was reared by a single mother who worked in manufacturing in order to provide for her family, provisions which included enrolling her in Catholic school. She was always told by her mother that school was necessary for success, and although she lived in the projects, she never considered herself poor. She and her husband have four children, and relocated several times in the past due to her husband’s military responsibilities.
After earning middle-school licensure in both chemistry and social studies, she went on to receive masters and doctoral degrees in education, and has been a principal for ten years. Her teaching career began in what was considered to be one of the worse middle schools in a large city on the nation’s east coast. Her administrative career, conversely, began as an assistant principal in a Midwestern urban school district where she was promoted to principal five years later.

Cynthia currently leads one of the worst schools in the district in terms of crime rate. In one specific incident, a child asked if she and her family could stay at the school following a shooting in the neighborhood because she felt most safe that setting. Despite the challenges associated with her feeder community, she has successfully managed to increase enrollment from 270 to over 400 in the ten years of her principalship and maintain a 93% attendance rate. Additionally, although her school is 100% economically disadvantaged, it received the highest score possible for academic progress of the lowest 20% of her students in an annual statewide report (Ohio Department of Education, School Report Cards, 2016).

**Deborah:** “I think I’m so much more than this job.”

Deborah’s full frame appeared nearly five feet tall, and her smile radiated throughout the room. Her neatly, styled shoulder length hair bounced sporadically against her vividly, colored blouse and her manicured nails glistened in the sunlit room. Deborah began her career as a speech therapist in a southwestern region of the country, and only began to consider administration after the urging of an African American principal in one of the schools in which she was assigned. After much consideration, she
entered a summer intern program in the midwest and after three years earned her master degree and principal license.

Education was always seen as an important aspect of her family life, starting with her grandparents who wanted their children to have opportunities beyond those available in their rural southwestern community. Deborah’s mother worked at home to rear her and her brothers while her father worked multiple jobs to support the family. Unlike her brothers whom she felt had sports and the military to look toward as career options, she found education to be the best choice for her future. In her mind, it was very clear that she was expected to attend and to graduate from college, and she never doubted the unyielding support of her parents.

Her first principalship was in a school located in a rural part of a midwestern city where she was the only African American throughout the four years in which she was employed. Upon arriving at the school, she was greeted by a parent who exclaimed, “Well, this ought to be interesting,” when she learned that this was the principal, and not the new cook.

Unlike her first school, Deborah’s current school is located in a small urban community in the midwest where the majority of families are low-to mid-income African Americans. She lives only a few miles from her school, and is an active participant in the community. Over 97% of her third grade students met the state’s stringent criteria for promotion, even though, according to state records, 100% of her school’s students are considered economically disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education, School Report Cards, 2016).
Joyce: “Everybody leaves the conversation with their dignity. I have mine and you have yours.”

Joyce is the only participant I had known prior to the study. I noted how vocal and, at times, animated she was throughout the conversations, and, attributed that partially to her familiarity and comfort with speaking to me. She did not learn to read until she was 14 years of age, and retired from the principalship in 2012 after earning her bachelors and master degrees. Of all those interviewed, Joyce was the most talkative, passionate and sometimes the most animated of the participants. When discussing her past experiences, she would occasionally stiffen, and her voice would rise as if scars from the past were in some way still very fresh in her mind. Her petite frame, neatly-styled salt and pepper hair and coordinated attire reflected a personal attention to detail and a high level of self-awareness. She would often use her hands and facial expressions to underscore an important point, and at all times a certain palpable energy surrounded her as she spoke.

Joyce was born the oldest of three girls to Black parents in the early 1950s, during the civil rights era. When describing herself growing up, she recalled how her mother would say she was “Black before Black was popular.” Both of her parents were actively involved in the civil rights movement. Her mother attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and her father spent several years at a local, private university. Joyce’s immediate and extended family was comprised of members that either attended or graduated from college, and she was expected to do the same. Her mother returned to the paid workforce when she was in elementary school so that she could ensure that her
children went to college. As did many of her family members, Joyce also attended and graduated from an HBCU after which she went on to teach elementary school.

Her first two principalships involved working with Appalachian populations, to which she remarked, “I didn’t know… about them, let me tell you I didn’t know… about Appalachia.” The school population consisted of over 75% poor, White families with a few middle class African Americans as well. As Joyce explained, she spent the majority of her principalship working with poor, White families. She described herself as a hard-working woman with an “acid tongue” who fought “fiercely for poor people’s children.”

Upon relocating to another midwestern, urban district, she served as principal of two different schools. Nearly 88% of the student population in the most recent school was considered to be economically disadvantaged, which caused it to be labeled “high poverty” by the state’s department of education. Although only 2 of the 10 state indicators were met during one school year, the attendance rate reflected an impressive 94% which exceeded the state’s requirement (Ohio Department of Education, School Report Card, 2016).

**Rhonda:** “*I’m an only child so you more or less learn how to stand up for yourself.*”

Rhonda is a statuesque woman with flowing gray hair, glasses, and a deep, contagious laugh. As an only child, she was reared by her parents in the projects of a large midwestern city. She graduated from an HBCU, and went on to teach third grade for a number of years. As a result of a persistent friend who encouraged her to consider administration, she eventually relented and earned an administrative certificate which led to her first principalship. She and her first husband had a daughter, but later, as a single parent she decided to return to school to earn an advanced degree in order to better care
for her child. In later years, she went on to earn master and doctoral degrees in education. She retired from that same large, midwestern city’s school district after 31 years of service. Although she served her full principalship in only one building where she began as an assistant, she served as an assistant principal for seven years.

Rhonda was appointed to her first full principalship in a school where she was the first woman as well as the first African American to serve in that role. She had previously served as the assistant principal. Her service as principal occurred during the time where court-ordered busing was being enforced throughout the district. Hers was one of only two schools that were not required to participate in busing, and as a result, experienced extreme demographic shifts as families often maneuvered their living arrangements in order to enroll their children in her school and avoid busing. Additionally, Rhonda assumed the role of full principal under duress as neither she nor several of the parents wanted her in that position. She described herself as a strong woman who was not necessarily concerned about being liked, but about making sure her children were educated.

**Evelyn:** “She’s the teacher and she doesn’t even know she has power.”

Evelyn is a middle-aged woman who exuded a calm, cheerful demeanor coupled with a warm, sincere, and reassuring smile. Her eyes often glistened as she spoke with both care and conviction of her past experiences. She would often take extended pauses while considering how to describe a particular setting or event, and appeared to be highly reflective throughout our conversations. Evelyn is a mother of two sons and began her undergraduate studies as an engineering major before switching to education during her senior year when personal circumstances dictated that such a change was needed. She
has been employed in the field of education for nearly 25 years and has served as a teacher, assistant, and full principal in elementary- and middle- school settings. She earned elementary and middle school and principal licensure, a master degree and has completed the majority of coursework toward a doctorate.

Although she is currently an assistant principal of a middle school, she served as the building administrator of a public charter school for 14 years. After returning to her hometown to work in the classroom, she discovered an alarmingly-low proficiency rate associated with students in her building and district. Due to this discovery, she lobbied for the chance to try some new, research-based interventions. The result was the funding of a charter school for which she developed curriculum and served as the principal. As the sole administrator, her charter school experience provided her with the opportunity to learn and perform a variety of duties that at times extended to those typical of a district superintendent. Early in her leadership journey she vowed to learn more about legitimate power after a student quipped, “She’s the teacher and she doesn’t even know she has power.” Those words still remain fresh in her mind, and have pushed her to become a better teacher and administrator. After nearly a decade and a half of work in the charter school environment, Evelyn returned to a traditional public school setting where she was once enrolled as a student, and now serves as an assistant administrator.

**Methodology**

Following the collection, review and member-checking of all transcripts, I proceeded to create descriptive codes that reflected specific details about the participants and their statements (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In order to efficiently examine the data, specific comments that were similar in nature were color coded within each
transcribed interview. Once specific words and phrases were clustered together, I was able to proceed to create analytical codes to identify overarching categories directly related to the research questions. These categories included (a) Personal and Professional Characteristics, (b) Race and Gender, (c) Psychological Contracts and Identity Shifts, and (d) Servant Leadership (Figure 2).

![Diagram showing initial categories associated with persistence.](image)

*Figure 2. Initial Categories Associated with Persistence.* Each category contained in the research question is illustrated in order to reflect connections to the primary focus.

Later in the process, following an in-depth use of axial coding where connections between words and phrases were identified, these key prompts were assigned to each category to more clearly define the issues related to the research questions. I termed these columns “themes” (Table 3) and proceeded to examine supporting documents which consisted of state local report cards, district websites, and press releases. Once the coding process was complete, a clear picture emerged. It was then possible to make inferences from the selective codes, and begin to formulate answers to the research questions.
Emergent Themes

Table 3
Emergent Themes of Persistence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Persistence</th>
<th>Race and Gender</th>
<th>Identity Shifts</th>
<th>Psychological Contracts &amp; Role Clarity</th>
<th>Servant Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Levels of respect</td>
<td>“The Look”</td>
<td>Feeling under-valued</td>
<td>Advocate, Protect, Fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>Toughest schools</td>
<td>Code switching</td>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Obligation to serve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of education</td>
<td>Scrutinized</td>
<td>Professional appearance and environment</td>
<td>Adapt to changing nature of the role</td>
<td>My “babies” or “kids”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Isolation and representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faith and Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
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In order to answer the question of what enables middle- and late-career African American female principals to persist for over a decade, I first asked to participants to describe themselves both personally and professionally. The question led to an emergence of several common subthemes such as educated, hard-working, strong, and confident. Each woman appeared to carefully and thoughtfully describe themselves using similar terms throughout the conversation. In every instance, the descriptive phrases flowed freely from their lips, and it was noted how confident these women were as they spoke. In fact, the words strong and hard-working surfaced at least 20 times throughout the interviews (Figure 3).
Theme 1: General Will to Persist

The value of hard work emerged as a common theme throughout every discussion, and each woman identified her strong work ethic as a major contributor to their success and persistence. Rhonda concurred by matter-of-factly stating, “I pulled myself up from my boot straps from the projects,” while Deborah mused with a slight shake of her head about the “hard work that doesn’t show.” When asked about her own work ethic, Joyce cocked her head, pierced her lips and pronounced, “You can’t out-work me. You may be smarter than I am, you may have more little letters, but you are not going to out-work me.” She went on to speak of how important she felt it was for others to know how hard she was working, and to know that she expected the same from them:

It’s not that you were born with anything, you have to work hard. And people would say “How are you doing today? Honey I’ve been working like an Egyptian slave, okay? That’s how I’m doing. Because you see, the Egyptian slaves built bricks with sand, so that’s the kind of slave I was, okay? (laughs) I was one of them because I was taught to work hard.”
The prevailing theme of hard work underscored the persistence of these women. Evelyn noted that she “probably [had to] work harder, smarter, study more” in order to provide the best for her school. None believed that they were entitled to their positions, and all suggested that their work ethic was at one point or another a source of scrutiny by others. Despite the scrutiny, all women credited a strong work ethic with enabling them to create school climates in which they were able to persist for a significant amount of time. This ethic was embedded in their value systems from childhood where they watched and heard other family members acknowledge the need to “be twice as good . . . to get half as much,” as Deborah stated. These women also underscored the universal importance of getting an education.

**Importance of Education.** Working toward a quality education was an important value in the lives of these principals. Each woman knew that in order to succeed they needed to secure a good education, and subsequently demand the same for their students. Cynthia recalled, “It was always school is what you need to do, that’s how you succeed in life, and this is your job so . . . there’s no excuse for you not to get your job done,” as did Joyce who recounted how her mother returned to the paid workforce when she was in fifth grade primarily because she “said I was going to go to college.”

**Theme 2: Race and Gender**

Critical race theorists argues that racism exists within society and is perpetuated by those who wield power, privilege, and influence. This theory focuses on the inequities that exist between members of dominant and disempowered groups (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2015). Additionally, the central tenet of intersectionality theory includes the recognition that social identities are “neither exclusive nor discrete,” and
therefore they may overlap (Few-Demo, 2014, p. 169). The second theme centered on the intersection of race and gender in the lives of these women. Issues of race permeated throughout the lives of all participants, and each cited examples of heightened scrutiny, personal identity shifts, non-verbal communication, and attempts to balance community and institutional needs (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Race and Gender. How the intersection of race and gender impacted the personal and professional lives of the principals, and were associated with their persistence.

Every principal stated that she remained cognizant of her race throughout her tenure. No principal felt that she had the luxury of forgetting that she was a Black woman. None of these women could lose sight of the fact that each was charged with managing and serving large groups of people that may or may not feel comfortable with a Black woman at the helm. Each principal shared stories of how her race either positively or negatively impacted a particular circumstance. Although each woman’s personal story was unique, each recalled numerous occasions where she felt her race had impacted the role of principal. At times, racial tensions surfaced, nevertheless these women used their personal strengths and commitment to their “babies” to overcome any of these challenges. In one example, Rhonda recalled a situation where teachers would bypass her and seek the approval of her assistant:
I remember I had a White male, assistant principal and sometimes the teachers would come into the office and ask him a question such as are we going to have an early lunch today. Well, that wasn’t his decision, it [sic] was mine.

In another example, Joyce described a situation involving one of her teachers who never felt the need to acknowledge her:

One of my best teachers spent six years never speaking to me. Never speaking to me . . . . But she was a hell of a teacher . . . I knew she could teach and that’s all I cared about but . . . how do you think it feels every day . . . to be the leader of a building . . . and a White woman who . . . . I am your superior and you don’t feel like it’s necessary to speak to me?

In addition to remaining keenly aware of her race, each principal in some way demonstrated characteristics of tempered radicalism. In a variety of situations each woman found herself grappling with her own personal ideology while trying to work within the larger school system and culture. These situations led them, in many instances, to give a voice to their families’ values in such a manner that would penetrate the bureaucracy of school systems while still working within the system’s protocol.

These systems at times reflected a stark contrast to the families’ own cultures. One such example involved a principal who spoke of her insistence that teachers dress professionally even though there was no district-wide dress code. The principal was aware of how appearance was important to members of the community, and suggested a level of respect. A situation arose where a parent commented on the attire of her child’s teacher prior to a parent-teacher conference with Rhonda:
This one teacher was having a lot of trouble. Of course she was a White teacher, a lot of trouble with this young man, and the mother came in to discuss it, and the mother, before the teacher came in the mother said, “how can you expect him to respect her when she doesn’t respect herself? Now look at her, she has on a thin blouse with only a bra and you know, we Blacks don’t do that, you know.”

Another principal shared a similar cultural view when she stated, “If you come in here looking like you just got out of your garden at your house, that’s disrespectful,” referring to the manner in which some of her teachers preferred to dress. It was clear throughout the interviews that the principals saw appearance as a means of power and influence, and sought to incorporate that mindset into the cultures of their schools.

Several principals expressed to me an unwritten reality that African American principals would be assigned to the more difficult schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), nearly 40% of all Black and Brown principals in the 2011-2012 academic year were assigned to schools with student populations that reflected 75% or more who qualified for free or reduced price lunches. These data suggest that principals of color are often assigned to work in high poverty schools which customarily pose the greatest challenges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Rhonda remarked, “It was mostly White males, the males got the easier schools,” and went on to say, “Supervisors would not transfer me out because [they] felt being an African American female, uh, was needed at that particular building.” Joyce recounted, “We [African American principals] had the most difficult buildings.”

Several principals also described how they felt their actions and decisions were constantly under scrutiny. They also lamented the fact that being Black and female can
be lonely at times. Cynthia laughingly stated, “I mean every conference I go to, every, you count how many are there,” when referring to other Black females. She also spoke of the challenges of maneuvering in the system as a Black female, “it’s been challenging because it feels like as a Black woman that I can have the credentials for longer and have more experience than other people of other races and I may not have gotten the job.” Joyce concurred by stating, “Yes, because it is, it is extremely lonely. Anybody else that doesn’t look like me, even if it’s a Black man, anybody that doesn’t look just like me is not received in the very same way and every day, I don’t care what I did, I had to prove myself, every, single day.” Despite the challenges associated with their race and gender, these women were determined to do what it took to make a positive impact on the lives of their children by persisting, pursuing and prevailing.

When Evelyn was asked to comment on her belief that, at times, she was looked upon to speak for her entire race she countered with the perspective that such situations provided her opportunities by responding,

I felt even prouder to be the spokesperson if that’s what they thought of me to be, that I represented African Americans. I all the more wanted to be sharp and represent well. I had a voice at every meeting, where if there were 9 of them [White educators] and they all had to share, I always got a say.

In a later discussion, she did acknowledge that at times her race influenced some district decisions, such as she described when the newly, appointed “superintendent asked, ‘Can you be on my strategic planning team?’ I know why he wants me there. And so, yes, I do feel like [I’m] representing.”
Theme 3: Identity Shifts

According to Mullen and Robertson (2014) it is common for African American women to shift identities to fit certain situations. These shifts can reflect changes in speech patterns, outward appearance, and even role definition. Although sometimes these shifts can occur unknowingly, many women are aware of their changes in behavior. Some of the female principals acknowledged shifting behaviors according to the varying situations in which they found themselves. Although none felt the need to adapt her outward appearance (attire or hairstyles) throughout her tenure, all acknowledged the sometimes unconscious shifts in communication styles depending on the audience. Rhonda very directly stated, “Yes, I code switched” when asked about changes in dialect. Cynthia confirmed her own regular changes in communication patterns by describing her behaviors:

Now there’s some people, you know, that I’m like “Hey, that’s my girl,” you know, “Look at you,” you know, I talk to those people and you know, I have some parents like, “Girl, what you have on today?” and I’m like, “Ah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” more like a girlfriend, but there’s others I know I need to step back from more and then there’s others that come in with some preconceived notions.

The shifts in behavior were especially pronounced in more demographically diverse settings, and involved considering both the racial and socioeconomic profiles of the schools. Joyce stated:

That means when I’m over here and I’m with the uh White ladies, I will not speak any Black slang. I’m not going to go home girl with you. But if I’m also
significantly over educated, compared to you, then I’m going to make sure that I don’t use any educational lingo.

None of the principals felt they needed to change their appearance to fit situations, and most subscribed to a belief in dressing professionally in order to gain respect and also serve as role models for their students. Rhonda stated, “I’ve always tried to dress very well, and that comes from being raised in the projects with not having anything.” Two other women stressed the importance of enabling their students to make their own shifts. Cynthia stated:

> You teach kids how to talk to one another, how to talk to an adult, how to respectfully wait but also get your opinion in at some point. Those are things that you have to teach them, and you model that, and you teach most of that through modeling and also saying, you know, correcting people in the proper manner.

Evelyn was particularly focused on her own appearance as well as that of her teachers. She reflected upon the fact that she took pride in her professional appearance and sought to change the culture of the school. In this instance, she was attempting to shift the identities of her teachers to fit with her own. It was not unusual for her to send teachers home to change clothes if she felt they were not dressed appropriately. At one point in the conversation, she mused that the children deserved better than that and commented:

> I’m sharp every day . . . you know I feel like children love to see a leader come in there [looking well-dressed] they’re like, they see those teachers and I get on
those teachers. I really think culturally, we as a culture . . . it says something you know, a respect level.

Many principals felt that it was important to create a school environment where students can see and experience nice things. By allowing students to see what success looks and feels like, they felt it would be more likely that academic achievement would become a priority. One principal spoke of the importance of exposing children to a “fancy restaurant so they can know how to act,” and another mentioned the importance of providing settings that included “table cloth, where there’s crystal, and there’s china, and silverware.” Joyce echoed the important responsibility of dressing professionally at all times by stating:

I wear my good stuff because my children need to understand what you can aspire to be. . . . They need to know that you don’t have this many outfits, you don’t have this many shoes, all of your stuff doesn’t match unless you are a reader and a thinker and have the opportunity to, to go to college and you find a way to be successful so you can travel the world.

Knowing how to behave in certain situations was an important aspect of their professional identities, skills that were likely acquired as a child. As Joyce mused, “I think its survival mechanism and it’s so much a part of us . . . that I don’t even recognize it.” She went on to ponder the issue and refer to Black professionals as being “chameleons” when she stated:

I think that we, I think that I probably learned it from watching my mother, watching reactions in school . . . the survival techniques that people, that
children of color have to acquire so young. I think that Black people period learn how to manipulate situations because of [their experiences in] school.

Deborah cited the complexities of identity when she spoke of her need to shift from leader to follower in some situations. She also acknowledged being conscious of how she was being perceived by others. In her previous rural setting where she was the only African American in the building, she admitted, “I was always aware that I was the only one and that I was representing and being scrutinized in that position.” She went on to say of her current urban setting:

This is much more personal. Comfortable as well…When I’m out of the district, representing the district at a conference . . . I’m much more keenly aware that I’m once again, like in [her rural district], I’m perhaps being scrutinized at a level.”

This comment suggests that principals may react situationally in terms of identity, expecting different degrees of scrutiny depending on the setting.

The Look. One universal behavior mentioned by all principals in shifting identities involved using “the look” in order to gain respect, control, and attention. This unspoken yet powerful facial expression was the cornerstone of identity shifting, and was used by all. Evelyn spoke of the ability to manage an off task behavior by just “raising an eyebrow.” Deborah asked, “You know, the mama look? Or, mama’s in the church choir standing and looking at you pointing giving that look,” whereas another described how, “we use that every day. Um, just the look, people know when you’re displeased”.

Bailey (2011) described this practice in her own African American upbringing when referring to her mother whom she described as “an expert at giving ‘the look’…slowly, she would turn her head toward me and give it to me. . . . that stern glare.”
Theme 4: Psychological Contracts and Role Clarity

The issues that emerged surrounding psychological contracts and planned renegotiation included parent and district relationships, preparation, respect, and for one principal in particular, restructuring (Figure 5). Each woman assumed the role of principal with different levels of preparation and had formed varied relationships with parents and administrators.

![Diagram of Psychological Contracts and Role Clarity]

*Figure 5. Psychological Contracts and Role Clarity. How issues associated with preparation, respect, relationships and district restructuring impacted the psychological contracts and role clarity of the principals.*

All women described pinch points where they were forced to re-evaluate their roles in some way, and reach a conclusion about choosing to persist or not. One such time occurred following the restructuring of the school due to court-ordered busing, another time the re-evaluation process resulted from lack of respect for and from those in higher level positions within the district. Other times involved enduring difficult parents or teachers who appeared to be undermining the principals’ agendas. Deborah spoke of her awakening as she began her principalship when she stated, “My rose-colored glasses made me think ‘okay, I’m going to college, and I’m getting a graduate degree because I don’t want to do that stuff’ and guess what? I still do that stuff” speaking of doing chores such as cooking, cleaning up messes, and changing soiled clothing. The job, she
explained, was ever-changing and did not always match her initial expectations. As was the case with the other principals, she adapted to fit the expectations rather than choose a more formal means of role negotiation within the system. These adaptations were negotiated not through the formal school system, but through her own value system. Additionally, disruptions were met by many of these women with unyielding faith in God to give them the strength and wisdom to endure. Education and service to the community were values shared by all principals, and were reflected in their own family’s values. The commitment to these strong values resulted in the stability and productivity needed in order to successfully manage their schools and avoid unhealthy disruptions.

**District Restructuring.** Although in 1963 the large midwestern city in which Rhonda was employed enacted mandated busing to address school segregation, in 1976 a federal district court ruled that the schools were insufficiently integrated and would be required to employ additional policies to end the de-facto segregation (History central, 2016). This ruling led to a heightened focus in court ordered busing. Rhonda experienced a change in role expectation when her school experienced the consequences of ongoing city-wide busing. Although her school was one of only two that was not required to participate in court ordered busing, the result was an influx of people moving into the area in order to enroll their children in the school. This decision by parents was, in large part, due to their desire to avoid having their children bused to other schools. As a result, the population increased and became more diverse, with neither the principal nor the teachers feeling prepared to deal with the aftermath. Rhonda stated:

> And suddenly we get in all these kids from this particular area and they were very lower socioeconomic and quite a few of them were White, and some of the
parents whose younger children, um, the ones who had to be bused out, they refused to have their children . . . put on a bus so what they did was put the kids in the parochial schools around there, so therefore, that left more space and people, and, oh, then the school was surrounded by a lot of apartments so that left more space and people moved in and, uh, there was just a change in the population.

The unplanned changes to the population left the principal at a point where a severe pinch was felt. The absence of an opportunity for negotiation with decision-makers resulted in an “increasing frequency and intensity of disruptions” (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1973, p. 198). As time passed, the population became more diverse and challenging, and the principal ultimately reached a crunch point and decided to retire after 31 years. In her mind, the psychological contract between herself and the district had been broken. Although this particular principal’s experience was considered an outlier to the others, it was a powerful example of how broken or unplanned changes to psychological contracts can at times lead to an eventual severing of ties with a district.

**Welcoming and Unwelcoming Parents.** Included in the social systems that existed in these principals’ schools were parents and students. These principals, in large part, worked to establish and maintain relationships with the students and their parents. The relationships formed with parents served to dictate the quality of each principal’s experience. Joyce found the parents in one of her schools to be her greatest allies. By her own admission, she worked hard to form positive relationships built on her love for their children and stated, “I was non-judgmental. I was passionate about their children being educated and about teachers stepping up and working for their pay, and so, I was
embraced”. This mutual respect was grounded in both parties’ expectations that the other would work for the children. As a result, the relationships remained stable, committed and productive and the psychological contract between the principal and the parents had been honored.

Similarly, Evelyn credited her strong relationships with parents with her willingness to persist. Because she was a member of the community in which she worked, she had many close relationships with the families enrolled in her school and felt a personal responsibility to give something back to them. At one point, she pondered the reasons that she remained in the position despite certain challenges and concluded, “I just feel honored that they share their children with me and I feel just that heavy burden, but a good burden, a very positive burden,” which enabled her to translate any disruptions into opportunities for growth for herself and her families.

Conversely, Rhonda found some of the parents in her school to be her biggest challenge. Because the previous principal had deferred to the parent group to make many school-related decisions, parents expected that the same would be true for her. There was no initial sharing of information nor of expectations. As these inconsistencies surfaced, disruptions occurred:

The parents . . . didn’t care for me. They were Black female parents and so they had gone to, uh, the area superintendent and asked her to please not put me there. They did not want me there as a principal. Rhonda was convinced that these women, regardless of color, did not like the idea of having a strong, African American woman in charge. She went on to lament that if she had been willing to succumb to the parents’ wishes she likely would have been able to get
the transfer she very much wanted but, “No, uh-uh, I’m going to be tough and run this place” was her response. As a result of these disruptions, she never fully embraced some of the parents, and instead, chose to focus on their children. These disruptions at times led to the anxiety, fatigue, and uncertainty described by Sherwood and Glidewell (1971). Despite the strained relationships with some of the more vocal parents, she did admit that some former parents still remembered her fondly and expressed appreciation for her interest in their children even years later.

**Treatment by district leadership.** Two principals represented different urban districts within the same midwestern state. In both instances, these principals found themselves approaching their crunch points as a result of treatment by district administrators. The women had been successful principals for at least 10 years and had demonstrated high levels of skill and productivity. Their schools’ test scores had risen, as had attendance rates despite high levels of poverty. Several principals found themselves and their achievements being minimized or ignored by higher level supervisors. One principal stated:

I think it was a case of feeling disrespected by those above me in authority and because I can deal with my parents, but if you can’t respect me as an individual or if I start feeling stifled where my, where I don’t think my opinion counts, and I don’t think you really want to know my opinion, nor do you want the feedback that may be beneficial to my community and my side. If you’re not open to hearing that then you know . . . I’ve reached a point where I’m ready to go.
Conversely, Evelyn reacted differently to district intervention when the decision was made by her funders to withdraw support for her charter school. After years of trying to improve student achievement data, she found it to be increasingly difficult to maintain consistent progress. This lack of consistency resulted in the loss of major funding which left her at a crossroad. Rather than seek additional sponsors, Evelyn decided to accept the decision and choose a new direction because “I felt like kids don’t have time to wait for me to get to be good enough and to lead us back well enough for them to have the gains that I needed them to see.” Although she acknowledged the difficulty in accepting the decision, she supported the reasons for it. In other words, she psychologically renegotiated her role and shifted her focus.

These women demonstrated very strong senses of self and expected to be treated with an appropriate level of respect. They appeared to take ownership of the cultures they had worked to create in their buildings; Deborah repeatedly referred to her school as “my house,” and Joyce lamented the fact that because she was reared to defer to authority she expected the same from her teachers and students. For some, the perceived lack of consideration of their opinions, and an unwillingness to allow for adequate input created disruptions in their levels of commitment and shared understandings. Rhonda responded to the disruption by refocusing on her overarching beliefs, whereas another principal began to question her physical ability to meet the growing demands of the position. Restructuring had resulted in increased enrollment and the unexpected addition of students with severe emotional disabilities. Her inability to influence the system resulted in two simple words, “I’m tired.” Soon after, she began to plan for retirement.
**Preparation and Role Clarity.** The state in which these women were principals required that they complete an accredited principal preparation program, pass a standardized test, and have taught for at least two years in the grade levels over which they would preside (Ohio Department of Education, Administrator License, 2016). When I asked the women about their levels of preparation for the principalship, most agreed that no formal training could have truly prepared them for the expansive nature of the position. Evelyn very clearly felt that her preservice preparation provided her with little direction once she assumed the administrative role, but she credited her mentors with providing her with valuable guidance.

Several of the women had been promoted from assistant principals, and therefore, had some prior administrative experience. Three of the participants believed the presence of a Black, female superintendent was instrumental in the decision to promote them to building principal positions. Cynthia remarked, “When we had a Black superintendent, that’s when we saw more minorities move into the principalship under her guidance.” Joyce concurred when she stated, “She was just ‘us’ and so we wanted to make her look good”, referring to the former superintendent. She went on to add that unlike the former Black superintendent who appeared to want her principals to succeed, “The other superintendents put me in buildings where, or put me in situations where, I was not to succeed, and so and they gave me . . . the most difficult” school settings. These comments are consistent with previously cited literature that suggested African American females are most likely to lead schools with high percentages of non-White, poor or working class students in urban settings (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).
The principals lamented the fact that the position is unpredictable and not what others may believe it to be. They also recalled inconsistent levels of support. Deborah commented:

Well it’s not the high-heel shoes and sitting in the meeting with your legs crossed taking notes and your secretary doing all the grunt work, it’s not that . . . and I haven’t always had the level of support. Sometimes I was forgotten, sometimes I was under a microscope, sometimes I was praised and challenged, and sometimes I was just, um, (pause) I want to say mis-trusted.

Rhonda appeared to feel the most prepared for her position as principal. She made mention of the fact that she had spent more of her 31 year career as an administrator than as a teacher, but did describe in some detail the challenge of learning how to deal with the teacher’s union. Her organizational skills seemed to help as much, if not more than her prior preparation:

I was a very organized person . . . I never broke a rule, a union rule, a contractual rule and I did learn to keep the union contractual book on my desk . . . . I thought I would have more control but your teachers’ union, it has a lot of power which is needed. Because I taught when there was no union, (I believe) you do need a union but there needs to be more of an understanding of being realistic as to what is expected, and more support of principals…

Regardless of the individual’s background and experience, each agreed that within both urban and rural settings, individual buildings have their own unique needs based on the feeder communities. The best way to meet those needs, they agreed was to demonstrate a sincere interest in the families and businesses that called their neighborhoods “home.”
Theme 5: Servant Leadership

The strongest evidence of shared experiences came from this category, which included spiritual and religious beliefs, protecting, advocating and fighting for their “babies,” and giving back to the community. The will to serve appeared to be strong in each of the principals. Themes associated with serving others included the principals’ desire to give back to their communities, practice and demonstrate strong spiritual beliefs and protect their students, who they often referred to as their babies (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Servant Leadership and Persistence. Principals’ demonstration of servant practices included giving back, demonstrating strong spiritual beliefs and protecting, advocating and fighting for their students.

Witherspoon and Arnold (2010) described the caring nature of African American female principals and provided examples of how spirituality and strong values served as shields from many of the challenges and obstacles faced by these women. Other studies support the importance of spirituality in the lives of African American females (Loder, 2005a, 2005b; Mattis, 1997; Turner & Bagley, 2000).

Divine Guidance. Each woman identified religion or spirituality as one reason for persisting. Although some described their strong belief systems in more detail than others, the will to persist was, in part, derived from their strong spiritual belief systems.
The faith held by these women helped them define their roles, and clarified their obligation to serve others, especially their “babies.” One principal stated, “it’s not uncommon for me to tell parents ‘keep praying’ and ‘be sure you’re praying for us’ ”, and another reflected, “I know where all my strength and courage and blessings, all my blessings, uh, come from my Lord and Master.”

At several points where Joyce had almost reached her crunch point and believed she was ready to leave, she mused that, “if it were not for my Lord, I wouldn’t even get out the bed, because I know it’s going to be cray cray (laughs).” Another example illustrated the intersection between persistence and prayer when Cynthia professed about her decision to remain:

I actually had to really pray about it, and in my prayers, it was saying that “Lord, if You don’t want me to go anywhere then, You make sure all those doors stay closed. If You want me to move on, open a door and open it wide open so that there’s no doubt about it. Otherwise, keep it closed and don’t tempt me”.

Deborah underscored the strong connection between her spiritual beliefs and her willingness to persevere by explaining a greater purpose for her efforts. Her expectations aligned with a divine message, and as a result, she maintained the necessary stability for almost two decades. At one point, she paused, looked down, and calmly stated:

I believe that this position was not accidental. That it is part of a greater plan that I am here and performing my duties and service that I provide. I believe that when difficulties arrive I can handle them, and I realize that I’m not doing them alone that, um, that God is helping me and supporting me and guiding me and encouraging me . . . I believe that.
Similarly, Evelyn regularly turned to her faith when navigating the sometimes treacherous terrain of the principalship and pronounced, “I feel spiritually, you know, my steps are in order and if I’m in this I know that God is going to help me through this.” The spiritual component of these principals’ lives was a major factor in their decisions to persist.

**Protecting the Babies.** The principals’ view of the role of mother and the associated values of caring and nurturing often guided their leadership (Loder, 2005a). Case (1997) studied how principals often demonstrate a sense of deep care and concern for the children within their school settings, and suggested that they often focus on the “psychoeducational needs of the child” in order to support their academic success (p. 37). There were numerous examples of such *othermothering* by these female principals. Every principal at one time or another referred to her students as her “babies” or her “kids.” One principal in particular, became extremely emotional when discussing her students and said, “I think about . . . my son because I loved other people’s children so much.” She went on to describe a near crunch point in her career where she seriously contemplated leaving, but her future husband reminded her of her obligations to the children, “He shamed me, he said, ‘What about the kids? You are deserting all those children, your kids, your babies.’” She responded by choosing to remain in her position. Another principal, Evelyn, expressed her need to take care of her students by remarking, “You just stay and you lead, but that was the attitude I had to use to approach it or I think my poor babies wouldn’t have gotten the type of education they wanted, or they were entitled to.”
In some instances the principals saw themselves as protectors of the students in their care. Many of their students, regardless of color, were poor. Additionally, a large percentage of some students were Black or Brown and lived in challenging urban communities. These principals regularly commented on their perceived need to fight for and protect the students from the system, and sometimes even their teachers. None of the principals employed many teachers of color, and most lamented the fact that such teachers were difficult to find despite their efforts to do so. Despite the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity in their teachers, all principals maintained high standards and expected that all students be provided a quality education. At times, this quality involved the need for the principal to intervene on their students’ behalf. Delpit (2006) spoke of a Black elementary school principal who struggled with certain teachers’ abilities to work effectively with Black, Brown, and poor children. These abilities often resulted in the children’s frequent visits to the office and regular parent conferences. These and similar situations were described by the participants. Many of these principals appeared to have assumed the unofficial role of interpreter when teachers and children approached issues from different perspectives. Because the teacher has the power in the classroom, the principal felt the need to provide a level of power to the child by viewing the situation through a multicultural lens.

One particularly poignant experience with a student was shared by Evelyn who recalled the role her own students played in improving her practice and solidifying her endurance. She described a young, middle-school girl who had often given her problems in class. As a teacher in her first year at that particular urban setting, Evelyn lamented the fact that it was a student who, in some ways, protected her from the environment, and
not the other way around. That revelation caused her to dig in her heels and vow to persevere. She recalled how this particular student helped her become a better teacher and leader:

I had an after-lunch class that made me ask myself if I was in the right profession... a student helped provoke me, helped me want to become more of a leader just by her comments to me, mumbling under her breath “She’s the teacher and she doesn’t even know how much power she has.” Yeah, she probably diagnosed my problem... I learned a lot from (student’s name). I learned a lot from (student’s) comments and her signals that “you’re way too far above us,” and I don’t know how much power... and I thought ‘How do you use the power you have and how do you utilize and use it and listen to student needs?’

The recognition that a low income, African American, middle-school student could actually help her find personal meaning and purpose was a powerful one. Evelyn used that experience to reflect, research and revise her practices in order to fight harder for her “kids,” and sometimes seek to protect them from novices like herself.

In every instance, these principals were cognizant of the fact that many of their poor, and some students of color were school dependent and needed to rely on teachers and principals to learn strategies for successfully navigating within the dominant culture. Their more privileged counterparts would learn these strategies at home, from their parents but they often did not have such a luxury (Delpit, 2012). Evelyn remarked that she often served as an advocate for both children as well as their parents, and realized that she could serve them by providing guidance in navigating the bureaucratic education system, “advocating their desire, advocating for something maybe they want but can’t
communicate, or might not be received well, but if I go in there first, advocating for parents to realize . . . the power they have.”

Rhonda recalled a situation where she reversed a teacher’s decision to retain a child that the principal felt was capable of moving on. The child, she recalled, “did quite well” as a result of her intervention. In another example, Cynthia felt strongly that her teachers be able to provide an environment that was both academically challenging and also emotionally-safe for students. This emotional safety was partially reflected in the way teachers were expected to react to behaviors that were viewed as outside of middle class norms. She articulated this expectation by explaining that most teachers bring with them middle-class values and beliefs. This she felt, can be especially pronounced if the teacher does not share the child’s culture, and can put the child at a disadvantage. One example of this approach was found in her statement, “coming from that middle-class family they are bringing that same belief system with them into the classroom. So when a teacher says to a child, ‘you know you’re not supposed to do A, B, C, and D’ they made an assumption . . . which that may not be the case.” Joyce described certain situations where she would choose to accompany a disruptive child back to the classroom in order to ensure that he or she be treated appropriately upon arrival:

Part of my strategy was you and I are going to go back to your classroom together and I’m going to help you with that re-entry. I’m not just going to send you back . . . and I’m going to see how that teacher’s treating you when you come back, and how you are treating her and the rest of the classroom . . . . I felt like every day when it came to discipline I advocated for children.
I discovered the collective desires of these women to protect, advocate, and fight for their students. They each provided a certain protective armor for their families that served as driving forces that motivated them to continue their journeys, despite occasional setbacks and obstacles.

**Giving Back**

When I asked the principals to elaborate on their obligations to others in the community, Cynthia stated, “there’s also this nurturing side that wants to give a service to my community, and I do have a strong belief in reaching back and helping those . . . just like those people that reached back and helped me when it was my time.” Joyce underscored her “responsibility to African Americans as a race, my neighborhood, my family, and my church” as a factor in her persistence. When I asked Deborah to talk about the contrast between her principalship in the rural district and her current urban placement, she admitted that she had a different view of her role when she stated, “I attend church, I go to the hair salon, I shop in this community so I feel very much a part of the community. I am invested in a way that’s much different than in my previous experience.”

Evelyn was especially motivated by the idea of giving back to her community. After having lived in her feeder community prior to moving to another state, she returned with a sincere desire to contribute to her home town. When she learned of the alarmingly low proficiency data associated with the beloved school she once attended [and was then a newly employed teacher of], she recalled exclaiming, “What has happened to my hometown? This is my hometown and I’ve got to do something about this!”
I found that through conversing with these principals, each woman possessed a strong desire to fight and advocate for the families in their school communities. These women wanted to protect their children from threats they felt were embedded in the dominant educational system, and in so doing help them achieve academic success. Each principal acknowledged that others had done the same for her, and felt an ethical, spiritual and moral obligation to do the same for the children that came behind them.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the data I collected for use in this qualitative ethnography. I interviewed five African American females in order to explore the factors that enabled them to persist in their roles as principals for a decade or longer. Embedded in the research questions were factors related to race, gender, identity shifts, psychological contracts, and role clarification. The major issues contained within the research questions emerged as strong themes throughout the data collection process. As I collected and coded the data, these themes provided me with insight into the factors that enabled these women to persist for a decade or longer.

I found that the major personal characteristics shared by all women were a strong work ethic and high confidence in their abilities. Additionally, each principal credited a strong belief in the value of education as a contributor to sustained persistence. As I spoke to each woman, I witnessed her own unique personality emerge throughout the process. These principals shared personal accounts of great achievement and deep despair, and painted complex pictures of endurance and persistence.

Issues of race, and to a lesser degree gender, emerged as most of the participants reflected on their experiences. Each woman expressed feelings of isolation and, at times,
heightened scrutiny, many of which attributed these experiences to their race. In addition to race, most women acknowledged the need to shift their demeanor or style of communication to fit the situation in which they found themselves. These shifts included code switching. All participants saw attire as an important aspect of their identities and found no reason to shift during working hours. They wished to be perceived as professionals and dressed accordingly both in and out of school. None of the participants believed that their pre-service training alone was sufficient preparation for the job, and all believed first-hand experience coupled with even a small social support system helped them navigate the myriad of responsibilities associated with their principalships.

The strongest theme that emerged from these women was their belief in servant leadership. Every principal expressed at least some spiritual motivator, and all conveyed very high expectations of themselves and those with which they worked. These high expectations were regularly justified as necessary in order to protect, fight and advocate for their “babies.”

The next chapter has a summary of the findings and implications for the profession. Additionally, the previously described data was tied to select literature outlined in the second chapter.
Chapter V

Introduction

The demographic profile of our nation’s schools is changing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) and the disproportionate number of African American female principals employed in schools throughout the country as compared to their White male and female and African American male counterparts is worthy of examination. The skewed distribution of African American female school leaders suggests a need to explore the experiences and practices of these underrepresented educational leaders. According to Irvine (1988), principals who effectively lead schools with diverse student populations should demonstrate “resilience, patience, creativity, flexibility, the ability to inspire and motivate . . . and above all a desire to teach minority and at-risk students [as well as] understand Afro-American and other minorities’ cultural heritage and history” (p. 510). The African American females involved in this study not only possessed the ability to demonstrate such qualities, but chose to persist in urban and rural settings that presented both challenges and opportunities.

It is also important to study the characteristics of the leaders charged with managing urban schools, specifically the unique challenges and opportunities faced by many African American school leaders. We need to understand how some have persisted for extended periods of time despite these circumstances, in order to learn how we can best create environments that will sustain diversity in school leadership. Although data reflect that nearly 82% of our nation’s public school teachers are White, and 76.3% are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) there are significantly fewer principals who are both Black and female. This is particularly important because
demographically, over 78% of students in the 66 largest urban school districts across the country represent Black and Brown populations (Council of the Great City Schools, 2013). In other words, the number of non-White educational administrators in our nation’s schools is disproportionately small. This disproportion increases when the number focuses solely on African American females. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that of the nearly 90,000 public school principals in 2011-2012, fewer than 12% of them were both Black and female (Table 1). Historically, African American school leaders have served as both advocates for, and role models within, their communities (Tillman, 2008). Female leaders, specifically, have provided such services to the community. The diminishing pool of African American school leadership candidates, coupled with fewer opportunities for advancement than their White counterparts, supports the justification for further research on the topic (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009). This study was intended to contribute to existing research on female principals of African American descent who have served in their roles for a decade or longer. The characteristics, experiences, and practices of these women were examined in the context of their abilities to persist amidst challenges and opportunities related to race, gender, identity, psychological contracts, and personal characteristics.

Because African American females are most likely to lead schools with high percentages of non-White, poor, or working class students in urban settings, this study is particularly relevant when considering our nation’s changing demographics (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As is consistent with this research, all five participants worked in urban settings with low income, Black and
Brown student populations. Additionally, all schools struggled to achieve state-mandated proficiency levels.

When addressing the needs of students of color, many African American principals have the capacity to provide an understanding of, and empathy for, the experiences of these students. Additionally, it is quite probable that the presence of educators of color in all school settings can positively impact the assumptions, beliefs and values of students. Evidence of such an impact can be found in Deborah and Joyce’s experiences in rural settings where the population was poor and predominantly White. Not only did these women gain a greater understanding of the conditions under which many rural families operated, but the families were exposed to female school leaders with high expectations, broad vision, and deep care for their children. It is assumed that this impact served to not only embolden academic performance, but also to create a more equitable and inclusive educational climate for all students. In order for students of all colors and income levels to benefit from such an impact, principals must be motivated to persist for sustained periods of time.

**Statement of the Problem**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) over 50% of the nation’s school principals were female in the year 2011, however only 10% of these were African American men and women. Unfortunately, of all new principals regardless of race or gender, nearly 50% will resign by their third year in the position (Tyre, 2015). This statistic is particularly problematic considering that it can take up to five years to improve the academic culture of a school (School Leaders Network, 2014). Constant turnover of school leaders can impede the progress of their students, which may be
especially true in low income districts. The role of the principal is critical to the academic success of the students enrolled in their buildings; in fact, 25% of student academic achievement can be directly related to the quality of the school administrator (Tyre, 2015). Viadero (2009) stated that the highest turnover rates of principals were found in schools with “large concentrations of minority students” and that many of these principals leave within five years (p. 34).

While the numbers of African American and other students of color enrolled in our public schools continue to increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), African Americans represent a relatively small percentage of principals. In one specific instance, Grubb (2002) factored both race and gender into the profile of South Georgia’s school principals in the year 2002 and found no African American female secondary principals, 12.5% African American female principals in elementary schools, and only 6% African American female principals in middle schools. Although these data reflect a small sample, they do suggest the need for more effective systems of recruitment and retention of African American females in school leadership positions. In order to support continued investigation of measures for recruitment and retention of African American females in school leadership and other positions, it is helpful to explore the characteristics, experiences and practices of middle- and late-career female principals, and how they have persisted despite challenges related to race and gender, identity, psychological contracts and role definition.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this critical ethnographic study was to better understand the factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American
female principals, and how they have experienced issues related to race, gender, identity, and role definition. The factors are described through in-depth interviews and examination of artifacts. This study also includes an examination of psychological contracts, identity shifts, and perseverance strategies of these women, and serves to expand on the current literature. In an effort to address gaps in the limited research conducted concerning African American female principals, this study focused solely on middle- and late-career principals. Additionally, the study introduced the value of psychological contracts and persistence strategies found to be used effectively for a decade or longer. Upon conclusion of the study, the data may serve to inform practices of school leaders and policy makers in order to improve the continued recruitment and retention of African American females as principals.

**Review of Methodology**

I chose a qualitative design for this study because it provided the opportunity to collect rich, descriptive data from participants’ own lived experiences. According to Tillman (2008) “qualitative methods represent an effective approach to conducting research about Black principals” (p. 196). In order to fully explore the research questions, I felt it was important to derive as many answers as possible directly from the participants. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), these exploratory questions are best used when investigating an area or population that is deemed to be under-researched. Gaining information directly from the participants, and using their past experiences as a conduit for further exploration is paramount to the ethno-methodological approach (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This study involved an exploration of the characteristics, challenges and persistence of an African American female principals in
public school settings. I used a purposive sample (N=5) based on the settings in which their schools are (or were) situated, the race, and gender of the participants, and the number of years they served as principals. In addition to the participants’ class, race, and gender, their interest in the subject matter and their availability to participate during the specified timeframe was also a major factor. Following approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (Appendix D), I created pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the principals, and chose not to divulge the state in which they were employed. Upon acceptance of the invitation, and prior to beginning the research study, the participants were all given an *Informed Consent to participate in a Research Study* form (Appendix B). This form identified the research questions, outlined the processes involved in the study and addressed the interview protocol.

At least one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, followed by additional questions for those whose responses needed further elaboration. All interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. Upon completion, I personally transcribed all interviews and distributed copies to the participants for member-checking. Themes were identified through use of descriptive, analytical, focused, and in-vivo coding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). I described the lived experiences of the participants through a narrative format whereas attention was also paid to the principals’ demeanor and non-verbal communication techniques. The inductive nature of the process lent itself well to a critical ethnomethodology.

**Overview of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that enable middle- and late-career African American females to persist as principals for a decade or longer.
Embedded in the research questions were issues surrounding psychological contracts, role definition, race and gender and identity shifts. Five African American females from the same midwestern state were interviewed. Once data were collected and coded, themes surfaced and provided insight into the factors that impacted the persistence of these female principals. This chapter contains an overview of the methodology and findings; all of which relate to the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals. Issues of persistence was presented using the broad themes reflected in the fourth chapter and was aligned with select literature in the second chapter. These themes and literature include the examination of psychological contracts, issues of race and gender, impact of personal characteristics and use of servant leadership, and combine to detail the fruitful journeys of persistence experienced by these principals (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** General Factors Related to Persistence. Major themes reflected in the literature and through findings contained in this research.

**Primary Question:** What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?
Personal Characteristics and Persistence

Factors associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals include personal characteristics, a will to serve others, and a strong spiritual foundation. Included within each major characteristic were specific motivators such as inner strength, community bonds and giving back to those who helped them persist (Figure 8). Each of these women credited a strong work ethic and sustained inner strength with enabling them to persist in their positions. Additionally, their faith in God and their commitment to giving back to a community that once did the same for them provided the necessary satisfaction to continue their work.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 8. Personal Characteristics and Persistence. All women demonstrated a strong work ethic, inner strength and a spiritual foundation.*

Servant Leadership and Othermothering. Consistent with previous findings (Loder, 2005a, 2005b; Turner & Bagley, 2000; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010) the clearest and most powerful source of persistence echoed by all principals was the spiritual belief in their obligation to empower others (Figure 6). This belief was grounded in value systems that relied upon a divine force to guide and protect them. As was the case with Witherspoon and Arnold (2010), the spirituality and strong values of these principals
served as shields from many of the challenges and obstacles they faced. These values also enabled them to appreciate and capitalize on the opportunities presented to them. Evelyn lamented the fact that God was controlling the steps in her path. Rhonda recalled the Bible verses used by her mother to provide her with guidance. Joyce credited her God with giving her the strength to endure and expressed sadness for those who did not have such a source of fuel.

Similar to the statement cited by Witherspoon and Arnold, “These kids are smart. I am tired of people worrying about what the kids don’t have and think about what they bring to the table. They can’t help who their parents are” (2010, p. 227), the women in this study echoed parallel perspectives when Deborah stated, “You have to plead that case, for your kids…for your Black boys, for whoever because it’s not always fair.” Joyce spoke of her unquestioned responsibility to African American families and communities, and Cynthia described her “strong belief in reaching back and helping” others. Evelyn had a very personal source of motivation in that she was working to improve the lives of children and families who were living in the neighborhood in which she grew up. She also mirrored the interest convergence referred to by Milner (2007) when she spoke of intervening between parents and district administrators when concerns arose. These reflections underscored the pattern of African American female principals’ desire to use their talents to move students and families forward despite their sometimes unfair circumstances. The combination of these principals’ personal traits led them to behave in ethical ways consistent with servant leaders: putting students and families first, helping students, families and teachers grow and succeed, empowering others, and uplifting the community (Northouse, 2013, p. 225). The consistent focus on social justice
and activism among all of the principals can be directly tied to their strong, spiritual belief systems and to their perceived obligations to help others as those before them had done.

As was the case with Loder (2005a) and Case (1997), these principals’ view of the role of mother and the associated values of care and nurture often guided their leadership decisions and enabled them to persist. Their deep care and concern for the children in their school settings, or othermothering was apparent in many of their stories. Additionally, several principals demonstrated what Case (1997) referred to as community othermothering where they linked the lessons they learned from their own mothers and community members with their practices as educators (p. 37). These practices and emotional bonds reflected the servant leadership approaches common to many of these African American female principals cited in other studies (Case, 1997; Williams, 2013).

Williams (2013) interviewed African American female principals and found that some of the women had experienced feelings of marginalization and powerlessness throughout their tenure. Principals in this study recounted similar reactions. Deborah, Joyce, and Cynthia all described situations where they at times felt underappreciated and disrespected by district administrators, parents, or in some cases, teachers. Despite Rhonda’s wealth of administrative experience and specific requests, she was powerless to control her building placement. Additionally, like many Black principals before them, these women continued to carry with them the self-imposed personal responsibility for ensuring that the children of color, and at times, the teachers of color whom they served received the quality education of which they were deserving. Joyce articulated numerous occasions where she rose to protect her “babies” from what she believed to be harmful
classroom practices. Rhonda intervened on her students’ behalf despite objections from teachers. Cynthia described occasions where she used her own cultural capital to enlighten teachers about the unique needs of her student population. Evelyn spoke of her efforts to mentor African American preservice teachers so that they could overcome the rigorous demands of college coursework and eventually find homes in urban classrooms. Deborah took it upon herself to challenge systems that maligned her Black boys.

One important component of successful leadership reflected in literature concerning African American female principals was the strong desire to establish caring relationships with both the students and their parents. The desire to “stay focused on the students” enabled one principal in a previous study to keep challenges in context (Townsell, 2006, p. 8), and continue to consider the bigger picture. Each of the principals in this study demonstrated the same will to persist.

**Inner Strength, Strong Work Ethic.** Several times throughout each conversation, the principals described themselves as strong women (Figure 5.3). The inner strength demonstrated and described by these women appeared to have been worn proudly as they chronicled their past experiences, and each believed that this trait had contributed to their abilities to persist. As was true with African American female principals during the pre- *Brown v Board of Education* era (described in chapter 2), these women sought to establish and maintain a “tradition of excellence” in their buildings despite the inherent challenges of the position (Tillman, 2004, p. 282). Joyce and Deborah credited their inner strength with enabling them to continue work towards changing the cultures of their schools. Evelyn found strength through the support she received from her mentors. Rhonda attributed her upbringing as a single child with her
ability to sustain the mental toughness needed to tackle the issues surrounding court ordered busing. In every instance, these principals demonstrated the strength needed to serve their own needs as well as those of their students, parents, and teachers.

Whitmore (2015) outlined seven elements associated with a strong work ethic: (a) professionalism, (b) respectfulness, (c) dependability, (d) dedication, (e) determination, (f) accountability, and (g) humility. These women’s value of hard work was demonstrated in their character. Each woman identified their own strong work ethics as sources of their confidence and success. Some combination of the words “work” and “hard” surfaced multiple times throughout the interviews. The value of hard work appeared to have been ingrained in the lives of these principals, and they acknowledged that they would need to work hard, if not harder, than everyone else in order to successfully perform their duties as principals. Each conversation contained words such as respect, dedication, determination and professionalism, all words that are consistent with Whitmore’s elements.

Race, Gender, Class and Persistence

Subquestion 1: How do issues of race and gender impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

Critical Race and Intersectionality. Rocco, Bernier and Bowman (2014) discussed the social constructions, legal implications, and power structures associated with race, class, and gender by examining the “existence and consequences of power” in the workplace (p. 467). The authors argued that issues of race and power exist within organizations, and encourage maintenance of the status quo. Included in the discussion was how one of the tenets of CRT (interest convergence) motivates members from both
dominant and under-represented populations to ignore issues of power and privilege in order to reap the perceived benefits of existing practices.

Evidence of power and privilege surfaced throughout the conversations with these principals. The most poignant depiction was revealed when Evelyn’s urban student informed her of the unacknowledged power she possessed as a teacher. Only after digesting that comment was Evelyn able to comprehend fully how her legitimate power as a teacher could ignite her own cultural capital in order to better meet the needs of her students, particularly those of color.

Yosso (2005) provided a context within which to examine the experiences, challenges, and barriers faced by African American female principals, and challenged traditional deficit views of communities of color. By examining the wealth of knowledge and resources students can gain from their communities’ cultural strengths, the author described how educators can use “the potential of community cultural wealth [to] transform the process of schooling” for students of color (p. 70). This practice was especially pronounced by the principals in the study. Both Evelyn and Deborah lived in the communities in which they worked, and spoke of how that connection motivated them to continue to fight for their families. Joyce and Deborah both found it beneficial to visit the homes of their rural White families in order to gain a better understanding of their personal stories; something with which they were previously unfamiliar.

Social Identity and Persistence

Subquestion 2: What identity shifts do African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles?
Social Constructivism. Neff (2016) explained how Vygotsky viewed the construction of knowledge as supported by those cultural influences that determine social rules, develop communication skills, and foster abilities to navigate social terrain. The important role of culture in the interactions of individuals within social contexts is relevant to the discussion of African American female principals. This role suggests that an individual’s family and community ties may influence their ability to interact with and communicate across cultures, and can be reflected in certain code switching and identity shifting behaviors displayed by participating principals. Every principal acknowledged that they were at all times conscious of their Blackness. With that acknowledgement, they also conceded that the reality of their race came with it a natural inclination to adapt to situations. All five principals acknowledged demonstrating “the look” when interacting with certain students. This stern, focused glare was seen to be a fixture in African American culture, and each woman expressed the ability to seamlessly transition their body language into that mode when necessary, especially in urban settings.

Vygotsky’s views on social construction are consistent with these women’s stories in that past experiences informed their practices when interacting with other members of their school communities. These women were connected to their communities to various degrees, and spoke of how their upbringings impacted their abilities to form such connections. Each was also very cognizant of how they were being perceived by others and focused on their images both in and out of the workplace. This awareness can be attributed in part to their cultural values and norms.

In this study, intersectionality theory was narrowed to include the specific experiences of principals who were both African American and female. The Afrocentric
feminist epistemology involved the examination of the unique standpoints of the participants, standpoints characterized by class, race, and gender. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Contrary to the original expectation to focus on gender, more evidence of class differences was discovered. On several occasions the principals in the study identified both race and class as issues involved in their efforts to improve the cultures of their schools. These women were able to “negotiate systems of privilege, oppression, and opportunity” in order to uplift themselves and their families (Few-Demo, 2014, p.170). Joyce and Deborah, for example, began their principalships in predominantly White school settings where many of the families were extremely poor and lacked formal education. Rather than gender, the intersection of race and class was a more powerful force to be reckoned with by these women since they both identified with middle-class values and standards of living. They were required to immerse themselves in the stories of these families in order to adapt their own middle-class views and practices in a manner that provided them the necessary empathy and understanding.

**Identity.** Each principal in the study was found to shift their identities in ways that were thought to benefit themselves and their students. These shifts were primarily focused on speech patterns when interacting with certain parents. As Deborah, Rhonda and Cynthia remarked, they would often switch speech patterns with certain parents with whom they had casual relationships. These switches allowed them to relax their diction and use some informal jargon and gestures. As a result of this familiarity, trusting relationships were made stronger. Several women also recalled adjusting their vocabularies to fit the understanding of the person with whom they were speaking. Both Cynthia and Deborah gave specific examples of how they explained complex testing
criteria in ways that could be easily understood by their parents. Conversely, these women were also able to shift and speak of “value added measures” and “criterion referenced assessments” when the need and situation arose. Evelyn recalled a Black student telling her that the student’s parent believed her to be White because of the way she spoke. This shifting of language patterns between formal and informal conversations was apparent in all principals, and sometimes appeared to occur without thought.

Unlike the participants described by Mullen and Robertson (2014) who spoke of relaxing natural hair and making other physical changes in order to fit their situations, none of these women found it necessary to adapt in such a manner. All women did pay special attention to their attire, and sought to dress professionally at all times. Although knowledge of scrutiny by others was always seen as a concern, most principals attributed their attire choices to the belief that professional attire demonstrated a level of respect. This demonstration of respect had deep roots in their cultural heritage. Additionally, Cynthia and Joyce specifically attributed their decisions to dress nicely to their attempts at modeling behaviors deemed to be successful in the dominant culture. These behaviors may not have been provided elsewhere in “their kids’” lives.

**Psychological Contracts and Persistence**

**Subquestion 3: How do clearly defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?**

**Planned Renegotiation and Social Exchange.** Sherwood and Glidewell (1971) described the cycle of relationship building, commitment, stability, productivity, and disruption in their *Model of Planned Renegotiation*. This model underscores an individual’s desire to avoid uncertainty and minimize anxiety, factors which can impact
one’s decision to remain in a particular place of employment. The severity of the disruption, such as a district reorganization, a change in school composition, changing parent and staff relationships or added responsibilities not outlined in the job description can lead individuals to reach a *pinch point* which signals a need for some sort of change. If this point is not sufficiently addressed, either personally or institutionally, it can lead to a *crunch point* where anxiety and uncertainty lead to decreased functioning and even severing of ties between parties within the organization. In other words, the will to persist can be lost (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1973).

Cherry (2015) described social exchange theory as one involving an exchange of perceived benefits and risks between parties as relationships are formed. Individuals analyze the costs and benefits of any relationship and, as a result, choose to continue or terminate depending on the projected outcome. The process of weighing the value of a given relationship is closely related to the model of planned renegotiation and the issue of persistence.

Each woman in the study articulated one or more crunch points in her tenure as principal. When the point was reached, each principal needed to weigh the costs and benefits of remaining in her current position or terminating the organizational relationship. The benefits of remaining outweighed any perceived costs for these women; the crunch point eventually escalated to a pinch point with Rhonda who finally chose to retire. For Rhonda, the costs ultimately outweighed the benefits as the conditions under which she was operating became untenable. Joyce struggled with challenging relationships among herself and some staff members coupled with some resistant parents. The burden of carrying the weight of the position at times felt too great.
Once she weighed the costs of those relationships with the benefits of protecting her “babies,” she was convinced to remain in her position, despite being ignored for six years by one of her teachers. Evelyn conversely viewed many of her challenges as opportunities for personal growth. When she was faced with her most difficult challenge (closing the charter school), she determined that the cost of securing new investors was too great, and her “kids” could not afford to wait for new those relationships to form.

There were few examples of direct negotiations with district administrators. Often these principals chose to manage their struggles and embrace their accomplishments in isolation. Although Evelyn spoke fondly of the ongoing communication and support, she received from her immediate supervisor, others credited parents and family members with providing them the necessary support. In all cases, spiritual guidance and a laser focus on their “babies” provided them the motivation to achieve their goals.

**Social Exchange.** The basis of Social Exchange Theory rests in the belief that individuals consistently consider the rewards and costs of any given relationship. As consideration is given, individuals weigh the satisfaction gained from the relationship as well as their levels of commitment to sustaining or persisting over time. An important aspect of this process involves CL (comparison level) and CLalt (comparison level for alternatives) which considers what one expects from a relationship and what one expects from the alternatives to the current situation (Thompson, 2008). Throughout the conversations with principals in the study, numerous examples emerged where the women were forced to weigh their satisfaction with their situations with alternatives.
Role Definition. The role of the principal was neither clear nor concise according to all participants. Each principal expressed a general understanding of the duties associated with the principalship when she entered the position, but all expressed challenges in meeting complex and ever-changing nature of the role. Neither Joyce, Cynthia, nor Deborah felt she had been adequately prepared for the position. Rhonda, conversely felt that her years as an assistant were instrumental in enabling her to transition seamlessly, into a full principalship. Evelyn said her preservice program did little to prepare her for the rigors of the position, but credited strong mentors with providing her the necessary preparation and role definition. Both Joyce and Cynthia credited a previous African American superintendent with providing them the opportunities for advancement as well as the tools to meet the demands of the position. In all cases, the need for role definition was met through spending long hours learning the system and negotiating within their own value systems, rather than with district administrators.

Reflections and Implications

When it looks like all is up,

Keep a-goin'!

Drain the sweetness from the cup,

Keep a-goin'!

See the wild birds on the wing,

Hear the bells that sweetly ring,

When you feel like sighin', sing --

Keep a-goin'! (Stanton, 2016, p. 1)
Reflections

As stated previously, I hoped this work would help bring about a small level of “equity, fairness, and social justice” for African American educators by helping others better understand this under-researched population (Ornstein & Levine, 2008, p. 191). Throughout the study, I continued to view data through a critical lens where power, privilege, and penalty were believed to be the cornerstones of the educational systems in which these women worked. This study began with a specific set of beliefs, assumptions, and experiences. I believed that African American females had continued their struggles to meet the increasing demands of their positions and populations. I believed that these women would express feelings of isolation, and would see themselves as under-valued. I also believed that these women had fought through race and gender-related adversity because they truly believed in the value of their efforts for future generations.

I was surprised at the strong will and determination expressed by these women. I was also unprepared for the unyielding spiritual thread that permeated throughout the discussions. Perhaps their responses were generational in nature and reflected their decades-long connections to the church. I can only wonder if early career African American female principals would respond in similar fashion. I also expected to find more examples of shifting identities to comply with expectations of the dominant culture. Although there were examples of such shifts, there were far fewer than I anticipated. Perhaps the shifts have become so seamless that they are no longer identifiable.

Image appeared to be very important to these principals. Whether it be their attire, hair, nails, or salutation, each principal demonstrated a desire to be viewed professionally. Even as they were involved in the interview process, and as shifts in
speech sometimes occurred, there was a sense that each woman elicited respect. Upon receiving the copy of the interview transcript, even with the knowledge of anonymity, more than one principal wanted to change what she believed to be unprofessional comments or speech to passages that were more aligned with the images they wished to portray. This suggested to me that they were always cognizant of possible scrutiny, even outside of their work places.

**Implications**

In an era of high stakes testing, school accountability, and heightened focus on race relations, it is important to examine factors related to educator quality and retention. This is especially true for educators of color who will need to feel a degree of satisfaction and commitment in order to persist in their positions. Research tells us that student achievement is in part tied to the tenure of teachers and administrators in the school setting (Echols, 2006; Sanchez, Thornton & Usinger, 2009). In fact, 25% of student academic achievement can be directly related to the quality of the school administrator (Tyre, 2015). Sanchez, Thornton, and Usinger argued that the recruitment and retention of minority principals is important to the future of our educational system since these leaders can provide unique perspectives that may serve to uplift students of color both academically and socially (2009).

Using the data obtained from the five principals in this study as a guide, districts must be willing to establish and sustain mentoring programs for prospective and current educational leaders of color. In addition to mentoring programs, districts should conduct environmental scans to ensure that appropriate levels of flexibility and autonomy are
provided to existing principals, particularly ones who pride themselves with a strong work ethic. Wingfield (2015) stated, “To be a black professional is often to be alone” (p. 1). In order to combat the feelings of isolation expressed by these women, districts must also work to systematically provide ongoing opportunities for collaboration with other principals in similar settings.

The current state of race relations in this country calls for the creation of avenues for greater understanding of the stories that educators bring to their relationships, whether these stories be personal or professional. This study is one such attempt to magnify the experiences of African American females in their quests to manage schools, increase quality and bolster student achievement. As districts begin to better understand the realities of these women, it hoped that they can work to create environments that will enable African American female principals to thrive and persist long after opportunity knocks.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study contributes to existing research on African American females, with a specific focus on the persistence of middle- and late-career principals. Because this population continues to be under-researched, it is recommended that additional studies focused on African American female principals be conducted. These future studies can include the exploration of factors that impact the persistence of sixth year principals, since research shows a significant drop in retention rates within the first five years, especially for principals in schools with “large concentrations of minority students” (Viadero (2009, p. 34)).
Principals in this study did not feel adequately prepared by their certification programs. Additional research can be conducted to determine if there are relationships between pre-service principal preparation programs and retention. Findings from such research can guide educator preparation program practices in order to ensure principal consistency. Finally, additional research can explore the spiritual foundations of early career African American principals and determine if the relationships between their faith and persistence are similar to those of middle- and late-career leaders.

**Summary**

This study aimed to explore the factors that enable middle- and late-career African American female principals to persist for a decade or longer. The research questions sought to examine personal characteristics, race and gender, psychological contracts, and identity shifts as they related to persistence.

The overarching themes that surfaced throughout the study were summarized in this chapter. Based on the data gleaned, it was concluded that inner strength, a strong work ethic and spiritual beliefs contributed to the persistence of these principals. Additionally, during this study it was found that the principals believed their race influenced many situations in which they were involved. These principals dealt with disruptions in their psychological contracts with their districts by recalibrating and shifting focus back to fighting for and protecting their “babies.” Only one principal had reached the final crunch point in her journey, and ultimately chose to retire. In all cases, these women remained keenly aware of their identities, were cognizant of any shifts that occurred, and sustained their inner strength as they sought to uplift stakeholders, big and small, through their persistence.
References


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Appendix A

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL
Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Characteristics, experiences, and practices that enable middle- and late-career African American female principals to persist and overcome challenges related to class, race and gender

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Bridget Ingram, principle investigator, is conducting this research study to explore the characteristics and practices of middle- and late-career African American female principals, and how they were able to persist despite challenges related to class, race and gender. Specifically, what is being analyzed is how 5 African American principals sustained their positions for a decade or longer, and what specific challenges they faced. Upon completion of the study, potential implications for future educational leadership studies and practices was identified.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You was asked to complete one or more interviews with Bridget Ingram. Each interview will last approximately 2 hours.

2. During the interview, you was asked to:
   Describe past experiences as related to your roles as teacher and principal
   Reflect upon challenges and obstacles
   Describe your personal and professional characteristics
   Reflect upon issues of class, race, and gender
   Describe systems that exist within your school and district

3. The interview session(s) will take place in a private setting of your choice, and was audio recorded. The interview sessions for out-of-state participants was conducted through use of an online meeting program. All interviews was audio and/or video recorded. The recordings was transcribed for further analysis and may result in an additional follow-up interview.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There is no physical risk to participants of this study. There is a significant privacy risk to the participant since the interview was conducted in front of a class wherein background and demographic information may obtained. Participants will review material for content, and was provided with the opportunity, if they wish, to comment on the transcribed interview.

Due to the nature of some of the interview questions posed during the interview process, there is a small mental health risk to the participant. In the event that a sensitive subject or memory is brought forth, the participant may experience discomfort and/or anxiety. Additionally, participation in this type of research inherently leads to a loss of privacy.

D. BENEFITS
By participating in this research, you will gain a better understanding of the personal and professional characteristics associated with African American females in educational leadership roles as well as any obstacles or challenges faced throughout the ascent process. You will also have the opportunity to reflect upon issues of race and gender that may have impacted past experiences.

E. COSTS

There was no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

G. QUESTIONS

If a research-related injury occurs, or if you have questions about the research, please first contact Dr. James Olive, 226 Dwight Schar College of Education, 419-207-6643 or 614-285-5466. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects, by calling (419) 207-6198 between 8:00am and 5:00pm, Monday through Friday.

H. CONSENT

You were given a copy of this consent form to keep. Additionally, a copy of the interview protocol (questions) will have been provided to you prior to signing this informed consent form. Please indicate, by signing your initials in the space provided below, that you have been given a copy of the interview protocol for review.

__________ I certify that a copy of the interview protocol (questions) have been given to me. I have reviewed the proposed interview questions and consent to this line of questioning.

I have voluntarily decided to participate in this research project. The investigator named above has adequately answered all questions that I have about this research, the procedures involved, and my participation. I understand that the investigator named above was available to answer any questions about experimental procedures throughout this research. I also understand that I may refuse to participate or voluntarily terminate my participation in this research at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am entitled. The investigator may also terminate my participation in this research if he feels this to be in my best interest. In addition, I certify that I am 18 (eighteen) years of age or older.

________________________ Date __________________________ Signature of Study Participant

________________________ Date __________________________ Signature of Person Obtaining Consent
Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

What factors are associated with the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

I. Characteristics
   1. How would you describe yourself as a woman and as a principal?
   2. How would others describe you?
   3. Which of your characteristics have served you best as a principal?

II. Persistence
   a. Can you briefly describe your journey to becoming a principal?
   b. Has your goal always been to be an educational leader? Why?
   c. What leadership role models have helped your vision?

   As you look back on your career, are there any events that stand out in your mind that caused you to question or confirm your career decision? Explain.

   a. What has prepared you for managing the myriad of responsibilities that come with your position?
   b. Have you ever wanted to discontinue your role? What, if anything would cause you to do so?

III. Challenges
   a. What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced leading up to your role as principal?
b. What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced during your tenure as a principal?

c. What have been some of the biggest obstacles to continuing in your role?

d. What have been some of the biggest obstacles to supporting the success of your students?

IV. Accomplishments

a. How confident are you that your presence has made a positive difference in the lives of families, teachers and students? Explain.

b. By what measure do you define your success? Would you characterize your tenure as successful? Why or why not?

c. Which of your accomplishments stands out in your mind as most meaningful?

Subquestions

1) How do issues of race and gender impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?

a. How would you describe the racial and socioeconomic composition of the students in schools you have led? Teachers? Communities?

b. What impact, if any, do you believe your class or race has had in your journey?

c. What impact, if any, do you believe your gender has had in your journey?

d. Have you found the need to use different communication styles depending on the socioeconomic status or race of the student, teacher, parent or colleague you are interacting with?
e. Have you found the need to use different communication styles depending on the gender of the student, teacher, parent or colleague you are interacting with?

f. How cognizant are you of your own class, race, and gender when participating in leadership activities within the district?

g. Within the past decade, can you identify any national or global events that have severely impacted the culture or climate of your schools? Explain.

(2) **What identity shifts do African American female principals experience while fulfilling their leadership roles?**

a.) Can you describe any situations in your tenure as principal where you had to shift your appearance, language or demeanor to better fit with those with which you were interacting?

b.) Have you ever felt a personal responsibility to advocate for certain groups of students versus others?

c.) Have you ever felt as though you were representing the African American community when you have interacted with non-African American professionals in your tenure as principal?

d.) Are there times when you have communicated using sounds, gestures, or facial expressions rather than spoken words? If so, when, where and how did you learn to do this?

e.) Have you ever experienced role conflict in your position?
(3) **How do clearly defined roles and shared expectations impact the persistence of middle- and late-career African American female principals?**

a.) Can you describe your first interview for a principalship?

b.) How closely related were your job expectations and your actual experience?

c.) Have there been times throughout your tenure where your role was unclear?

d.) How have you handled setbacks in your role?

e.) What role do you feel your communication skills has had in circumventing potential issues surrounding role clarification and expectations?

f.) Have you ever experienced a change in (senior) leadership in your district? If so, has that change impacted your understanding of your role within your school or district? Your effectiveness as a principal?
Appendix D

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
TO: Bridget Ingram and Dr. James Olive
FROM: Chris Chartier, HSRB Chair
DATE: April 11th, 2016
SUBJECT: Human Subjects Review Board Approval
PROJECT TITLE: Characteristics, Experiences, and Practices that Enable Middle and Late Career African American Female Principals to Persist Amidst Challenges Relating to Class, Race, and Gender.

HSRB APPROVAL CODE: 3-29-16-#080

The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your research study. You may proceed with the study as you have outlined in your proposal. The approval is granted for one calendar year. Research participant interaction and/or data collection is to cease at this time, unless application for extension has been submitted and approval for continuance is obtained.

The primary role of the HSRB is to ensure the protection of human research participants. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you adhere to the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. We would also like to remind you of your responsibility to report any violation to participant protections immediately upon discovery. Likewise, we would like to remind you that any alteration to the research proposal as it was approved cannot move forward. Any amendment to the application must be submitted for approval before the project can resume.

We wish you success in your discoveries,

[Signature]

Doctor Chris Chartier
Ashland University
Chair Human Subjects Review Board