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Leading School Improvement:
African American Women Principals in Urban Educational Settings

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by

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Abstract

African American women administrators working in urban educational settings have been found to be effective leaders of school improvement. Underutilized women and people of color are the untapped value that organizations of all types need to enhance creativity, change efforts, teamwork, and financial benefits (Northouse, 2001). During the last decade, African American women have pioneered and forged new frontiers as educational leaders (Rusher, 1996). Perspectives on African American women in the principalship will further encourage other women of color, particularly African American women educators, into leadership positions.

This study investigates the phenomena associated with the African American woman principal leading urban school improvement, and how ethnicity and gender impact the social climate of urban educational centers. This research seeks to aid in the knowledge construction and add to the larger picture about leadership and school improvement in urban settings through shared personal experiences, personal perspectives and conversations with African American women principals in urban public schools who have successfully led urban school improvement.

Through the use of personal narratives, analysis of documental data and field observations this study observes and describes the feelings and attitudes towards the job of urban school improvement performed by three African American women principals. In reviewing their lives, educational histories, and school improvement efforts, the similarities of the lives of these African American women principals is remarkable. All three principals mentioned the responsibility they felt as African American women to provide an equal opportunity and resources for minority students to succeed academically, how important goal
setting and accountability is in regards to school improvement and reform, and they each built and/or strengthened a culture and environment where academic success is at the forefront of their school improvement effort. The level of participation and passion exhibited from each woman seemed almost therapeutic as they had a chance to share enthusiastically their journey through the principalship and school improvement.

This study helps to shine the light on three African American women principals and their urban schools that have become symbols of hope and success for their educational communities. The research was intended to provide a greater understanding of African American women leading urban school improvement.
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, who encouraged, supported, and pushed me at all times and my faithful friends who gave me the confidence that this dream would come true. Your beautiful words, prayers and well wishes filled my heart with support through out this entire journey. I'm where I am today because of your compassion, insight, and most of all, your patience and love. Thank you for always being there even when I was convinced that I never needed help. I love you all.

In loving memory of my late grandfather

Wilbur “Daddy Mack” Ollio Mack

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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem and Review of the Literature

Statement of the Problem

America’s schools are facing a leadership crisis. At any particular time, there are always significant challenges, old and new, facing any educational community. Lack of effective leadership seems to be inevitably at, or near, the top of the list of challenges for urban educational environments. Inspired principals are the essential ingredient to ensure the success and improvement of our urban schools (Hammond, 2001). These urban leaders should have an overall objective to make a difference and improve the lives of the urban children of today. The need to educate and develop a new generation of school leadership that reflects gender and ethnic diversity is the greatest challenge facing American education. Minority populations will become the majority in our schools, especially in our large urban school districts (Hammond, 2001; Karpinski, 2006).

Over the past years, the leadership profile in our nation has become more inclusive with women and people of color in positions previously occupied by whites, but the overall picture does not reflect the new demographics (Brown, 2005). To mirror the demographic shift in our nation, school leadership must also change. It should be more reflective of gender and ethnic diversity. Educational leaders of the future must reflect the diversity of their populations, and the best way to bring about the desired change and success in our urban educational communities is to aggressively recruit, retain, and train more gender-balanced and culturally diverse school leadership (Harris, 2001).
Effective change in education will require a critical influx of effective urban education leaders in our urban communities. Our urban school districts must foster the leadership environment that actively recruits, trains, places, and supports principals engaging in the urban educational community (Harris, 2001).

Creating successful urban schools will require a redefinition of educational leadership. Educational leaders in urban communities must be able to effectively work with, through, and around all assets, barriers, advantages and disadvantages that their immediate communities may present. Urban educational leadership should provide leadership for the challenging and stressful environment in urban centers. An urban educational leader should demonstrate and have the knowledge and skills to improve the performance of low-achieving urban centers. “No one should or could expect urban schools, or any school for that matter, to overcome all of the obstacles faced by low-income children and their families” (Vail, 2004, p.18), but urban educational leaders should be prepared to address, work through, and overcome these issues.

One of the dominant influences impacting a school’s climate is the leadership of the principal (Bennis, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2001). A growing number of African American women are seeking the ever pressing and stressful job of being a leader in an urban educational setting. As these numbers continue to grow, it is becoming increasingly evident that there is a need for African American women’s theoretical constructions of leadership (Montenegro, 1993), which in turn, will broaden their knowledge base within the leadership field. Hooks (1989) contends that without the voices of African Americans in written works and oral presentations, there will be no articulation of our concerns. A wealth of information will be brought to schools and communities where the effectiveness and expertise is needed from
women of color, specifically African-American principals, who deal with large numbers of students on a daily basis (Leggett, 2002).

African Americans share a common culture, a common belief, and worldview that educators need to learn in order to gain an appreciation for the legitimate similarities that bind the members of this population (Foster, 2005). Members of the African American community feel a sense of total family. Most African American educators and leaders possess an understanding of how their own cultural experiences shape who they are as teachers, thereby encouraging patterns of school achievement and success for urban students. They are effective teachers, principals, mentors, and leaders for urban students in part because they have developed competencies related to the cultural context of their learning environment. According to Brown (2005), schools in a racially diverse society will require models of leadership that will address the general racial, cultural, and ethnic makeup of the school community.

African Americans have been underrepresented in school administration (Brown, 2005). This underrepresentation may be the reason for the academic decline of success of African American students. Individuals feel and communicate a sense of identity that is displayed by particular activities, behaviors, and symbols. It is important for students to see models of people like themselves in positions of power in the school system. The presence of African American professionals in the school system is crucial to the development and success of African American students (Brown, 2000).

African American principals use similarities in cultural experiences with urban students, particularly African American students, both as sources of caring and communication and as the basis for demanding high standards of achievement (Pollard,
These similarities and common attributes shared by African American educational leaders and African American students allow a connection to be formed, and a bond to be made with the overall objective centered around student success and achievement (Lomotey, 1993).

African American educators are sometimes viewed as surrogate (other) mothers and fathers (Collins, 1998; Loder, 2005). They assume many important roles in the school system and have numerous opportunities to shape, and even redirect their students’ futures (Brown, 2000; Loder 2005). Collins (1998) suggests that the cultural term “othermother” is used in the Black community when referring to African American women “who work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability, which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality” (p. 132). Their goals focus on efforts to, “take care of children’s social, emotional, and physical needs so they can learn” (Vail, 2004, p. 13).

Public education in America which consists of a diverse population, should not only be reflected in its students, but among its school leaders as well (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Brown, 2005). African American principals are typically selected to take positions in urban schools with a large population of students who are minority (Fiore & Curtin, 1997). Murtadha and Larson (1999), state that, “…principals of color, especially African American women, typically emerge as the leaders of urban schools that are undersupported and economically depleted” (p. 6). Therefore, there is much that can be learned about the leadership styles that are exhibited by successful leaders in urban schools, particularly African American women principals.
Collins (1998), contends that the quest to add voice and meaning to the role of the African American women in America is in no way an attempt to ignore or disregard the hardships and struggles of other groups of people. The experiences of African American women principals can create a climate where success is possible for not only African American students, but for any urban student population.

It is important to study the leadership experiences of black women; their success against social injustices wrought upon them by the intersection of gender, race, class, ethnic origins, nationality, and heterosexuality (Alston, 1999; Hooks, 1989; Ngunijri, 2006). The ability of African American women principals in urban educational settings to share personal experiences through conversation presents their perspectives and ideas through lived experiences that add to the larger picture and knowledge construction about leadership and school improvement in urban schools.

There is limited knowledge construction based on data gathered from African American women principals (Alston, 2000; Collins & Lightsey, 2001; Lomotey, 1989). Educational theories, knowledge construction, and perspectives of African American women concerning the principalship will further encourage other women of color, particularly African American women educators, into leadership positions. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how African American women principals lead urban school improvement. The African American women studied in this research are those who tackled critically ill schools and created schools that became a symbol of hope and success for their educational communities.
Research Question

This study will address the following research question:

How do African American women principals in selected urban schools lead school improvement?

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature will be presented on urban schools, the need for school improvement, principal leadership, African American women principals, and a summary of African American women principals leading urban school improvement.

Urban Schools

Urban schools are often plagued with low test scores, poor attendance, lack of resources and little parental involvement. Urban schools have typically been defined as those schools that are located in an urban area; areas that are not rural, small town, or suburban in area. Urban schools generally have a relatively high rate of poverty (as measured by free and reduced lunch rates in schools). Further, these schools have a high proportion of students of color and have been designated as high need by their respective state education departments.

Urban areas, according to Kopetz et. al (2006) encompass the city and their surrounding suburban areas. Its urban schools reflect the issues found in those areas (Kopetz, et. al, 2006). Cullen and Sinclair (1996) reported that the most prominent characteristics of an urban school are cultural diversity, low socio-economic status of students, a high immigrant population, a high incidence of poverty, social problems, a high turnover rate of students, and a lack of parental involvement.

According to a report issued by the United States Department of Education (1994), urban schools are more likely to have low income students attending than other schools. The
report states that 44% of urban public school students are eligible to receive free or reduced price school lunch, compared with 23% of suburban students and 30% of rural students. Poverty rates among children are higher in urban locations than in the surrounding suburban or rural areas, which translates into higher concentrations of poor students in urban public schools (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

The socioeconomic status (SES) of a family is one measure that helps define “urban” and can affect both the economic, social and academic well-being of students. This is usually a composite measure of the parents’ education, occupation, and income, and is considered a more complete measure of the resources that a family can contribute to their child. According to the United States Department of Education (1988), one out of three urban students came from families whose estimated ability to contribute to their child’s development was among the poorest in the nation. Urban students are also more likely to be disadvantaged by having only one parent; having less educated and/or unemployed parents; having handicapping conditions or learning, emotional, or health disabilities; having difficulty speaking English; or by being homeless (Peng et al. 1992; Hodgkinson 1989). Urban children typically possess at least one or more of these attributes, which compounds their disadvantage both academically and socially (Peng et al. 1992).

In an effort to provide for and support low income students, the federal government provides funding for urban schools that allows for free and reduced price lunches and supplemental education services to be provided for low income students. The National School Lunch Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Consumer Service provides free or reduced price lunches for children from families whose
incomes are below 85% of the poverty line for that year (U.S. Department of Education, 1987–88).

The U.S. Department of Education (1987-1988) reports that high poverty schools in every location have higher enrollments of minorities than low poverty schools, but urban high poverty schools are more likely to enroll minority students than high poverty schools in suburban or rural areas. Among urban schools, 69% of students in high poverty schools belonged to a racial or ethnic minority, compared with 26% in low poverty schools. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NECS) reports that the number of minority school students is increasing (2000).

Urban schools either have or are located in areas with a higher incidence of conditions frequently associated with poorer educational outcomes than suburban or rural public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Urban schools of today are constantly facing an uphill battle (Predmore, 2004), and present conditions which include larger school size, higher concentrations of poor students and students with difficulty speaking English, and higher levels of risk factors affecting children than do rural and/or suburban districts.

Brown (1975), contests that the factors which define urban schools, cultural diversity, socio-economic status, high poverty rates, and high minority rates, are the same factors that contribute to the uniqueness of urban schools and offer several benefits to the public education system. Therefore, there is much that can be learned about urban schools and positive practices that help improve urban education and the social, economic, and academic development and success of urban students.

The need to improve urban education is one of the most daunting public policy issues in America today (Greene, 2003). Urban education centers present many different issues and
problems that may not be present in other centers. It is important that each adult who affects student achievement be properly prepared to work with these children. Seriously tackling urban educational problems requires dramatic shifts in the culture and performance of urban schools.

“After two-and-a-half decades of federal, state, and local efforts to improve urban education for low-income children, achievement in inner-city schools continues to lag behind national norms, and drop-out rates in inner-city high schools (especially among African-American and Hispanic youth) remain distressingly high, while many of those who do graduate are often so poorly prepared they cannot compete successfully in the labor market” (Kantor & Brenzel, 1993, p. 366).

According to Ford (2004), many educators in urban settings are not prepared to work with students whose culture differs from their own. “New teachers who see themselves as capable of handling the challenges of their assignments, who volunteer to help with a school or team problem, and who see their students as motivated and capable are likely to feel competent and satisfied in their profession and are most likely to stay” (Jorrisen, 2002, p. 51). It is important that each adult that will affect student achievement be properly prepared to work in urban schools.

There are many urban schools that demonstrate academic accomplishment and do, in fact, succeed, despite the reality that many struggle academically (Meier, 2002). It is important to study the most critical aspects of these successful urban schools as it relates to school improvement to allow for other schools, urban or otherwise, to achieve student success.
The Need for School Improvement

Urban schools endure and are confronted with many more challenges than rural and/or suburban districts (Predmore 2004). Additionally, Predmore states that these problems include over-crowded classrooms, dilapidated facilities, lack of equipment, teacher shortages, and low student achievement. Furthermore, “students in inner cities must often deal with the stresses of poverty and violence outside school” (Predmore, 2004, p. 19).

The innumerable problems faced in urban schools accelerate the demand for improvement. The historical question to be answered is, “Where should urban school improvement begin?” School improvement is the process that schools use to ensure all students are achieving at high levels. It is the journey on which a school embarks in order to move from an ineffective or low performing school as noted by state standards based on student achievement, to a school where students’ learning is maximized.

Urban schools are in a state of crisis. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1988) stated that:

America must confront, with urgency, the crisis in urban schools. Bold, aggressive action is needed now to avoid leaving a huge and growing segment of the nation’s youth civically unprepared and economically unempowered. This nation must see the urban school crises for what it is: a major failure of social policy, a piecemeal approach to a problem that requires a unified response (p. xv).

Throughout the years, urban schools have made significant reshaping and reformatting efforts (Finkel & Vogel, 2008; Meier, 2002). According to Barth (1991) school improvement begins from within. Finkel & Vogel (2008) state that improvement efforts have focused on
professional development opportunities for teachers, the incorporation of new curriculum, an improvement to school governance, and improved teaching styles. As a result of these efforts, Payne (2008) believes that urban school systems perform “marginally better” than they did 10 or 15 years ago.

School reform and improvement refers to a whole school systematic shift that involves the implementation of new ideas, new plans for professional and community development, and a way to address particular educational concerns. Hargreaves (as cited in Hopkins, 2001) defines successful school improvement efforts as those that:

1. focus on student learning and achievement on a broader base than test scores;
2. inspire and empower the school community by increasing skills and raising the level of expectation;
3. exhibit work as research based and is rich in theory;
4. have plans that are school specific;
5. build capacity by improving the conditions for learning;
6. demonstrate an inquiry driven and reflective process;
7. orient implementation to student learning and classroom practice;
8. strategically plans and promotes development by interventionist work;
9. sustain good practice through external support; and
10. present an improvement plan that is systemic in adapting external change for internal purpose and utilize creativity and synergy within the system.

Sustainable educational reform is linked to a strong, capable school principal who can lead a culture of change, especially in today’s educational climate (Payne, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2001). If school leaders desire modification in the structure of their schools, they cannot
ignore the culture of the school. For successful reform and improvement, the culture must be modified, as it is the culture that provides the foundations upon which to grow (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989).

The deep roots of a school’s culture make it difficult to change. Reforms that strive for educational excellence are likely to fail unless they are meaningfully linked to the school’s unique culture (Deal & Peterson, 1998). There is no one strategy to improve urban education, but school culture, leadership, and guidance can have an enormous impact on effective instruction and students’ ability to navigate through difficult circumstances, with leadership at the forefront of these strategies (Barth, 1991).

**Principal Leadership**

Urban school leaders should realize that "the only constant is change." Productive school leaders understand the forces that influence the change process and can direct these forces for continuous school improvement. Effective school leaders must learn how to lead change rather than react to it. Schools in this 21st century are constantly changing and require different forms of leadership. At any particular time there are always significant challenges, old and new, facing any educational community and school administrators are expected to play an integral role in urban school reform. Lewis (1994) states,

“As principals and their school communities come to recognize the impact of the revolution, so too, they will need to continually question the ways that both the construction so schools and the delivery of teaching and learning process are currently implemented.”

The urban educational leader of today will be charged with reinventing themselves to meet the ever pressing needs of the urban educational community. Inspired principals are the
essential ingredient to ensure the success and improvement of our urban schools (Hammond, 2001).

The role of principal leadership in all aspects of school success has been highlighted and confirmed as the link between effective school leadership and effective schools (Barth, 1991; Fullan, 2005). Successful principals and their styles of leading in urban schools are factors that give structure and improve these schools, and ultimately have an impact on student learning, achievement and success (Gooden, 2002; Lomotey, 1987; Lomotey, 1989). The description of what effective principal leadership entails is important because it is evident that leadership is a key component to successful school reform and improvement (Fullan, 2005).

“Strong leadership,” including principal leadership is often cited as the solution to school failure (Bennis, 2003; Keller, 1998; Mezzacappa, 1999; Samuels, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2001). Urban school principals must readily accept the challenge of school improvement upon being called to head an inner-city school (Winfield et. al, 1993). They contest that leading with vision and focus upholds the duty of urban administrators to radically change the learning outcomes of their students.

Educational leadership in urban schools should not attempt to reinvent the wheel; it should be built upon the well-documented foundation of knowledge about leadership that already exists. Leithwood & Rhiel (2003) further report the following claims as major findings concerning effective school leadership:

1. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers’ instruction.
2. Currently, administrators and teacher leaders provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist.

3. A core set of leadership practices form the “basics” of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts:
   - identifying and articulating a vision;
   - creating shared meanings;
   - creating high performance expectations;
   - fostering the acceptance of group goals;
   - monitoring organizational performance;
   - communicating;
   - offering intellectual stimulation;
   - providing individualized support;
   - providing an appropriate model;
   - strengthening school culture;
   - modifying organizational structure;
   - building collaborative processes; and
   - managing the environment.

4. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work:
   - creating and sustaining a competitive school;
   - empowering others to make significant decisions;
   - providing instructional guidance; and
5. Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students:

- building powerful forms of teaching and learning;
- creating strong communities in school;
- expanding the proportion of students’ social capital valued by the schools; and
- nurturing the development of families’ educational cultures (p. 5-9).

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key element in achieving school improvement (OfSTED, 2000 in Harris 2002). Efforts to improve urban education are directly proportional to the quality of leadership provided in the schools. The school principal is the key figure in a school’s success or failure (Dunlap & Goldman, 1991; Lezotte, 1992). Leadership, explains Hopkins (2001), has a powerful impact in securing school development and change. Transformational and instructional leadership practices achieve school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances (Hopkins, 2001), otherwise known as urban schools. Harris (2002) believes that schools in the 21st century require new and alternative approaches to school improvement and school leadership in order to cope with the unprecedented rate of change in schools.

Leadership can take different forms in different contexts. Transformational Leadership is a process where “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (Burns, 1978 p. 20). Transformational leadership involves the processes of the leader creating new visions, and supporting people in accomplishing these visions. It is processes where leaders help the individuals in the organization grow. Bennis (1989, p. 118 in Eby) indicates that transformational leaders are noted as being ethical, “noble
of mind and heart; generous in forgiving; above revenge or resentment”. Transformational leadership captures four important qualities and emphasizes leadership meeting changes over time in an organizational context. These qualities are: charisma, vision, trust and empowerment (Carlson, 1996).

Yukl (2006) writes that transformational leaders activate higher-order needs in followers. Followers are elevated from their “everyday selves” to their “better selves”. He continues with transformational leadership involving the following three characteristics:

- charisma – a process wherein a leader influences followers by arousing strong emotions and identification with the leader;
- intellectual stimulation – a process wherein leaders increase follower awareness of problems and influence followers to view problems from a new perspective; and
- individualized consideration – includes providing support, encouragement, and developmental experiences to followers.

The role of transformational leadership is explained by Crow and Glascock (1995), as focusing change through shared decision making to foster ownership of school reform efforts. This shared decision making can develop a renewed sense of ownership and empowerment throughout the school community. Jason (2000) contests that transformational principals are open to change and, more fundamentally, embrace its prospect since they realize that school improvement is connected with the personal and professional development of themselves and their staff. Transformational leadership provides for successful organizational change and improved performance (Crow & Glascock, 1995; Eby, 2004; Yukl, 2006).

With such a wide-reaching impact on the school, the principal has to have a philosophy of leadership that leads the school to success. With this in mind, the philosophy of
educational leadership of an urban school principal should be one that is based on trust, integrity, communication, and change.

**African American Women Principals**

African American women administrators working in urban educational settings have been found to be effective leaders of school improvement. Underutilized women and people of color are the untapped value that organizations of all types need to enhance creativity, change efforts, teamwork, and financial benefits (Northouse, 2001). Women have become a viable force in providing educational leadership to urban secondary schools throughout the education system in the United States (Eby, 2004). During the last decade, African American women have pioneered and forged new frontiers as educational leaders (Rusher, 1996). Perspectives on African American women in the principalship will further encourage other women of color, particularly African American women educators, into leadership positions.

African American women principals in urban schools are a very unique group of administrators who may offer a different perspective on school improvement. The principal is responsible for the atmosphere and direction of the school (Bennis, 2003). Leaders manage the dream, the vision of the school, and/or educational community. It is the principal’s job not only to share and convey the vision, but to get all staff on board to accomplish it. Principals greatly affect the performance of both the teachers and the students. A leader must lead by example.

Leaders need to be able to set general directions and create environments and structures that enable everyone in the school community to discover their own skills and talents and thereby be free to help students discover theirs. One of the dominant influences impacting a school’s climate is the leadership of the principal (Bennis, 2003; Sergiovanni,
According to Fenwick (2001), in the last fourteen years there has been a 33% increase in the number of female school principals. Further, Fenwick (2001) reported that there are still fewer women administrators than men. A growing number of African American women are seeking the ever pressing and stressful job of being a leader in an urban educational setting, and, “assuming the helm of the nation’s toughest urban schools” (Loder, 2005).

In an attempt to grant understanding of the importance of African American leadership in urban schools, Brown (2005) states:

A critical aspect of the diversification of American schooling is the preparation and placement of African American school leaders. Given the increasing number of schools in large, urban districts with majority African American student populations, leadership theory, preparation, and practice must be approached from a broader perspective – a perspective that includes the scholarship and knowledge of African Americans (p. 585).

As the number of African American women leaders increase and the achievement of professional status among African American females increases, the issues associated with the status of women in school administration are documented (Shakeshaft, 1994). As the numbers of African American women leaders increase, the need for African American women’s theoretical constructions of leadership is also needed (Montenegro, 1993), therefore allowing for a broader knowledge base within the leadership field.

African Americans share a common culture, a common belief, and worldview that educators need to learn in order to gain an appreciation for the legitimate similarities that bind the members of this population (Foster, 2005). Further, Foster (2001) contends that the omission of black leadership narratives, along with an adequate analysis of the contexts in
which leadership has worked, limits the ability to develop ways to improve school and communities for children who live in poverty and children of color who are becoming the majority in our nation’s schools.

“Black principals positively affect the academic achievement of Black students and Black leaders – and Black principals, in particular – lead differently than their white peers. Therefore, culture is important when looking at the significance of the Black principals’ influence upon students.” (Lomotey, 1987, p. 173)

Members of the African American community feel a sense of total family. Foster (2005) states that, “Fordham & Ogbru (1986) have conceptualized this worldview as a “fictive kinship system” that engenders a collective sense of “brotherhood” and sisterhood” that binds all African Americans”. Individuals feel and communicate a sense of identity that is displayed by particular activities, behaviors, and symbols; this identity results in a bond that is not dependent upon blood or legal relations, but on a relationship of fictive kinship (Foster, 2005).

Research has shown the importance of race in leadership styles (Asante, 1991). These researchers contend that the influence of someone who has experienced similar racial and cultural experiences as the minority population is more likely to be effective in communicating with minority students. African American women are an important educational and moral presence in the lives of urban students; they utilize their social context of the minority culture and community as a resource to foster school improvement. Lomotey’s (1987) research contends that the achievement of black students is positively related to the leadership of black principals.
The presence of such figures in urban educational communities can carry deep personal meanings for the urban youth in these educational communities. African American women are able to both nurture and lead by their presence, and examples in these settings. The children are able to see on a daily basis how she conducts her life and work in both professional and personal situations. Dillard (1995) states it best, “all schools in the United States and the leaders in those schools exist for the overarching purpose of the educational, social, and cultural development and growth of our increasingly diverse children, such a caring ethic most not solely be a vision but also an integral task of school leadership” (p. 557).

Female principals generally practice democratic leadership, sensitivity, and a cooperative attitude as they lead (Eby, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1994). In addition to the leadership styles of female leaders, African American women principals leadership styles are characterized as “caring for others” (Shakeshaft, 1994). African American women principals are often viewed as “othermothers” (Collins, 1998; Loder, 2005). Collins suggests that these women are those who hold the family structure together by their maternal approaches to urban school leadership using their virtues of caring, ethics, teaching and community service to lead. African American women have historically been looked upon to provide leadership in the African American community (Loder, 2005). They (othermothers) are considered to be the backbone of the black race and give anything that they can to their communities. African American women principals view their mission to effect change beyond their urban educational settings into the broader school community, resulting in sustainable school improvement and achievement.

Collins suggests that African American women principals, or “othermothers”, in urban schools play an integral role in fulfilling the psychological and educational needs of the urban
child, and have made dramatic contributions to the entire educational community (1998). Black women administrators are often characterized as “warriors”; they have a strong sense of mission and accomplishment, demonstrate intensity about their work, and have extremely high expectations for their performance (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993).

Working as an administrator in an urban school today can be both a difficult and dangerous assignment. African American women are typically appointed to lead urban schools (Murtadha & Larson, 1999). A wealth of information will be brought to schools and communities where the effectiveness and expertise is needed from women of color, specifically African-American principals, who deal with large numbers of students on a daily basis (Leggett, 2002). Therefore, there is much that can be learned about the leadership of African American women principals in urban schools.

Summary

There is limited knowledge construction based on data gathered from African American women principals (Alston, 2000; Collins & Lightsey, 2001; Lomotey, 1989). A great deal of research on principal leadership concentrates on the relationship between student achievement and principal leadership styles (Ascik 1984). The effective school research investigates the relationship between student achievement, student socio-economic levels and leadership of the principal (Eby, 2004; Ascik, 1984). Researching school improvement as it relates to African American women principals will allow for the development and construction of new educational theories, knowledge construction, and perspectives of African American women in the principalship.

“By studying African American educational leadership, researchers find that mainstream theories are increasingly deficient in understanding leadership from the
perspectives of diverse cultural groups who fight for equity in this society” (Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 606). Schools in this 21st century must be redesigned to meet the needs of a diverse student population. It is important to study the leadership experiences of African American women principals (Alston, 1999; Hooks, 1989; Ngunijri, 2006), because the communication of their successes and their experiences can help to create a climate where success is possible for not only African American students, but for any urban student population.

This research seeks to further encourage women of color, particularly African American women educators, to pursue and find success in leadership positions. While all of the trials, tribulations, problems, rewards and advantages encountered by African American women principals are worthy topics of study, this research seeks to aid in the knowledge construction and add to the larger picture about leadership and school improvement in urban settings through shared personal experiences, personal perspectives and conversations with African American women principals in urban public schools who have successfully led urban school improvement.
Chapter II
Design and Methodology

The job of an urban school principal has become increasingly more complex as school improvement efforts are being mandated. School restructuring and reform efforts have become a priority as public pressure for academic success has increased. This prospective study of school improvement seeks to utilize a qualitative phenomenological research approach to understand the African American women principals’ ways of leading school improvement. This study aims to fill a gap in the research regarding the African American woman’s leadership role in establishing and communicating a culture of success in an urban school as it is in the process of undergoing a school improvement effort.

This section presents the rationale for using qualitative methods, the identification of participants, data collection procedures, and the data analysis procedures for this study. The conceptual framework of the researcher, and the significance and limitations of the research are also provided.

Rationale for Qualitative Study

This qualitative study examined how the leadership of African American women principals facilitates school improvement in urban schools. Patton (2002), states that qualitative research provides an opportunity to describe phenomenon in context. Qualitative designs make no attempt to change the research setting or manipulate it in any way, and are therefore viewed as naturalistic. To understand naturally occurring phenomena in their natural occurring states, qualitative methods should be used (Patton, 2002).

Bogdan & Biklen (1998) contend that qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern the behavior. They further state
that qualitative research seeks out the “why” of its topic through the analysis of unstructured information. This information may include, but is not limited to interviews (self stories), observations, documents and records, and “personal experience materials.” These personal experience materials include, but are not limited to, correspondence, diaries, narratives, and audio-visual materials.

Creswell (1998, p.15) defines qualitative research as, “An inquiry process of understanding…that explore[s] a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.”

The method of narrative inquiry (interviewing) is particularly relevant when studying African American women because of the historical tradition of African American women’s use of storytelling as a method of personal expression. McKay (1989, p. 142) states, “Black women use the personal narrative to document their differences in self perception as well as their concerns for themselves and others, their sense of themselves as part of a distinct women’s and racial community, and the complexities of the combined forces of race and gender for the only group beleaguered by both.”

Utilizing stories is an integral part of the research in narrative inquiry. According to Patton (2002, p. 196), “Our knowledge is made up of the stories we can tell, stories that must be told in the language that we know.” Patton further explains that cognitive scientists have found that stories are more memorable and better support learning and understanding.

Qualitative research methodology, using a phenomenological perspective, was used to examine the lived experiences of three African American women principals in urban school
settings as they successfully work through the implementation stages of urban school improvement. Phenomenology describes the world as it is experienced, (McClelland et.al, 2002), and was chosen because as a phenomenological researcher, I attempt to gain knowledge of the essential “truths” of the lived experience (Byrne, 2001).

According to Moustakas (1994) the purpose of phenomenological approach is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. Phenomenological approaches are good at bringing deep issues to the surface and making voices heard (Hycner, 1985).

Identification of Participants

Moustakas (1994) defines essential criteria for selecting participants. In phenomenological studies, it is important that the participant has experienced the phenomenon and is interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview, grants the investigator the right to tape-record the interview, and supports publishing of the data in a dissertation or some other publication (Moustakas, 1994).

The African American women who participated in this study are all urban school principals. Throughout this study, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of each participant and their educational communities. The "purposive" or "convenience" sampling method was be used for selecting participants as, according to Patton (2002), this method helps to select those members of the educational community who are believed to be able to provide the best information, in this case, African American women leading urban school improvement. Purposeful sampling is a qualitative technique of predetermining which
members of a population may provide the most beneficial information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002).

Introduction to the Mid-Western Urban School District

The large, mid-western urban school district in which this study took place has been educating children for over 175 years. The district serves about 34,700 students in its 64 schools and covers an area of about 90 square miles. This urban school district is predominately African American with a demographic make-up of: 68.8% African American, 23.7% White Americans, 4.6% Multiracial, 1.9% Hispanic, 0.8% Asian, and 0.1% American Indian. The majority of the student population of this urban school district, 68.7%, participates in federal Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Program. The social economic status, SES, of the district reflects a population of 59.9% economically disadvantaged, and the population of students with disabilities is at 20.3%.

This urban school district operates 42 elementary schools, 18 high schools, and 4 satellite school programs. The satellite programs include a juvenile detention center, area hospitals, a home for mentally ill students, and a work resource center. These programs were designed to serve those students who could not attend school in a formal setting.

Elementary schools in this district serve students on many different grade levels; some kindergarten through sixth grade, some kindergarten through eighth grade, and some kindergarten through third grade. A neighborhood school student is assigned to a neighborhood school based on the student’s address, and the boundaries determined by the district. The neighborhood schools offer a comprehensive elementary academic program. Magnet elementary schools are district-wide specialty schools. They offer special curricula, such as math-science or performing arts programs, or special instructional approaches and are
designed to attract students with different learning styles and interests. Magnet schools promote and maintain diversity while focusing on improving achievement for all students who enroll in these programs. There are seven magnet elementary programs offered in the district.

High schools in this district all serve students from grades nine through twelve. The district follows a “school of choice” philosophy for secondary education and is comprised of neighborhood schools and magnet school programs. The school of choice philosophy was adopted to provide parents/students the opportunity to choose a school near their home or enroll in a magnet/citywide option school to prove that all schools in the district are well-suited to meet the individual needs of all children. Secondary education parents and students are allowed to select from a variety of high-school programs with special focuses leading students into careers and/or higher education. To enter some high school programs, students are required to meet standards set out by the individual program. There is one magnet high school program offered in the district.

This urban school district as a whole is experiencing budget cuts and a surplus of employees. With billions of dollars in cuts, many urban districts, not only this district, are laying off classified employees, teachers, and support staff. With less educational support staff and teachers, students can expect larger class sizes, fewer bi-lingual staff, less supervision and security on the playgrounds, and less reliable school transportation and teacher training.

In 2008 the Superintendent of schools introduced an elementary initiative to this underperforming urban school district. “Ready for High School” is a reform initiative designed to ensure that all students enter high school prepared for rigorous, higher-level
learning and includes strategies for improving progress at all of the district’s elementary schools, with additional intensive support for 15 underperforming elementary schools. This initiative follows a previous reform effort of restructuring the districts large “traditional” learning programs into smaller schools. According to state standards, the high school reform initiative has made significant strides. The Superintendent has similar hopes for the elementary initiative

*Introduction to the Participants*

Participants of this study were selected based on the following criteria:

1. they are African American women principals who have worked in their current position for at least one year;
2. they all work in the same mid-western urban school district;
3. their school is currently engaged in school improvement efforts as evidenced by their school improvement plan; and
4. they were willing to participate.

A list of all the principals in the district was given to three people in district supervisory roles, who oversee the professional development, success, and growth of principals in the chosen urban school district, and a list of the selection criteria were given to the same three individuals. These supervisors chose three African American women principals from the list whom they believe met the criteria. All three supervisors identified the same three principals.

Each interview began by reviewing the informed consent form (see Appendix A) and reminding participants that, although recorded, their confidentiality was ensured. Pseudonyms are used for all participants and their schools. The initial contact with each
participant was via phone. A recruitment letter (Appendix B) was then sent to the three principals formally inviting them to participate in the study. Contact was made both electronically and by phone to arrange interview times. All three interviews were private.

Principal #1: Ms. Patty Clay

It was a beautiful spring day. The trees were budding and the air smelled of fresh cut grass. The researcher left work in a hurry to make the scheduled appointment time to interview at 4pm. This was to be the first of three interviews, and the researcher was enthusiastic about data collection, as it seemed the time would never come. As the researcher drove down the long road to Hartford Elementary, she was greeted with an extremely long line of “dismissal traffic.” Parents were lined up in their cars eagerly awaiting the dismissal of their children from school. The school day of Hartford Elementary lasted from 9:15am till 3:45pm. As to not disrupt the flow of traffic, the researcher pulled to the side of the street, parked under the shade of a budding tree, and patiently waited until the last parent rode away with her child. While waiting, the researcher noticed the excitement and joy that each parent and most children exhibited as they were leaving school for the day. Parents seemed happy to see their kids, and the students seemed happy as they told their individual stories of their school day.

The researcher was finally able to drive up to the school and park. There were very few children still waiting for their parents, and school resource officers and crossing guards were walking to their respective vehicles, as they too were finished at school for the day. Hartford Elementary, a renovated school as of 2008, was a beautiful campus. Hartford’s renovations are the result of the school districts’ $1 Billion, 10 year Facilities Master Plan. Building construction costs totaled $12,849,801. The researcher took time to walk the campus
grounds to observe its beauty, but hurried at it was close to 4pm. The façade of the building presented beautiful white pillars and arched windows complemented by red brick. Hartford Elementary school serves 620 students. This urban school is predominately White American with a demographic make-up of: 64.4% White American, 20.7% African American, 9.2% Multiracial, 3.3% Asian, and 2.2% Hispanic.

The main doors had yet to be locked as there were few students still exiting. The researcher entered as one of these students exited. The main office of Hartford Elementary was surrounded by gorgeous, large paneled, arched, glass windows. It was quite large and presented warm inviting colors. The researcher checked in at the front desk and waited patiently as the principal was handling “after school business”. Ms. Clay exited her office, and greeted the researcher with a warm smile and a welcoming hug. The principals’ office was charming, as it was decorated with photos of her students and many different school and/or community outings. The room was furnished with typical office furniture as well as several chairs placed in front of the principal’s desk. While the office was very well equipped, it seemed chaotic. Ms. Clay assured the researcher that her office/life was usually well organized, but she has been bombarded with many projects as the end of the school year was quickly approaching. The researcher and principal sat after the door was closed, ready to begin the interview.

Each interview began by reviewing the informed consent document and reiterating the confidentiality of the interview. The researcher restated that the interview would be both recorded and transcribed for review. The principal was very enthusiastic and expressed many times her willingness not only help me, but to help others learn as she shares her experiences.
Ms. Clay, a single African American woman principal of a state rated “excellent” urban school, is from the Midwest. Ms. Clay was born into an educated family and was raised in a Christian environment, and was taught the importance of education, teaching, and learning. Ms. Clay has been in the business of education for over 14 years and focuses on, “closing the achievement gaps” between the different race classes at her current school. She has been an administrator for nine years. In the years before that, she was a distinguished classroom teacher. Ms. Clay is the principal of an elementary neighborhood school with a rich community involvement and strong parental support. She places great value on education and stresses these same values to her own child, as well as the other children she serves.

Principal #2: Ms. Barbara Hall

The second of three interviews had a morning appointment time of 9:15am. The researcher drove quickly to Dubois High because the principal, Ms. Hall, had another appointment scheduled for later that morning, and the researcher didn’t want to run over time. It was a mild spring morning, and the sun was shining brightly. The trip to Dubois High took approximately 15 minutes and the researcher was allowed to enjoy the beautiful spring morning as she rode with her windows down the entire way. The parking lot of Dubois High was scarce with cars in the back of the lot but got very crowded as the journey to the front door was near. It was difficult to find a parking spot as all the visitors parking spaced were filled. The researcher parked in the first available parking space in an adjoining parking lot, not affiliated with the school and jumped out of the car to be prompt for the interview.

Dubois High was also a result of the school districts’ $1 Billion, 10 year Facilities Master Plan and was completed in 2006. The first of the high schools to be renovated in the
school district, Dubois High serves 1100 students and features three wings designed for the schools three career-technical programs. The new Dubois High is a beautiful campus and features an 8,000 square foot commons area, a façade made completely of glass, and offers a fresh take of school architecture. This urban school is predominately African American with a demographic make-up of: 93.3% African American, 3.8% White American, and 1.8% Multiracial. The majority of the student population of this urban school, 70.0%, is economically disadvantaged and participates in federal Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Program.

The main entrance to the building was almost completely made of glass doors and windows and was very inviting. As the researcher continued down the rounded sidewalk to the main entrance, she noticed that there were no children outside, but several adults. There were two police cars, both with the police officers standing in the driver’s doorways, one parent and two women standing in front of the building conversing. The researcher had never met Ms. Hall, but had done her research, and noticed as she got closer to the building that one of the women conversing was in fact Ms. Hall, the principal. The researcher introduced herself, and was directed inside by the principal, to check in at the main counter. The principal informed the researcher that she would be in shortly after her conversation with the woman ended. The inside of Dubois High was as beautiful as the outside. The main common area was surrounded by glass windows which afforded abundant natural light. The main office was directly to the right. The administrative assistant who greeted the researcher was very pleasant and warm, she multi-tasked by greeting the researcher and answering many phone calls. The researcher sat in one of several chairs provided in the waiting area and awaited the presence of the principal.
Ms. Hall entered the main office and greeted the researcher once again with a smile as she informed the researcher she was prepared to go to her office and begin the interview. As we entered her office, she indicated that she was very pleased to be a part of this study and had prepared herself as there was much that she wanted to share. The principal’s office was quite large and well organized. Her office, as much of the school building, also possessed much natural light. The office was equipped with beautiful desk furniture, a principal’s chair, a matching side table with rolling chairs, two visitors’ chairs in front of the principals’ desk, a small vending machine, and several file cabinets. Ms. Hall directed the researcher to the side table where the interview would be conducted, offered a bottle of cold water, and sat down.

The interview began in her very quiet office. Ms. Hall, a single African American woman principal of an urban high school that is, according to state standards, under “academic watch,” is from the same Midwestern city she currently works in. Ms. Hall was also born into an educated family and had the value of education bestowed upon her at an early age. She was taught that education and hard work are the keys to success. There isn’t much that is unattainable if you are properly educated. She graduated from two Midwestern universities in broadcast journalism and secondary education respectively. She received her training as a secondary administrator from a university in her hometown where she earned her certification in administration.

Ms. Hall has served as principal for many of the schools in this mid-western school district, both elementary and high schools, and has been at her current school for two years. Although Ms. Hall does not view the pressures experienced by her colleagues as a great challenge, she does share the idea and belief that it is her responsibility to provide, and make
sure that, all students receive a quality education. She stresses this to her staff and all members of her educational community.

**Principal #3: Ms. Linda Greene**

The third and final interview took place on a very warm and sunny spring afternoon. The drive to Hawthorne Preparatory Academy proved to be very quick as there was hardly any traffic between the researcher’s job and the school. The school is located on a main street and offered very little up close parking. The building is outdated and awkwardly placed, as it lies on a curve on a main road. The new Hawthorne Prep has yet been granted a completion date as a renovation start date has not been determined. Hawthorne Preparatory Academy is an urban school that is predominately African American with a demographic make-up of: 95.4% African American, and 3.1% Multiracial. The majority of the student population of this urban school, 95.8%, is economically disadvantaged and participates in federal Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Program.

The small parking lot is fenced in and difficult to maneuver through. After parking in a staff parking space, the researcher exited her car. Although it was 3:00pm and the school day ended at 2:15pm, there were no children, parents, or staff in sight. The main foyer and main hallway of Hawthorne Prep were an uninviting, dark, ugly green color. The main office door was immediately to the right. The main office also possessed the green color. This office was very archaic in architecture and had matching archaic office furniture. The teacher mailboxes were directly behind an entrance to the door, which proved to not only be dangerous to those teachers getting mail as they exited school for the day, but also unattractive and unappealing in nature. The main counter was extremely high. The few students who entered the office asking to use the phone could not even see the office staff to
which they were directing questions. The main secretary greeted the researcher and asked her reason for visiting Hawthorne Prep. The researcher informed her that Ms. Greene, the school’s principal, had been expecting her. The secretary told her to have a seat as she would alert Ms. Greene of her arrival.

Although there was no concrete scheduled interview time, the researcher waited 20 minutes in the main office even before Ms. Greene came from her office. As the principal exited her office, she informed the researcher that this had been a day like no other. She looked spent, but communicated that she was very happy to participate in this interview. Ms. Greene came from behind the very tall main counter, revealing a very striking and bold polka-dot navy blue dress, and greeted the researcher with a long, warm hug. The researcher, coincidentally, had taught both of Ms. Greene’s two college students. Before retiring to her office, Ms. Greene attended to the needs of both the teachers and students in the office. If ever there was a child present, she would handle the needs of the child, before the adult, even if it meant interrupting the conversation mid-sentence. Each student that left the office did so with a smile, even if they had previously entered with a frown. Ms. Greene did a great job of also satisfying the needs of her teachers as she conversed with them during that short time.

The researcher was directed to follow Ms. Greene to her office. The researcher was advised to sit anywhere she felt comfortable, as the principal closed the door. Shortly after, a teacher knocked and entered Ms. Greene’s office. The principal apologized to the researcher for the disruption, but informed her that she had to deal with this situation, as it regarded an event to occur the following school day. As the principal interacted with the teacher, the researcher noticed the willingness to collaborate from both parties and the desire for the event to be the best the children had experienced. The principal met with the teacher
for almost 25 minutes, all the while entertaining phone calls from others who needed her assistance.

When the teacher left the office of the principal, Ms. Greene was ready to start the interview. We began conversing about her children and their educational pursuits and progress, in addition to her educational goals and objectives. The researcher had previously known Ms. Greene and felt very comfortable in her large, but dated, office space. Her office possessed new desk furniture with an accompanying principal’s chair, but a not so new side table and visitor’s chairs. We interviewed at the side table. Ms. Greene, a single African American woman principal of an urban elementary school that has been determined by state standards to be in “academic emergency,” is also from the Midwest and a mother of two. She was educated in the Mid-West and earned her Master’s of Arts degree in educational administration in the same city where she currently serves as principal.

Ms. Greene has been in her current urban school district for over 21 years. She’s taught almost an equal number of years as compared to those that she’s served as a principal. She serves a school where both parental involvement and teacher motivation were very low before she arrived. She prides herself on not only making great strides both academically and socially as it pertains to her students, but also with teacher morale and parental engagement.

Conceptual Framework of the Researcher

In December 2002, I received a Master of Science degree in Environmental Engineering from Michigan State University. I have a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemical Engineering from Tuskegee University. Although my early background reflects a scientific history, I am currently excelling in a career in education. I earned a Master of Arts
degree in Educational Administration in 2005, and I am currently working on my doctorate in Urban Educational Leadership at the University of Cincinnati.

I am an African American woman high school educator, who has worked in urban education for 8 years. As both a student and practitioner, I have experienced and studied the complexities of educational leadership in many capacities. I have encountered the frustration and successes that are commonly associated with urban school improvement initiatives. I have been influenced by my experiences.

It is important to me to allow the voices of the African American women telling their stories to be heard. The successes and achievements of African American women in urban educational settings who have led their schools through school improvement have led me to study their leadership experiences.

Mainstream literature surrounding school leadership has historically combined the school principal’s work in “scientific” theories of motivation and management due to the minimal numbers of African American presence as leaders in the academic environments of urban schools of today (Dillard, 1995) with minimal importance placed on sociocultural or feminist theories of leadership. Educational leaders in urban settings must reflect the diversity of their populations, and the best way to bring about the desired change and success in our urban educational communities is to aggressively recruit, retain, and train more gender-balanced and culturally diverse school leadership (Harris, 2001).

**Feminism**

It is important to view school leadership on sociocultural and feminist theories of leadership because school leadership of today must reflect the increasing racial, ethnic, and
School leadership of today is viewed in more expansive and diverse ways than have been explored previously.

Feminism is the movement for social, political, and economic equality of men and women. The use of feminism has made it possible and acceptable to acknowledge and applaud the accomplishments of women through history. Feminism values what has been traditionally seen as culturally characteristic of women. Feminism also explains and shows the way in which many women were quieted and/or ignored in history, when they succeeded in entering a field that was not seen as their own, such as school administration.

The feminist standpoint theory is a distinct element of contemporary feminist thought about how we construct knowledge (Allen, 1998). It is a theory that focuses on gender differences with the overall objective to empower women. The feminist standpoint theory enjoins us to view women as “strangers” or “outsiders” whose experiences might provide insight that is invisible to “natives” (usually White men) who are too immersed within dominant institutions to detect the patterns and behaviors that comprise reality (Hennesey, 1993). Feminist standpoint is the theory that “claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others for knowledge purposes” (Harding, 1991).

Allen (1998), states that the feminist standpoint theory encourages the solicitation of stories from many types of women. Being a member of two historically oppressed groups in the United States, being Black and being a woman, produces complex and distinctive ways of knowing and being. Black women are confronted with the issues of dualism; we belong to two oppressed groups in the United States. Black women are valuable resources for acquiring a variety of perspectives and narratives about how oppression operates and about how women
resist oppression. The feminist standpoint theory seeks to expose oppression and to highlight acts of resistance, allowing for those women who verbalize their struggles and victories to experience “consciousness raising” (Smith, 1987).

The Feminist movement alone focuses on the problems faced by white women. It does not confront the issues that are of concern for black women specifically. Black Feminism was instituted when Black women began creating theory and calling relevance and attention to the specific issues of sexism and racism encountered by Black females and is described as a critical social theory or as “bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by in justice” (Collins, 1998, p. 276). According to Williams & Evans-Winters (2005), Black Feminism is concerned with fighting against economic, political, and social injustice for Black women and other oppressed groups.

Black Feminism redefines what it means to be a Black woman in America. It is a feminist driven theory, where Black women serve as agents of change, rather than oppressed, incompetent victims that strives to create a humanistic vision of community that is more comprehensive than previously created social action movements. Black Feminism serves as a way to empower the community and the women in it the women of color (Collins, 1998).

Black feminism reveals that while being physically inside and outside educational communities, we are a part of the struggle for justice for all African-Americans, all low-income populations, all women, and all other marginalized groups (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). Black feminism allows us to look clearly through an otherwise blurry lens
the affect and necessity of intersecting the subjects of our age, with our location, upbringing, and experience level training to hopefully contribute to a multivocular epistemology (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

The demand for respect and recognition that Black Feminism evokes has led to a widespread knowledge about the Black woman’s plight and path to leadership by others outside the Black community. Black women are gaining universal exposure and acceptance in a multi-cultural society.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework and an intellectual movement that focuses on the complicities of society in sustaining societal dominance, and upholding similar social structures within gender, class, and sexual orientation. More generally, CRT is relevant to people who are looking for ways of dealing with questions regarding race and identity. It is widely used by a community of scholars who assert that Western society is characterized by persistent racial and cultural oppression.

The educational system in our western culture has a tendency to ignore facts that are unpleasant or that are indicative of negative positions or actions by individual leaders, groups, or our nation as a whole. Educational materials most times ignore the existence of prejudice, racism, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, sexism, and class distinction. When controversial topics are overlooked and disregarded, this unrealistic coverage denies people the information they need to recognize, address, understand, and overcome the problems of society. The use of CRT will help address these issues, therefore allowing for more positive and productive urban educational communities.
Critical race theory seeks to reduce marginalization through the recognition and promotion of historically disenfranchised peoples. Solorzano (1997) defines critical race theory as

A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color (p. 6).

CRT is an important tool in regards to both intellect and social issues. It is important for deconstruction of oppressive discourses and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power and authority. It begins with the idea that racism is normal and because it is so mixed up in the core of our social order, racism appears both normal and natural to people in our culture. CRT challenges the dominant discourse, cultural norms, dehumanization, and seeks social justice for all.

Lintner (2004) states that CRT has four major themes, two of which validate the argument for the presence of African American leadership in urban centers. The first theme is that race and racism are timeless, and will always be permanently tangled in the core of American social order. Secondly, “critical race theory seeks to promote the experiential knowledge of women and people of color as legitimate and central to the understanding of subjugated peoples” (p.2). Critical race theory has the ultimate objective to bring about change that supports a greater level of social justice (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

Williams & Evans-Winters (2005) relate to CRT and Black Feminism because they both provide voices for the marginalized and oppressed to be heard through the use of personal narratives and counterstorytelling. Brown (2005), states that the paradigm of CRT provides a lens that allows for an emphasis on the social, political, and racial context of
schooling and how these factors can affect the leadership of African Americans and the education of African American students to be viewed. “Given the insidious and often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of African Americans” (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 26).

Critical race theory focuses directly on race and racism and allows scholars to identify personal and universal injustices and inequities within a recognized White privileged society (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). Critical race theory will be used to first deconstruct the beliefs of the dominant western culture, and then reconstruct a new way of thinking, a new paradigm.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Qualitative research requires that the researcher collect data, structured or unstructured, from many sources. Three kinds of data were collected in order to build a rich, robust analysis: interview data, observation data, and archival data.

Interviews, according to Patton (2002), have been used by phenomenologists as a method to carefully and thoroughly capture and describe how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. Further, in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest provide the “essence” that is central to the experience (Patton, 2001, p. 104). In this study, the interview is the dominant strategy to gather data from the participants, described in their own words so that the researcher can develop insight on how participants interpret their world (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). The formal interviews took place at the location designated by the participant and were conducted
at intervals of 1 to 1 ½ hours after school hours. Each participant was asked a set of questions prepared by the researcher (see Appendix C). The interviews were typed by a veteran transcriber and then analyzed by the researcher, using both the transcripts and the original tape recordings.

Observation data and field notes help to describe each setting observed, the people involved, the activities, and the meanings of what is observed from the participants’ perspectives (Patton, 2002). Observations allow the researcher to learn about all stakeholders involved in the educational community (see Appendix D). They provide the researcher the opportunity to capture events that may have escaped awareness among the people in the setting (Patton, 2002). Field observations are written notes of what the researcher observed during the visit. They provide the context for the study, the school environment, office environment, and interactions during professional development activities and meetings. They are descriptive and reflective to provide a word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations as observed (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998).

Document reviews prove to be valuable, not only because of what can be learned directly from them, but also as stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observations and interviewing (Patton, 2002, p. 294). These documents can be categorized as personal, official, and popular documents (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). A rich variety of archival data were collected from each participant in as many forms as possible. Documents collected and analyzed included, but were not limited to, the following: photographs, planning documents, e-mail to the researcher, articles published in professional journals, student data from the state department of education and district data reporting office,
parent/student/faculty handbooks, school improvement plans, school newsletters, school and district website information and newspaper articles.

Triangulation of data was used to, “convey the idea that to establish a fact you need more than one source of information” (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998, p. 104). Data triangulation, according to Denzin (1998), is the use of a variety of data sources to interpret a single problem or program.

It came to mean that many sources of data were better in a study than a single source because multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you were studying (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998, p. 104). Triangulation strengthens a study by using several sources of data to create as comprehensive as possible a picture of the participant in the inquiry. All data collected were treated as confidential materials.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the next step involved in the research project focused on analyzing, synthesizing and refining the data collection using qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis usually consists of reducing data, by generating themes and categories, coding and displaying data, drawing conclusions and explanations, and verifying and testing data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Data analysis is the process of systemically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that are accumulated to increase understanding of them an to enable the researcher to present what has been discovered to others” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 157).
Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Data analysis and management, according to Patton (2002), focus on theme recognition and inductive analysis. He further contends that, “the challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data [by] reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (p. 432).”

Open coding was used to develop themes and patterns emerging from the data. This coding pattern included identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found in the data. Census, map and calendar data were used in the description of the study and were used to describe and analyze various sites, environments, settings, and individuals present during data collection. Field observations were utilized as a part of data analysis to give a greater understanding as to the work environments of all participants and to see daily operation of each field site. Any insights, analysis and interpretations that emerged during the fieldwork were included in the qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002). Triangulation of coded data across multiple sources was reduced to themes and patterns to produce convergence of data for analysis and to help assure validity of the study.

Significance & Limitations of the Study

Leadership deals with powerful public personalities, and is biased in terms of race, class, and sex privileges. In our nation, the contributions of black women leaders go largely unrecognized. Historically, studies on black female leadership are scarce and present a poor and incomplete picture. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Consciousness and the*
Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) offers a historical lens to view the plight of Black women in our nation.

Historically, the Black woman has had to wear many different hats; she is many different things to many different people. She is a mother, father, wife, sister, daughter, grandmother, nanny, and an administrator. Collins (1998) argues that [black women] are in an identity war, and discusses ways they achieve positive social identity in spite of the negative, perpetuated negative stereotypes of Black women in America.

Our nation most times ignores the existence of prejudice, racism, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, sexism, and class distinction. Previously, every policy in this nation was implemented by whites, even though it seemed to be in the interest of black advancement, it was actually an attempt to further white interests (Bell, 2004). Even though the face of leadership has changed in this nation, racism is still very prevalent, and in one way or another, affects the lives of every minority population. Collins mentions the need to make the voice of the collective standpoint of Black women heard in other cultures and communities rather than only heard in the African American community.

Black women have been systematically oppressed and denied in our society. The quest to add voice and meaning to the role of the African American women in America is in no way an attempt to ignore or disregard the hardships and struggles of other groups of people (Collins, 1998). The struggles of Black women are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice.

At the center of this movement lies the Black woman intellectual. Collins expresses that scholarship and activism go hand in hand. Traditionally, the more knowledge an individual possesses and the more educated an individual is regarding racism and social
injustice, the more likely the individual is to be an activist. It is our job as intellectuals to evoke dialogue concerning our struggles through which action and thought can inform one another. It is our responsibility to inspire action and thought in other Black women and other individuals in society.

Most of the information on African American women leadership is situated within larger gender research on women in corporate, public, or educational administrative studies (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). The inclusion of African American women administrators’ contributions should be given separate attention than those contributions within the predominantly White feminist’s studies program (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). It is important to study the leadership experiences of African American women in urban educational settings in order to encourage other African American women in to leadership positions.

Although data were collected from multiple sources, and findings were compared and analyzed, the limitations of this research exist in the size and nature of the sample. The number of participants in the sample was limited to three African American women urban school principals in a Midwestern school district who are enduring urban school improvement. Two of the schools, Hartford Elementary and Hawthorne Preparatory Academy are urban elementary schools and the remaining, Dubois High, is an urban high school. Two of the participating schools, Hawthorne Prep and Dubois High have similar demographics, while Hartford Elementary is more diverse. Purposeful sampling was used as it is a qualitative technique of predetermining which members of a population may provide the most beneficial information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). This small, but purposeful sample method, aims to reduce suspicion about why certain participants were selected for study, but still does not permit statistical generalization (Patton, 2002) because of
the limited time periods during which observations and interviews occurred, the limited number of documents studied, and the limited number of principals interviewed for this study. This has, in turn, limited the scope of the study.

Summary

This section presented the methodology and the rationale for the methodology for this prospective study. The theoretical frameworks to be used, the conceptual framework of the researcher, and the significance and limitations of the prospective research were all provided. Chapter three provides a presentation and analysis of data collected.
CHAPTER III
Presentation and Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study is to investigate how African American women principals lead urban school improvement. This chapter reports the findings and shares the stories and experiences of three African American women principals in urban education. These narratives were recorded and field notes were taken to reveal the opinions, gestures, feelings, insights, and incidences of the participants as well as to describe the local setting. These narratives include their professional backgrounds, their thoughts on what makes a successful leader, their insights as they relate to a positive school culture in an urban environment, their personal initiatives to improve urban education, and the unique responsibilities and/or pressures felt by these African American women who are serving as principals in urban education. Each account reveals the way in which each woman has survived and/or thrived in urban education in spite of what may seem as constraints of race and gender to some.

Each principal was aware that the interviews were strictly confidential, and each was free to discuss her perspectives as they related to the focus of the study. The principals, at the request of the researcher, told stories and shared experiences in their lives guided by the researcher’s questions in an informal, conversational way. The data for each of the women were not meant to be generalized to all African American women principals, as they portray individual uniqueness, while also showing connections through experiences of other participants in the study. The data were analyzed for common themes and patterns that emerged from the research and answer the research question:

How do African American women principals in selected urban schools lead school improvement?
Individual Stories of Three African American Women Principals in Urban Education

Principal #1: Ms. Patty Clay

Ms. Clay describes herself as a very ambitious goal setter who is constantly changing. She was born into an educated family and was raised in a Christian environment, and was taught the importance of education, teaching, and learning from her mother who was an educator. Ms. Clay originally hadn’t the desire to be an educator. When she graduated from high school her goal was to become a television broadcaster. Her desires changed when she realized that she would have to start her broadcasting career in a small town. She then began to think of other things in life that she had a passion for. “I always had a passion in school for like counselors and wanting more to happen in schools.” She expressed her continued passion for public education and helping students determine their career paths. She decided her interest in education would be best portrayed as role of a school counselor. “I thought counselors didn’t do enough.” With her mother’s constant push, she decided to continue school with her major as television broadcasting but as a minor, pursuing elementary education. As she continued through school, she realized that her desire to be in education overshadowed her original dream of becoming a television broadcaster. She changed her major to elementary education and obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree.

Ms. Clay has been in education for over 15 years. She has served in many roles including assistant principal, elementary school principal, and resident principal. She began her career as a classroom teacher in another Midwestern urban school district following the footsteps and direction of her mother who was also an educator. After one year of teaching, she returned to the current city she resides in because, “it was home.” She became interested in becoming a principal because of encouragement from different principals in the district.
During her fifth year of teaching, her building principal encouraged her to become a principal, and she was then asked to be a part of the resident principal program. A resident principal assumes charge of the school building in the absence of the principal. The following year, she was asked to be the principal of Hartford Elementary.

Ms. Clay has served in her current position for 9 years. When asked about the top priorities of a school administrator she reported that the school climate/culture set forth by the principal is key. As top priorities she also mentioned parental involvement, the instructional framework of the educational community instituted by the principal, and the long-term goals set for the educational community by the administrator are the three most important priorities.

Out of the top three [priorities] there would be school climate and culture. And that’s involving not only just with your students but with your staff. Both staff and student morale are important for school structure, survival, and achievement. I don’t want low morale to cause student discipline problems and attendance problems.

Two would be the instructional framework that you have for your school building.

The third thing would be having a long-term goal of where you want to be for your school and long term planning for your school so you just don’t maintain status quo but you are always adventuring beyond where you are.

I perceive as a high priority as school administrator is getting the parents involved. The difference between the four schools that I’ve served in from this district [and Hartford Elementary] is the distinction in parental involvement here at Hartford Elementary. What makes it impactful is not only are they involved but they are here and the kids see them here and they see they are involved so that’s the additional pressure for both the kids and the teachers because we are going to expect more. With that I think you get additional assistance and accountability for everybody.

Ms. Clay went on to talk about the importance of the instructional framework of an educational community and, “trying to get the kids where they need to be [academically].”
She professed that mission statements created by an educational community are important, but if there are no strategies to achieve the mission statement, the students in the educational community may not achieve academically.

    Researcher: What strategies do you have in place? Do you feel like that actually help the urban students to where they need to be especially with the problems that the urban schools always face? What strategies do you have in place to actually help the kids get to where they need to be?

    Ms. Clay: I think for [Hartford Elementary] we provide students with a variety of options to help them achieve those set standards. We try to expose the kids to not just the straight lecture format but students; we utilize stations with students from kindergarten up through eighth grade. It’s impactful because they need to be able to move around. There needs to be variety in education. Integrated technology has [also] been awesome for us to help move them to the next level.

    Ms. Clay focuses much of her attention to the school climate and culture in her building. She believes this is an important component to school improvement, success and academic achievement. She feels that a positive school culture is a responsibility that should be equally shared between students, parents, and staff. She believes that leadership can make and/or break a school’s academic success and growth. She states that it is her job not only to share and convey her mission and educational objectives for the school, but to help everybody accomplish it. She says that she knows that her attitude and performance affect the performance of both the teachers and the students in her building. As to her leadership, she tries to, “lead by example.”

    When asked to define her leadership style, Ms. Clay indicated that she sees her style as charismatic. She believes in building relationships, communicating, and shared leadership. She says that shared leadership and collaboration are important. She communicated that she tries to set general directions and create environments and structures that enable everyone in
the school community to discover their own skills and talents, allowing everyone to, “feel a part of the process.”

As an African American woman principal, Ms. Clay recognizes that she brings with her some special characteristics as well as stereotypes to the role.

As an African American woman how I would deal with a leadership role is that I believe in most cases [African American women] are seen or given the preconceived notion that we are very harsh, abrasive and under qualified. I try to go against that mark. I may find myself being very outgoing and open in many situations and maybe sometimes can be a little too collegial. Just so I can erase that first perception that people have about African American women being abrasive. Do I think my race as an African American woman makes a different personality? I think for others it does but not for me.

I think a lot of [students] and their parents may be shocked that I’m an African American female who leads this school building. I think as a female I do have the benefit of being able to be more sympathetic than men are. And sometimes that can be for [a woman’s] benefit and I think sometimes it could be to [a woman’s] detriment. Sometimes I think we can be too understanding and it may be taken for granted. I think I have to tow the line a lot of times, and as an African American female I feel that I do have to work harder because of the negative perceptions people have of [African American women].

What stands out clearly as an important factor in how Ms. Clay experienced leadership was her race and gender. Early in her career at Hartford, she remembers both parents and staff questioning even the smallest of her decisions. The disbelief in her leadership capability and the challenging of her knowledge had been a regular aspect of her leadership.

Ms. Clay also views her role as an African American woman affecting the students she serves.

I do think in an urban school setting African American females experience a different level of respect than African American males from kids. I think African American children in urban schools see African American women leading all the time in the household and other places so sometimes that is the norm for them and might not see it as a prestigious position. Whereas for an African American male [students] don’t see many of them leading, so that’s
different and when it’s different they sometimes are more apt to listen and to respond.

Ms. Clay believes that the negative perceptions that society may have of African American women initially had an alarming affect with the parents, staff, and some students in her building. She admits that she had to work hard to overcome those perceptions. “I do know as an African American female I try to lead at a higher level sometimes to the point where I feel I’m draining myself only [be]cause I feel I have no room to make mistakes just because of what the perceptions are.” She feels that the perceptions of others may be a constraint to her success in regards to an African American woman leading school improvement. Her work ethic, her ability to lead with her “heart and gut,” and her tenacity have proven to her stakeholders that she is a capable and well-informed leader.

A self proclaimed constant learner, Ms. Clay does not allow her excellent school rating to hinder her desire to continually improve her educational community. She states that her focus for current school improvement initiatives focus on “instructional and parental involvement, community involvement, and student engagement.” She is an individual who is constantly trying to grow, and encourages her staff to do the same. She says that educational growth and professional development of teachers and staff is important when discussing school improvement. A teacher in her learning community will be, “a team player, flexible, self-motivated, a continual learner, and have a willingness and be open for change.”

Ms. Clay believes in educating all in her school community. As an instructional leader focusing on school improvement, she recognized the deficiencies in her low performing students and built a system that could help with these deficiencies. Ms. Clay recognizes that while parental involvement may be present in many of the homes of her
students, she states that total parental involvement is not fully inclusive of the parents of many of [African American] children. Most parents work and aren't home during the day, and many don't have time to aid in homework and out of school assignments. She recognizes that working, single, and some married parents are often unable to fully participate in a student’s academic career. Strengthening the academic achievement in the building was a part of her current school improvement efforts.

Probably one of the biggest things that I would say as far as school improvement for Hawthorne Elementary is closing the achievement gaps between our African American children and our White children. According to the data, White students scores, on average, are in the 85th percentile or higher. Our African American students scored in the 20th percentile or lower [on standardized state assessments]. In my opinion, that was a huge gap between the African Americans and the Whites. I questioned this because they attend the same school and are in the same classes so why were our African American students scoring lower than our White counterparts? I instituted intervention services for our students both before and after school. These services are for those students that are possibly at risk and those who may be accelerated. They are to assist with their educational needs. My focus is not only on students who are underperforming, but those who can be enriched as well.

She closed a growing achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and other low-performing students by developing a mentoring program that provided students with additional instruction, both before and after school. These academic prep sessions also aided in positive social and emotional opportunities for students. She says assisting those African American students academically also helped with their self-esteem and confidence and in turn helped to nurture the positive culture in her building. “Our small-group sessions help underachieving students and give them an environment where they have a better chance to succeed.” Teachers in her building are constantly re-educated and professionally developed on, “how to deal with students other than the majority that may have been seen in the school building.”
Ms. Clay describes one of her roles as holding teachers accountable for pushing the goal of continued literacy and development as it relates to the school improvement plan. She “holds teachers accountable for providing strategies, ways to support all students.” She admits that it has, “taken some time for teachers to be re-educated and professionally developed on intervention strategies and looking at where the kids were and providing services for them before school and after school and in some cases at lunch time and recess.” She regularly attends teacher meetings to discuss individual student achievement and entertains suggestions on how to improve student achievement.

In 2002, Hartford Elementary won the Presidential Blue Ribbon award for excellence from the U.S. Department of Education. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program is a national school improvement strategy that 1) identifies and recognizes outstanding public and private schools across the nation, 2) makes research-based effectiveness criteria available to all schools so they can assess themselves and plan improvements, and 3) encourages schools, to share information about best practices based on a common-understanding of criteria related to educational success. Hartford Elementary School received the rating of "Excellent with Distinction" by the State Department of Education on the State Report Card for the 2007-2008 school year and again in 2008-2009. Hartford was the first school in the district to receive such an honor. Ms. Clay expresses that many may see her school as one that does not require “work” but she professes that it is harder to be on the top than the bottom. She is constantly stressing to her staff that becoming comfortable will be a detriment to their success.

I am constantly trying to show growth with [my students]. The question arises all the time about, “how do you make kids who are already accelerated or advanced any higher?” We need to figure out what we’re going to do to make that happen. That is my continuous improvement. I’m trying to move to
having no kids in the basic category and everybody being in proficient or higher.

School improvement, Ms. Clay states, has been on her educational agenda from the time she began working at Hartford Elementary. She prides herself on not being shy in asking for things that would benefit her educational community. A great strength of Ms. Clay is her ability to obtain resources for her school. She explains that she makes sure her students have all they need to succeed academically. She is relentless about obtaining resources from the entire educational community to ensure her students’ success.

Everybody is on board on what we are trying to do and what we need to do to make it happen. In most cases I think I’m very good at communicating what I need and following up if need be without being overbearing but still kind of sharing what we need to make this happen in our school. In most cases it works and sometimes it’s more a little bit extra pressure that I have to put in there to make it work.

Ms. Clay is very active in the community that surrounds her elementary school. She feels that her school can gain additional resources and a better understanding of its students' by reaching out to the surrounding community organizations. She says that some parents in these organizations may feel alienated, but her presence in these meetings and organizations brings light to her schools' outreach efforts. She believes that ultimately when teachers, community groups, and parents present work together, they can become a powerful force for school improvement and reform. She says:

The community counsel meetings I typically go to and present where we [Hartford Elementary] are so the community will be aware. Everybody is on board and aware of what we are trying to do and what we need to do to make it happen. So in most cases I think I’m very good at communicating what I need and following up if need be without being overbearing about what we need to make happen in our school. In most cases it works and sometimes I have to put in a little bit of extra pressure to make it work.
In addition to attending neighborhood meetings, Hartford Elementary sponsors several fund-raising activities benefiting both the surrounding community and the educational community. These events include, but are not limited to, annual silent auctions, marathons, golf outings and many other activities. These family events were created to recognize student participation, raise funds for educational gains and build community relationships to help ensure student success.

As an African American woman in urban education, Ms. Clay communicates that she feels a very unique responsibility to educate students that have ethnicities other than the majority.

African American women have the pressure and a responsibility to make sure that “our” kids, and when I say “our” kids I mean African American kids, get what they deserve. We must make sure that African American students are given a quality education.

African American women in urban education, as Ms. Clay states, have been given the responsibility to educate African American children. It is the responsibility of African American women to “stand up and address the inconsistencies” that may be present in the education of African American students and students of other demographics.

I also think we have the unique responsibility that we have an opportunity to make a difference and show that African American children can learn. I think we have a knack for working with our own children and with that knack I think we are able to exemplify that our children are capable when they are provided with the same opportunity as everybody else.

Along with feeling a sense of unique responsibility, Ms. Clay also admits that the responsibility is a pressure endured by African American women in urban education. She believes that the African American woman educational leader feels the pressure to make sure that the African American child receives that quality education. Ms. Clay elaborated on
some of the challenges and responsibilities that she sees as an African American leader in urban education and improvement:

In the future I also think that success in urban education is going to be the responsibility of the African American female. We will have to continue building the capacity of urban education, especially for African American children. I think the advancement of urban education is going to be placed on our shoulders. We must be flexible and cooperative and continue to bring all demographic groups together to keep urban education moving forward. It will be placed on us to continue to take charge in leading and showing that African Americans, Hispanic Americans and other low economic groups are able to achieve success.

As a part of the concluding remarks, Ms. Clay was asked her plan for urban education and urban school improvement. Her response was, “I want to make an impact.”

African American females as leaders have a tenacious spirit that other ethnic groups may not necessarily have. Historically, we’ve always had to give extra and more. The spirit of continuing to press on is instilled more in African American women than it is any other ethnic group. Being flexible and finding strength in other places other than the workplace has historically been our [mode of operation]. We always put forth a 110% in everything that we do. Most African Americans aren’t given a second chance. You better make it work and make it the best that you have that first chance, you know. But overall it’s probably that tenacious spirit and willingness not to give up.

Principal #2: Ms. Barbara Hall

Very professional, but very willing, Ms. Hall starts recounting her journey in education and leadership:

I always wanted to be a teacher. I was one of those kids who played school every day. When it was time to go to college my mom didn’t want me to go into education. I went to college in Ohio and I majored in broadcast journalism. I loved it. It was great. But I really had a passion for teaching and education. So when I graduated I went right into my masters in secondary education. I was substitute teaching at that time. I was doing some freelance writing on the side but I never got into broadcasting.
Ms. Hall began her career in education as a certified English teacher. She was a classroom teacher for five years and decided that leadership was her niche.

I was teaching English at a local high school and I had a tremendous opportunity for a lot of leadership rolls and it just kind of came a little naturally and so a position became available in the building for Academic Dean and my principal encouraged me to go back to school and I did that. Once I finished my administration degree, I became the Academic Dean at the same high school.

Ms. Hall continued sharing her leadership experiences. In this mid-western city, she’s served as the academic dean at a private school, assistant principal of a high school, principal of two elementary schools, and currently serves as principal of Dubois High. As a “natural” leader, Ms. Clay reports that her top priorities as an educational leader in urban education are academic success, positive behaviors and family/community involvement. She believes her collaborative leadership style helps to facilitate and further her top priorities in her educational community. As the educational leader in her building, she feels that the decisions made concerning academic success and student achievement reflect the attitudes of both she and her staff, as her building practices team decision making.

I have a wonderful staff and an outstanding staff. They are a very cooperative staff. I do believe they see me as the leader of the campus. They pretty much have bought into all of the initiatives.

Ms. Hall shared that her building has many “teacher leaders.” This “behind the scenes” leadership was evident in the principal’s “we’re all in this together” leadership style. The principal says she directs focus and goal setting but explains that she trusts the direction her teams may venture.

Keeping staff focused on the school improvement plan is a role Ms. Hall takes on. She explains that she centers her message on her priorities and the goals and objectives of the
school in every meeting. “I highlight every meeting so that everyone is sure of what the goals of the school are and then everyone feeds into those pieces.” She believes that school objectives should be shared by all and should be accomplished by all. Academically successful schools, as she states, possess the atmosphere where, “all of the stakeholders understand and buy into the vision and mission of the school and actively work to accomplishing those pieces.” She has created a basic structure so that all members of her educational community know the focus of the school improvement efforts and where they are headed academically and behaviorally.

As a collaborative leader, Ms. Hall focuses on improving the interactions among the teachers and the interactions between the teachers and the administration. She exercises leadership similarly to how she conceptualizes leadership, she feels that, “in order to improve the school in a positive direction that you try to move as many people with you as possible. I think that we have gotten a lot accomplished with this style.” She makes leadership decisions based on what she believes will help students learn and achieve. She shares that she constantly helps to establish the conditions that help other leaders in her building to be effective. She allows leadership to be, for the most part, democratic, versus centralized and authoritative. Leading, according to Ms. Hall, “is all about skill and talent.”

In August 2006 Dubois High School was redesigned to restructure the large “traditional” learning program into smaller learning programs. Dubois High established its career technical programs in 2003. As part of the restructuring of high schools in the Mid-Western city, small specialized courses were developed. Dubois High is a replacement school for the traditional program and features a mixture of college-preparatory and vocational education options. Ms. Hall explained the “deliberate” change in staff when she
accepted the role of principal at Dubois High. She shared that previous teachers of the building were not a good fit for the school.

Well here is what I’ll share with you. I did at the end of last year remove the long-term subs from the building. There were several who had been her many years. So we did remove the long-term subs. It was very deliberate. They are very good people. They were wonderful people. They just weren’t qualified to teach.

To strengthen academic achievement in the building I wanted all highly qualified teachers. So we did have a lot [of long-term substitutes]. Outside of the long-term subs I had two licensed people decide to do something else too. It’s a very large staff. We have 1100 students. So I feel good about that. I don’t see that as a negative. I see that as people addressing whatever their need is and responding.

She stresses that new staff members are aware when they join the staff that Dubois High is a school community that works hard and much will be required in terms of teaming, collaboration, and effort. New hires “know what they’re coming into.” Accountability is a key piece in school improvement for Ms. Hall. She conducts impromptu classroom walkthroughs to ensure teaching strategies coincide with the school’s improvement plan.

I look to see that it’s standards based instruction going on. I look to see that the students are engaged in the instruction. I look to see that they are being monitored. How do [teachers] know that they are mastering the material? I should be able to walk into the classroom without even having a conversation and see what’s going on.

Ms. Hall initiated student data folders into her school improvement plan. She believes that student data folders are an important component of continuous academic improvement in the classroom. Data folders allow both her students and teachers to keep track of individual student performance and promote academic success. With data folders, teachers can track individual progress and set individual learning goals for students. Ms. Hall thinks that student data folders help improve student performance and motivate students because they too
are allowed to see their individual growth. They allow for the creation of both intervention and enrichment strategies to guide students to academic success.

Our school has started to use data folders. In the data folders I should be able to pick up a student’s folder and look at an assessment and see how they are achieving and whether they are mastering it or not. If not, what is the plan for intervention?

With the data folders comes data meetings. We have regular data meetings where we are looking at the student. We are looking at their achievement. If they are not achieving we address it and the plans we are going to put in place. We didn’t have those conversations last year. We are having them this year and I think it’s helped tremendously.

Raising academic achievement and having a stronger school culture defines school improvement for Ms. Hall. She believes that a positive school culture improves academic success and lessens violent behaviors. She says that fewer problems are expected because students feel a sense of acceptance. A school’s environment is what connects the wide variety of school operations, school functions and activities, and Ms. Hall tirelessly tries to improve her school culture, as she believes that is correlated directly with school improvement. As a part of her improvement efforts, upon her arrival to Dubois High, Ms. Hall instituted a uniform policy. She expected that the dress code policy would support a positive school culture by identifying clothes that promoted school safety. She declared that initially the kids didn’t like uniforms. But she noticed that the uniforms make the school safer. Since her school began requiring uniforms, Ms. Hall has documented a notable decline in discipline problems. She hopes that her students view her efforts as positive and an attempt to ensure their safety and to provide them with the best possible place to learn and grow.

I hope that they see me as a positive African American female role model. I hope that they would see me as strong yet flexible and someone that they could talk with and I hope that they see me as someone moving the school forward and meeting the goals.
Ms. Hall admits that being located in a surrounding community that has in the past been recognized for violence, family and community partnerships with her school have become significant in her improvement efforts. She feels that supportive families and communities contribute to her students’ success and confidence. Confessing that violence prevention is a top priority in her school improvement efforts, she says that when children feel valued and supported, they are more likely to achieve academically, avoid risky behaviors and stay in school. She attributes much of her success as a leader in urban education to being present in the community.

I do think I have the ability to relate well with the students, the staff, the community and the parents. I live with them. I worship with them. We go to the same church. I do think that has a lot to do with it.

In an effort to continue community education and involvement, Ms. Hall has solicited several partners in education. The Partners in Education program is program sponsored by the Business Committee of the City Chamber of Commerce. The program connects local businesses with local schools on a one-to-one basis in the interest of enhancing children's education. The school and business then select projects that add knowledge and/or experience in areas where the business partner is most qualified to assist in the educational process. Faculty and students serve to improve the business partner's understanding and appreciation of the educational system.

Ms. Hall’s primary focus is the student and works to make her staff all understand and work to change their focus as to be student centered. Communicating school and academic expectations to both students and staff also contribute to her successful improvement efforts.

Dubois High has a positive school culture committee that meets monthly and I also have a step down team. That team focuses on in particular positive
prevention plans. When we look at our data and saying okay we are seeing decreases in this kind of behavior I will ask them flat out where we need to improve. Across the board I have an instructional leadership team of positive school culture environment.

We track our data and so I can show you first, second and third quarter data that shows those decreases. We have baseline data from last year that we are comparing this year.

A successful African American principal in urban education, she believes that her race and gender have little to do with her successes, but her personality and how she exercises leadership is how she continues to make great accomplishments.

I really do think that this is about skill and talent and I would hope; I don’t know that I was selected for this position because of being African American and I don’t know that I believe any of the positions was because of being African American. When they came and ask me to do the work it was an honor.

She has a very easygoing nature and is a flexible leader. Her relationship with people is a strong factor in how she leads her school. I do believe that Ms. Hall acknowledges and values her ethnicity, but based on her upbringing and positive life experiences her racial differences are not a factor, in her opinion, in her leadership opportunities. She believes that people respond to her based on her skill and personality.

Ms. Hall does, however, believe that she does feel a unique responsibility as an African American woman in urban education to be a positive role model, “you always feel you have to be viewed as a positive role model. I do think you have to be really involved in your kids’ lives. For me it’s community relationship and involvement.” Very competitive and goal oriented, Ms. Hall feels no constraints as an African American woman leading urban school improvement. She believes that she is a strong African American female, and she follows closely in the footsteps of her mother, whom she says was also a very strong woman.
Ms. Hall believes that one important characteristic that she possesses that has helped her improve her school is her ability to motivate others. Success for her is defined in terms of success of her students, staff, teachers, and her ability to keep morale high for all involved in her educational community. She contents that in schools, a strong academic program is crucial, but principals and teachers must also create a school culture that helps all students learn to work together and motivate themselves, to convince them of their abilities and responsibilities to achieve. “Motivation. I definitely think you have to have the ability to move the group towards its goal.”

She points out that while she may not feel the pressure as an African American woman, she has recognized some interesting facts as her role as a principal coach:

I’m a principal coach on the turn around team. The elementary initiative schools, which are low performance schools that have been that over time and what we do is go into the school and work with their school teams to improve. There are sixteen schools and the majority of those schools are run by African American women, which is interesting.

Just another side bar, within this district, some administrators feel like African Americans are channeled into low performing schools. If you look at some other schools that have not traditionally been low performing they are managed by Caucasians.

Ms. Hall confesses that although she had been given the unique responsibility of improving an underperforming school, she loves the challenge. She said she felt honored when she was asked to do the work of improving Dubois High, both academically and behaviorally. Ms. Hall values education and imposes these same values on her own daughter, as well as her students at Dubois High. She believes that her job as a secondary administrator in urban education is to lay the foundation of education for her students. She continues with, “Education is important because it provides students with all that is needed to make their
dreams come true. I feel that if you get a good education and if that [there] is something you want, then you can probably do whatever you want to do in due time.”

Concluding the interview, Ms. Hall shared that she has such a passion for educational leadership and it, “is absolutely” her calling. She loves the work of leadership and improving schools. She can not see herself in any other field.

Principal #3: Ms. Linda Greene

Smiling, very upbeat and showcasing her bubbly personality, Ms. Greene began sharing her educational experiences. Her professional career with this mid-western urban school district totals more than two decades. She is a veteran educator who conveys the passion and enthusiasm of a principal who truly loves what she does. Ms. Greene is a very energetic and confident woman. She is a self proclaimed “no nonsense” principal who confesses that she is determined to take Hawthorne Preparatory Academy to the next level both academically and behaviorally. She contends that she has never been afraid to express her opinion and has gained a reputation for doing so.

Ms. Greene began her career in education as a classroom teacher in elementary education, and eventually decided to pursue graduate studies in education administration. Two years after obtaining her principal certification, she was asked to serve as an elementary assistant principal. After only a year into administration, she was given the job as principal of an underperforming elementary school in the district. She served in this role and many similar roles for more than 13 years. She has been at Hawthorne Preparatory Academy for the last years in her successful career.
Unlike many principals who come into a school building and have to adapt to the school’s culture, Ms. Greene was able to help create the culture of her school. In 2008, Hawthorne Prep was one of the 15 underperforming elementary schools in the district that was redesigned. The redesign was an effort to accelerate academic achievement. The reform initiative was intended to provide intensive support to provide better learning environments for the existing students. The elementary initiative provided Hawthorne Prep with districtwide strategies with extra resources and support, a heightened emphasis on student data analysis, school-based learning teams in which teachers lead professional development, teacher content specialists, a new evaluation system for principals and assistant principals, and collaboration with the district’s partners to create more family and community friendly schools. In addition, Hawthorne Prep received a customized School Assistance Plan; additional help from district coaches, a new reading professional development strategy and instructional structure for grades 4-8; a “fifth quarter” of extended learning in June immediately after the regular school year; and Individual Learning Plans setting improvement goals for and monitoring progress of each child.

When questioned about how she was able to improve the school, she answered that she focused on the school climate. “My top priority for my school is to try to set a culture of respect where the teachers and the kids feel valued.” For Ms. Greene, a safe, clean, nurturing, and caring school is an important aspect of education that had been missing from her students educational experiences before her arrival.

It’s picking back up now. It had really died down a lot. I would say it’s nurturing, supporting and encouraging. I believe that it is all those things. Because we are a redesign school the kids here have probably been here about eight or nine years without any of those things. So for us to come in the first year we made strides but it’s not nearly where we want it to be. It’s safe
because we try to create an environment to make sure the kids are safe. We make sure the doors are locked. We make sure that we have security. If kids have a problem with bullying we try to deal with those issues as quickly as possible. We just support them in everything. If kids have a need we just try to meet it. You know, whatever it is. If we need shoes, food, bus fare, a hot lunch, haircuts or any of those things we try to provide that for our kids. Encouraging, we are always; every morning we do a school pledge and we do the school motto. I talk to the kids every morning before they go to class just to encourage them to be the best that they can be and to do what’s important and make good choices. That’s kind of what we do and we do that every day.

Ms. Greene uses her experience as both a mother and a former classroom teacher to form a relationship with her students and to break communication barriers. She reaches out to them not only as a mentor, but as a principal that is sincerely concerned about their well-being. She mentioned the mutual respect that she and her students have.

She notes that she is trying hard to create a positive culture and environment, and a part of that is the expectation that everyone is concerned about teaching and learning and doing the right thing.

As the leader of a school when I think about school improvement I think about improving the academics and improving the culture. I think you look at the entire what makes a school run. You look at how you can improve each piece of that. So from the simplest of the grounds and making sure the school is clean to the lunchroom and how the scheduling goes. You look at all the parts of what is the strengths in that school and what was going well in that school and what wasn’t and how you can improve on those.

So we try to look at our positives during school culture planning and we also look at areas that we are struggling in so we can improve them. We struggle with respect for the adults and we also have a lot of fighting. So for me the priority is to focus on the kids and what clientele I’m serving. We are probably 98% free and reduced lunch. So 98% of my kids are living in poverty. Probably 25 to 40 percent of them are reading below grade level. So when I think about school climate I always try to think about the people that I’m serving and what’s going to be the best way to help them.
Ms. Greene exercises school improvement similarly to how she conceptualizes school improvement; meeting the needs of the “whole child.” Since the beginning of her career in education, she explains that she has never wavered from her focus on benefiting the child, and confesses that some of her greatest accomplishments have resulted in a better learning and working environment for both students and staff. She says that she “can only hope” that she has had a positive influence on the lives of her students as a result of developing a caring, nurturing and safe environment.

Since I’ve been here the atmosphere has shifted. For the kids, oh man, my positives. When I talk to the kids they say that they have learned more this year than they have learned in a long time. I think when they see me in the hallway they talk to me. They know that I care about what’s going on in their lives. They want to share information with me. I don’t know. I just think being open to them. I sit down and have lunch with them sometimes. I just think, I don’t know, my reactions to them have been positive.

They talk about their lives to me all the time. I know what’s going on in my kids’ lives. All of them. They talk about what happens over the weekend. They talk about, when they are going shopping. They talk about everything. They just want to share their lives with me. If there is a problem they come to me. I left my book bag at home, well okay; we’ll go get it. I will just hop in the car and I will drive them to go get their book bag. I mean you hope that you have a positive influence on their life. I don’t think they immediately see that but I think I can tell by the way they respond to me. I guess my rapport with them lets me know how much of a positive influence I have on their lives.

Ms. Greene’s leadership style, as she explains, is very “hands-on.” Her beliefs about people, education, and leadership dictate how she leads her school. She explains that she works diligently to establish her goals. Collaboration is key for Ms. Green to further her goal of making successful, sustainable changes in her school. She considers herself as a servant for the people, the staff and the students. She contends that she tries very hard to serve their best interests. Ms. Greene noted that some of her decisions have not always been the most popular and may not have always impressed, but she ultimately does what’s in the best
interest for the children as well as the entire educational community. She is a leader for the children, but also for the teachers.

I’m a very hands-on leader. I believe in the team. I believe in working as a team. So I may have a vision or I may see things one way but when I sit down with the team if they come up with something that will work better I am always open to change. I like to know what’s going on all the time out in the classrooms. Not only in the classrooms but when I’m talking to the kids. So I know what’s going on with the building. I sit down and we have a lot of meetings. I meet with the teachers weekly. We talk about the data. We talk about the kids. If there is a concern with a child I usually take the lead on it once you bring it to me. I will contact the parent or I try to go to the home. It’s just a variety of things. I think I’m really hands on. I’m in it.

As an African American woman in urban educational leadership, Ms. Greene sees leadership as very nurturing and most times displays to all stakeholders her fervent nature, but communicates that she feels that she must work harder to prove that she is a capable and knowledgeable principal.

[As an African American woman] you have to be very confident and sure of who you are and what you’re doing. As an African American I’m always put on a different playing field as everybody else. I always have to be a step above or a step ahead of my counterparts.

Ms. Greene put a lot of effort into proving her professionalism and competence. She feels compelled to have a wide range of all aspects of education. She feels that as an African American woman leader she is always under a microscope. She says that there are always people out there who wonder if she will be successful and if she can really handle the job. She also mentioned the disbelief sometimes displayed by her followers as it relates to her ethnicity:

And because the way that America is set up, people don’t think that African American women are intelligent. So I could say something and my teachers will look at me funny, but somebody White will come along and say the same thing and it’s not a problem. They will do it. It’s not an issue. They’ll say, “oh
I get it now”, and it’ll be the same thing that I said. They struggle with seeing me as an intelligent person or one that knows exactly what I’m doing.

As a leader, Ms. Greene explains that she no longer is easily angered. She has realized that working with people is always going to be challenging because of differing personalities. There is always going to be someone with a different outlook. She says, “You have to blow it off.” She no longer allows others to “get to me.”

You know what; to be honest I don’t let it bother me. I know what I know. So as a leader if I don’t like what’s being said I change it. I do what needs to be done with and for the kids. I don’t get offended by it. At first I was very offended by it because I felt like I wasn’t respected as a person. Then I decided that it doesn’t matter. I know what needs to be done. I know it needs to be done and I do it because I know it’s going to be for the best interest of the kids. So I don’t get caught up in it anymore. Initially I did because it’s very offensive when you are a leader and you’ve worked hard and you’ve done everything that your counterpart has done. But people still see you as not having a value or you don’t have the knowledge base. I don’t care anymore because I know what I’m doing and the proof is in the pudding. So you can keep talking about it but while you are talking I’m just moving up and moving up because I know what I’m doing and I know what’s best for our kids.

As a successful African American woman principal in an urban environment, Ms. Greene credits the attributes of dedication and flexibility that her character possesses. She further acknowledges drive, willingness and fearlessness as keys to her success. She says she is, “dedicated to the cause” of school improvement and is very “open to learn new things.”

I don’t think I know it all. I’m always looking to get better at what I do. You’ve always got to be looking to get better and you’ve always got to be open and say, “Okay, I don’t know everything”. Flexibility in decision is also important. If somebody else gives me an idea that might be as good as mine I have not problem with using it.

For Ms. Greene, success can also be attributed to her ethnicity. She believes that the way her students view her impacts their success and academic achievement. She is very loving and doting towards her students. She truly sees her students as exceptional and her
students try to impress her by acting accordingly. “A lot of times our kids do not see people as understanding who they are and trust them to do what they are supposed to do or care about them.” Ms. Greene claims to be much attuned to the school needs of her students and works vehemently to make sure they needs are accommodated.

I think it (her ethnicity) has a lot of influence because my kids here at Hawthorne, my babies, they see me as an asset to them. So because I’m a Black woman they understand. At least they believe I can understand them. I believe that I understand where they live and what they’ve been through because I look like their mothers. I believe the kids will perform better for me because they trust me. And they know if something is going on in their life I’m going to help them. So they know I’ll get out in the neighborhood. They know I’ll show up at their house. They know I will walk all the way down the street to make sure they don’t fight on the way home from school. They kind of know that I’m not intimidated or afraid of the situation. I will come in and handle it when I need to handle it. They know and trust me.

Throughout our conversation, it was apparent that Ms. Greene put the priority of the students above all else. She made it clear that she would accept nothing less from her staff. She seemed to be a very informed leader who is committed to have an informed staff. She says it is her job to make sure that teachers are performing effectively with their students. When speaking of important characteristics she looked for when observing teachers, she said:

I want them to know their content very well. But along with knowing their content very well I want to see that they have a heart for kids and heart, you can see and hear it mostly in their conversations. You can tell when people are passionate about something. I want them to be passionate not only about teaching but about urban kids. You know all the projects that come along with urban kids and you have to be able to handle that and still teach in a classroom. I want them to be organized. I want classroom management. I expect for them to be at work and to be organized and to know the content. Their rapport and their relationship with their kids are key. If you have a good relationship with kids they’ll do anything for you. You could have the content but have a poor relationship and you are not going to get anything out of the kids. I see it every day. I’m seeing it right now in my school. I expect for my staff to take care of the kids here like they’re their own.
With all of the extra effort she puts forth to improve her school, she expects her staff to “give 110%” to help raise academic achievement and promote a healthy atmosphere. Holding teachers accountable, Ms. Greene says, is her job. She says it’s her job to give the teachers a guidance and direction, and also hold them accountable for ensuring that they impart those goals of learning and achievement to the students. She explains that during her classroom walkthroughs she is making sure that teachers are keeping the focus on instruction and learning. This, she says, is a way of “holding the teachers accountable to what we need to happen.” She continually discusses practices with her staff as a way of “making sure we fill in all the gaps”. Ms. Greene says, “We must all be on the same page, together, to see what needs to happen to help our students learn.”

Hawthorne Preparatory Academy was redesigned to accelerate academic achievement. Each school in the school district participating in this redesign effort is expected to provide better learning environments for students by making certain that teachers and other staff at the schools are dedicated to following the very best educational practices. Hawthorne was deemed a school in academic emergency according to state standards. In regards to the effectiveness of her school improvement initiatives, Ms. Greene reports:

Well our benchmark data has been going up at least ten to twelve points each benchmark. So from the time the kids came in August until January at every grade level we have increased at least thirteen to sixteen percent. The atmosphere in the building from K to 6 is awesome. My middle school is struggling for various reasons. But even in that they have been improving. Even in the K to 6 the data has been going up. The evidence is in the test scores.

Ms. Greene is very involved with the day-to-day activities of her school. She is very willing to fill all of the various roles necessary to operate extending to working on the outside of the building. As an African American woman in educational leadership, trying to change
the culture and the focus of her school building, Ms. Greene feels “a responsibility to the kids.” “I feel this obligation to make sure that they get the best quality education possible. So I don’t know if it’s unique but it is so serious that if I don’t do anything else I want to make sure these kids get what they need and then I’ll feel like I’ve done what I’m supposed to do.”

When asked about what she sees as constraints to her success, Ms. Greene reveals that finances are always an issue. She says money issues, many times, impede “what the real work should be.”

Constraints for me are always money. Money is always an issue because there is so much that I feel that you need in an urban school that you may not need in a suburban district or a magnet school. Because what I am trying to do is provide education for the whole child. It’s just not about academics. So for me when I don’t have the finances to do the things that my kids need to do I feel it hinders their education. I feel it hinders school improvement. When you don’t have finances to get those kids those things to build them up outside the school along with the academic piece, then I feel like it hurts school improvement. I really feel like it hurts it.

A successful African American woman leading urban school improvement, Ms. Greene shares some interesting thoughts and observations:

I think what I see as I look around the district is that most of your urban schools with the highest poverty and the highest students with issues are being ran by African American women. So if you look around if you went to all the neighborhood schools you would find an African American female principal. They are expected to raise those scores. Raise the scores and the behaviors, you know, in a positive direction.

Concluding the interview, Ms. Greene shares:

Just being an African American woman in this position is a pressure. I think that there are a lot more requirements placed upon us. I feel like we always have to be at the top of our game. You cannot have a time when you are not at your best because you are a Black woman. The expectation is that you can do it all and you will do it all. That’s the bottom line; and if I don’t see any hope in our African American kids then who will.
Analysis of the Stories of All Three Women

This section will present an analysis of the individual stories of the three African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement. The research question and the emergent themes and patterns from field observations, school documents and interviews will help shine the light on how African American women principals lead school improvement. The variables that will be analyzed include: background of participants, leadership, school improvement, and the role of the African American woman leading urban school improvement.

In reviewing their lives and educational histories, the similarities of the lives of these African American women principals is remarkable. All three principals mentioned the responsibility they felt as African American women to provide and equal opportunity and equity in resources for minority students to succeed academically. All commented on how important goal setting and accountability is in regards to school improvement and reform. They each built and/or strengthened a culture and environment where academic success is at the forefront of their school improvement effort. The level of participation and passion exhibited from each woman seemed almost therapeutic as they had a chance to share enthusiastically their journey through the principalship and school improvement.

Background, Education, and Career Path

In analyzing the data given by the participants, all were from middle-class families and all had working-class parents. All had supportive parents, and one of the three participants had a parent who was in the business of education. The women interviewed are all from 30 to 40 years of age. All three women are supportive and encouraging single
mothers. All three women received both their undergraduate and graduate degrees from large, mid-western, pre-dominantly White universities.

Ms. Patty Clay grew up in the same mid-western city where she currently serves as principal. Her mother was an educator, who encouraged her to explore a similar career path. Initially, Ms. Clay had no intentions of pursuing education as a career. At first, she majored in television broadcasting. She decided to major in education after realizing that her television broadcasting career wouldn’t take off as quickly as she’d dreamed. She began taking an interest in school counseling as she saw an area in education where she could make a difference. After graduating with a Bachelor’s of Arts degree in elementary education, she stayed in the mid-west to begin her teaching career. Ms. Clay began on her road to administration very early in her career in education. After five years of practicing classroom teaching, she obtained her certification in education administration and was given the opportunity to serve two years in the role of assistant principal. She was then presented with the opportunity to serve as resident principal at Hartford Elementary. The following year she was given the job of principal of Hartford Elementary, and has been there since.

Ms. Barbara Hall also grew up in the same mid-western city where she currently serves as principal of Dubois High. She was educated in both the public and parochial school systems. Ms. Hall shared that her mother, who she deems a strong African American woman, did not desire for Ms. Hall to pursue education as a career. As a result of her mother’s disdain for the education profession she, as did Ms. Clay, chose to major in broadcast journalism. Ms. Hall knew that there would be no other career path for her other than education. Her personal passions for education overrode her mother’s dissuasion and lead her to major in secondary education during her master’s career. She graduated with a Masters of Arts in
secondary education and was certified to teach English. She was a classroom teacher for five years and was encouraged by her principal to pursue education administration. She took his advice after realizing that she was carrying out many administrative roles while still performing the duties of a classroom teacher. After obtaining her Master’s degree in educational administration, she became the Academic Dean of a private high school. She served in this position for two years before becoming the Secondary Assistant principal in principal in a large mid-western school district. She then became principal in two elementary schools in the same district. After seven years of serving as an elementary school principal, Ms. Hall was given the job of principal of Dubois High and has been there since.

Ms. Greene was a classroom teacher for ten years before becoming an administrator. After earning her degree and certification in educational administration, she did not pursue administration right away. She taught for another year before deciding to become a principal. She was given the job as an assistant principal in a large mid-western urban school district. After just one year, she was promoted to the job of principal at an elementary school. She served in the role of principal in several elementary schools in this district for eight years before working as the principal at Hawthorne Preparatory Academy, where she currently serves as the educational leader.

All three women were raised in the same large, mid-western, conservative city in the United States. Although their parents had different influences on their careers in education, they all ultimately supported their daughters’ pursuit of their individual dreams. The women all worked at some point in their careers at the elementary school level as elementary school teachers. All of the women shared that their experiences as a classroom teacher in education were extremely helpful to them as principals. These elementary schools were in the same
large mid-western school district, but were all different demographically. Ms. Clay and Ms. Green similarly have served as administrators of elementary schools. Ms. Hall has also served as an administrator in an elementary school, but currently presides as the principal at a high school.

**Principal Leadership**

When asked to describe their leadership styles the responses were different. The style of leadership of each woman, however, was very similar. These women recognize leadership within themselves. All of the women saw themselves as strong leaders and change agents in their educational communities. All three African American women principals are currently engaged in urban school improvement and describe their leadership style as being participatory. They each concur that curriculum issues and issues regarding student achievement are the responsibility of the school community and that shared decision making surrounding these issues is practiced.

The women all shared that their school has made many positive improvements both academically and behaviorally under their leadership, but they also shared that their entire educational communities had a great deal to do with these educational improvements. The principals do not like to make unilateral decisions. All the participants solicited the interaction of others. Each principal believes that it is their responsibility to ensure that teachers and students have the materials, support, and time to endure sustainable academic change.

Ms. Clay described herself as being a charismatic leader. Ms. Hall sees herself as a collaborative leader. Ms. Greene strongly believes that she is a “hands-on” leader. They feel all staff have to work together to achieve common goals and objectives for students. All
three principals agree that it is more desirable and uncomplicated to support a common decision, but also recognize that the final decision rests with them.

Ms. Clay and Ms. Greene both share that their ethnicity and gender affect how they lead. They share that their strategies for leadership and urban school improvement reflect and are shaped by their socialization as Black women. They reveal that their characteristics of being nurturing, supportive, caring, and considerate are all traits associated with how they lead and can be considered to be specific to their socialization and upbringing as an African American woman. They admit that their ethnicity and gender figure significantly in the decisions they make and how they view urban education and their educational communities. Ms. Hall does not make strong connections between her ethnicity or gender and her leadership style and her success in urban educational leadership. She relates her leadership abilities and most successes to her personality more than to her race and gender. These women, however, suggest that African American women educational leaders should be considered equally or more effective in urban educational leadership than their counterparts because of their ability to empathize with the situations of the students in their educational communities and to provide an effective learning environment that will make a difference both academically and socially in students’ lives, no matter what the conditions of the students’ lives may be.

The principals conceptualized leadership as what is best for their schools. All three women seem to feel qualified and competent as principals. The women all see themselves as strong African American women who are required to be nurturing, supportive, and encouraging to all staff and students. They stress team building and goal setting as a part of their leadership styles. They each understand what effective leadership means as it relates to urban school improvement and communicate their visions and school improvement goals with
passion and spirit. They all viewed themselves as both an advocate for the student and the teacher, but educating the students is their primary agenda. I saw commitment from all three principals to the schools they lead from the way each articulated her beliefs and improvement goals as well as how each exercised her leadership. All see their role as educational leader as one that requires them to be involved in all aspects of their school improvement.

**School Improvement**

The principals were all successful in the area of urban school improvement. Their perceptions were evident by their statements about leadership and the desire and motivation for leading each principal possesses. They believe their school climate is conducive to learning and they provide opportunities for all children to learn. They are women who strongly believe in their ability to provide a positive, caring and safe learning atmosphere that makes a difference in the lives of their entire educational community.

**School Culture & Climate**

The principals are successful in the area of urban school improvement. These African American women leading urban school improvement all believed that a positive school climate and culture is important for academic success. They believe that they have created a school climate that is conducive to learning and that they provide opportunities for all students to learn. They have culminated a sense of unity with the entire educational community taking the collective responsibility for student success.

The school environment in each school seems to be one that is calm, warm and a secure setting for all students. These principals have set a unified, driven and clear tone regarding school climate and student achievement. They each believe that for student success and achievement, a positive learning environment conducive for growth must be
developed, and that building and encouraging positive relationships must be included vision for the educational community. They’ve created school environments that foster motivation in teachers, students, staff and parents which has helped to develop and improve student achievement.

Both Hawthorne Prep and Dubois High are located in neighborhoods that are known as high crime areas. Ms. Greene and Ms. Hall both have made it their mission to make students feel safe in their learning environments. The principals feel their students need a positive and supportive climate in order to reach their full academic potential. These women have all instituted a climate that focuses on academic achievement while emphasizing supportiveness, communication, collaboration, attendance, and motivation.

Many strategies have been utilized by these African American women principals that support their efforts of creating a positive school culture in order to raise student achievement. Ms. Clay mentioned putting notes in teachers’ mailboxes concerning both positives and negatives in regards to school improvement initiatives, and also writing letters to both parents and staff concerning positive strides and goal attainment. Ms. Hall discussed acknowledging staff and students for trying new things and taking risks in both their teaching and education. Ms. Hall and Ms. Greene both have specific beliefs about how best to educate urban students and were able to create a school that would work best for their students by employing teachers who had similar beliefs. Ms. Greene focuses on her efforts of building a better partnership with her parent teacher organization in efforts to support her positive culture initiatives in her building. All three principals mentioned the importance of constant learning and setting aside money and resources for professional development of teachers and staff in their buildings.
These women principals all think that being visible and having open relationships with students, teachers and parents make a big difference in the positive culture of their schools. They believe that visibility helps to shape and form the attitudes of both students and staff. These principals have made it clear that everything that occurs in the school matters to them, and they want to be a part of it. While Ms. Greene admits that she would like to be more visible, she feels that her interactions with her students are positive, and that her students know that she wants to be a part of their lives. The three principals demonstrated their collaboration efforts during our interviews by consistently using the word ‘we’ when discussing their schools and their efforts to raise student achievement. The work ‘I’ was hardly ever used except when discussing a personal aspect of their lives. It is clear that these principals seek out change both in school culture and student success. Their ways of changing their school culture may differ in some aspects, but their goals are the same.

**Academic Achievement**

In communicating an important factor in urban school improvement, each African American woman principal interviewed says that school improvement strategies must concentrate on the individual academic needs of students. The principals clearly exercise decisions and actions to effectively improve their schools, particularly in the areas of academic achievement and socialization. High expectations for staff and students are communicated at each school. Each principal confessed that their staff has become very specific with their work as it has become more standards focused as it relates to academic achievement.

Ms. Clay incorporated academic prep sessions both before and after school to assist with the academic performance of her students. Ms. Clay’s model for increased student
achievement, she says, is a place where students receive individual attention from their teachers and allows each student more frequent opportunities to ask questions, actively participate in lesson, and receive help in critical low-performing areas. Of the students who received assistance, Ms. Clay says these academic prep sessions significantly boosted their test scores as well as their confidence and motivation. Intensive remediation and instruction efforts are used during these sessions to improve students’ academic success.

To aid in the academic success of her students, Ms. Hall made a deliberately hired all Highly Qualified Teachers to work at Dubois High. She has also incorporated academic prep sessions into her school improvement plans. These prep sessions are differentiated for each student based on the goals developed in accordance with the data from the individual students’ data folder. In addition to assisting with assignments, these prep sessions are designed to improve both organizational and study skills to make students more successful in completing academic tasks.

Ms. Greene confessed that school improvement efforts and district initiatives have forced her and her staff to be on task all the time. She measures the academic achievement of her students by looking their student work and data in relation to the district learning standards in order to identify her students’ needs; this helps her and her staff better design assignments and improves instruction. She admits that because of school improvement efforts, there is very little down time, but is pleased of the improved learning of her students. These women principals all believe that academic success is an important piece in urban school improvement because it is strongly linked to the positive outcomes that we as educators promote and value for urban students.
Accountability

Each principal clearly sets an expectation for student achievement and staff performance at their school. They communicated that the best way to provide student motivation is for the teacher to be motivated and focused on student success. They believe that the achievement and motivation of students will rise as adult relationships, collegiality, and teacher motivation are demonstrated by adults in the building. These women principals have identified a competent teaching staff that have the best skills and the highest expectations of African American students, and hold them accountable for educating them and ensuring their success.

These principals realize that their teachers are the gate keepers for education, motivation and learning of their students. Ms. Clay even communicated in urban education; she realized that her teachers wore and that she held them accountable for making the appropriate adaptations in their classrooms to ensure the academic achievement of her students. Ms. Greene says that it is the responsibility of the teacher to establish and foster the environment where all students are motivated and ready to learn. The classroom walkthroughs conducted by each principal are to look for specific strategies that should be integrated into instructional practice based on school improvement plans. These constructive classroom audits serve as a way to hold teachers accountable for communicating the goals of school improvement and student success.

Ms. Clay, Ms. Hall, and Ms. Greene all mentioned how student success and achievement not only depends on the teacher, but must also focus on student motivation. They said that it begins with the individual student’s decision to seek education and be open to learn new things. Ms. Greene commented that her expectation of her students in the
building was to come to school daily, focused, and prepared to learn. Although all students may not come with daily with the mind frame to learn, Ms. Hall states that her staff does all that is needed to support their needs and get them in the correct mind frame. The importance for students to understand how important their education is was stressed by all three principals.

Ms. Hall mentioned that the more actively engaged students are in their own educational success, their relationships with other students and their teachers, with the subject matter being taught and learned, the more likely they are to achieve. Students are held accountable for their involvement in their educational success which, Ms. Hall explained, enhances their motivation to learn and provides them with the skills that they need to achieve.

**Parental & Community Involvement**

Parent, community and family involvement in education are important to these principals. They believe this involvement promotes both higher academic performance and school improvement. These women believe that by identifying the needs in their educational communities, and acting upon these needs is the best way to improve the academic achievement in these communities. They believe in action. The three principals have a clear vision as it relates to school improvement for their educational communities and expect teachers, students, parents and the community to be involved in the educational process at their schools.

Throughout the interviews, the principals expressed the need for students, teachers, and parents to feel connected to the school. Each participant feels that by creating a relationship with parents and the community the success rate of students will increase. The three principals provide the opportunity for this connection by attending functions outside the
school. Ms. Clay spoke of attending community council meetings in the neighborhood where her school resides. Ms. Hall states developing and fostering a relationship with the religious organizations in the community where her school resides. Ms. Greene spoke of being involved in community programs and activities in the neighborhood where her school resides.

These women principals realize the need for parents, teachers, students and the surrounding community to see the school as a source of both social and educational development, as they provide opportunities for social interaction for all stakeholders within the school facility as well. They all agree that parent participation and community involvement leads to improved student outcomes.

Ms. Clay stated multiple times that it takes a village to raise a child. She believes that the entire community has a vital role to play in the growth, development and education of the students of Hartford Elementary. Ms. Hall, a high school principal says that parent, family, and community involvement in her students’ education has decreased the dropout rate at Dubois High and has assisted in their motivation and academic success. She says that Parents Active for Dubois Students (PADS) disseminate a students newsletter, volunteer at dances and chaperone out of school activities. The aid of PADS has significantly, in Ms. Hall’s opinion, increased student involvement and achievement.

Ms. Greene admits that while her parental involvement isn’t where she would like it to be, parent volunteers and parental visibility and assistance have encouraged increased motivation in her students. These principals noted that addressing the social service needs of their students as well as their academic needs is a part of teaching and learning and fosters school improvement. These women contend that much of the success in school improvement
they’ve have had in their individual schools can be attributed to the hard work of faculty, staff, students, and the cooperation received from parents and surrounding communities.

*The Role of the African American Woman Principal Leading Urban School Improvement*

These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement all possess the unique responsibility of believing in African American students and their ability to succeed, which helps them to improve the academic achievement of these students despite the presence of roadblocks and critics who do not care if the students in their urban schools fail. Educating the students is the primary agenda for all three principals.

As African American women, all three principals feel very competent and equipped to serve as a principal in any urban setting. These three women principals do not feel constrained professionally due to their race or gender but both Ms. Clay and Ms. Greene share that they feel that they must work harder, do better, and do much more than their counterparts of other ethnicities because of their race and negative stereotypes associated with it. They communicate that they constantly feel studied and viewed by critics who question their authority and knowledge. For these women, the anticipated inability of leadership and effectiveness is a pressure experienced by both and can be attributed to ethnicity and/or gender. They contend that even after they have proven themselves successful, they are constantly expected to prove their leadership abilities with each challenge and every issue. They commented that they had to work very hard to dispel negative images of African American women and prove their competency. Although Ms. Hall does not confront racial issues as often as Ms. Clay and Ms. Greene, she, as did the other women, feels obligated to advance the educational capabilities and social status of the students she serves.
All three principals feel that issues involving ethnicity and gender have yet to evolve in the school district where they serve. Remarkably, all three of these African American women principals in an urban school made mention of the statistics in their school district. They noticed that gender and race is associated with who is appointed to serve as principal in a predominately ethnic minority school with an at-risk population of students. They all mentioned that typically most underperforming schools in their district were led by African American women principals. They spoke of the traditionally higher performing schools in their district being led most times by white Americans.

The three women interviewed are principals who genuinely care about themselves, their staff and their students. They have a vested interest in the success of their students. All three women discussed that race had an impact with their ability to interact with and serve as role models to minority students. Ms. Clay and Ms. Hall mention that more male role models are needed in urban education, but they stated that as principals, their own race and gender can act as an incentive for students to work hard and achieve academically.

They believe that their race also allows for better communication with minority parents and impacts the way they are treated and perceived by the various stakeholders in their educational communities. Although stated differently in some cases, these women believe that their race and gender as an African American woman allows them to bring forth more progress and response from African American, and other minority students by evoking, in most instances, self-disclosure, which has a positive impact on self-esteem and motivation of students. They see their role as pivotal to uplifting the race and community by serving as a positive African American woman principal.
These African American women principals all had a clear vision of how to improve these urban schools. They clearly understand the difficult conditions present in urban education, but they accept and enjoy the challenge of urban education and leadership.

Summary

In this chapter, the data collected from interviews, field observations, and school documents were presented and analyzed as they related to individual participants background, leadership experiences, school improvement efforts and initiatives, and the role of the African American woman principal leading urban school improvement. The leadership experiences and school improvement contributions of all three women were identified and discussed. All three African American women principals had educational roles prior to becoming principals including academic deans, resident principals, teachers, assistant principals and academic advisors. The leadership traits identified in these women include: confidence, collaboration, intelligence, commitment, nurturing, tenacity, diligence, perseverance, supportive of others and student driven, among others. They are successful urban school leaders who possess the ability to educate the “whole child”. They have a strong sense of collaboration and the ability to create a safe, caring, and nurturing school environment where all students, and teachers, feel valued and driven towards student success and achievement. They are powerful educational leaders with unique ways of leading their perspective educational communities to success both academically and socially.

The next chapter is a summary of the study. It will include a general summary of the findings, important conclusions, and implications for practice and future research.
CHAPTER IV

Summary, Findings, and Implications

The purpose of this chapter is to present the conclusions of the study. This chapter consists of four sections. The first section gives a general summary of the research. The next section will report the findings based on the data presentation and analysis. The third section draws conclusions from the findings, and the chapter concludes with implications for practice and research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how African American women principals lead urban school improvement. It was intended to shine the light and expose through the stories and experiences of African American women principals, effective reform efforts in urban educational settings. Without those theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations, leadership institutions cannot adequately prepare future leaders to best serve the needs of other Americans who do not match the mythic norm of leadership (Foster, 2001; Lorde 1995; Montenegro, 1993). This study illuminates the success in urban reform of the African American woman principal by examining her characteristics, leadership style and school improvement efforts, exploring the variables, context, and interaction with which she works.

The research sought to answer the following research question: How do African American women principals in selected urban schools lead school improvement?

Data for each participant were collected through interviews, document reviews and observations. These data included information on educational histories, philosophies of education, school improvement initiatives and the socio-political, context of the school and communities where she led as principal. The primary purpose of data collection was twofold.
First, there was a desire to understand as much as possible about each African American woman principal interviewed and to write a description of the principal in her own setting, based on the data collected. Second, there was the hope to analyze the data from all three principals to answer the research question raised in the study. Pictures of urban educational school improvement and leadership behaviors which help to explain these women principals’ descriptions of their successes, failures and limitations within an urban school context are described in individual synopsis through narrative storytelling.

One purpose of this narrative inquiry is to encourage leaders in education to share their stories with their colleagues to improve urban education. According to McKay (1989) narrative inquiry is particularly relevant when studying African American women because historically, African American women use storytelling as a method of personal expression. “The use of narratives, and the epistemological frameworks through which these narratives embody and convey meaning, not only provides an important way to think about [leading, teaching, and learning], but also is vital to understanding what goes on at school” (Eisner, 1989, p. x-xi). Eisner (1999) believes that “experience” is,

“…slippery; it is difficult to operationalize; it eludes factual descriptions of manifest behavior. Experience is what people undergo, the kinds of meanings they construe as they teach and learn, and the personal ways in which they interpret the worlds in which they live. Such aspects of life are difficult to relegate to a technology of standardized observation schedules or behavioral measures, yet what people experience in schools is central to any effort to understand what schools mean to those who spend a major portion of their lives there.” (p. ix)
The three principals, chosen using purposeful sampling, each responded to questions that were asked during the interview. These responses, field observations and data obtained from documents were then presented taking into consideration the purpose and focus of the study. The variables of background, career path, school culture & climate, principal leadership, school improvement, and the role of the African American woman principal leading urban school improvement were used as the major themes and categories for the data analysis.

Findings

From the narratives of the three African American women principals leading urban school improvement and a review of the documentary evidence, major findings emerged. This study indicates that the leadership styles of these African American women principals are similar to those described by Leithwood & Rhiel (2003) concerning effective school leadership. These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement exercised a democratic leadership style. The nurturing part of their leadership style reflected their behavior as a relational leader and encouraged students, teachers, and parents to be involved in the educational community. This shared decision making developed a sense of ownership and empowerment throughout the school community and supports the beliefs of Crow & Glascock (1995) concerning transformational leadership. The interactions and relationships of the principals are grounded in the need for the principals to provide educational programs that cultivate academic achievement and success and cultural diversity made possible through additional funding provided by both school wide projects, and parental/community relations.
The three principals practiced collaboration and communication and had a desire to positively affect the academic success of their educational communities. All three women expressed a belief in and demonstrated participatory leadership and shared decision making, similar to a transformational leadership style (Yukl, 2006). Each principal has strong inner resolve and vision as to how her school should operate. They all prefer to have the input and support of their teachers and staff before implementing change and collaborate with the teachers and staff to come to a mutually agreeable decision. These principals all possessed effective leadership styles. They possess knowledge of the curriculum, effective problem solving skills, conceptual skill and strong interpersonal skills; all of which are required to effectively manage and reform an urban educational center.

All three principals promote and share leadership within their educational communities by developing teacher leaders. These teacher leaders not only model instructional practices but also model effective behaviors that promote the development and fostering of a positive school culture. These principals and their teacher leaders help to create the framework for and expectation of collaboration among teachers and staff to discuss student progress and instructional practice.

The findings indicate that these three African American women principals demonstrate an intense work ethic and commitment to success in leading urban school improvement. These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement were all committed to the daily challenges of their exigent positions. The principals were goal driven. Regardless of the similarities or differences in their family compositions, they set a goal for themselves and were determined to reach that goal. These principals were highly motivated. They did not internalize racism and/or sexism. They
refused to let their ethnicity and their gender to present themselves as barriers to their professional goals; they refused to succumb to these barriers, and have not lowered their aspirations because of them. They possessed a strong personality and admitted to a strong desire to excel in educational leadership and school improvement. These women are committed to the daily challenges of their positions and are driven by a personal need to excel.

In addition, the three African American women principals use nurturing in the form of collaboration and “fictive kinship” (Foster, 2005); they emphasized the importance of relationships between them and their entire learning communities. Each principal saw herself as the matriarch of her educational community. They provided environments that encouraged learning and social growth, using their personal background experiences as a reference. They all referred to the students in their schools as their children, and they shared their personal experiences with the students and staff. These women principals all exercised and understood the ideals of nurture, care, and love. They had a strong sense of community and belonging among students, teachers’, parents, and all members of the educational community. All three principals were supportive of not only the students in their schools, but the staff as well. They believed in empowering the African American youth in their schools by making their entire school community feel valued and respected.

Practicing “fictive kinship” while leading means empowering students to have both self and group knowledge, communicate openly with others, be both leaders and followers in organizing school activities, and remaining on task concerning the issue of academic achievement. These African American women principals are leading in a way that practices the skill of empowerment which has historically been used on behalf of the youth by African
American women for years (Collins, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Foster, 2005). These women principals believe that in an urban educational system where minority students may have been denied numerous educational and other opportunities to maximize their development, they must continue to exercise empowerment in order for African American youth to grow and achieve academically. They are interested in educating the “whole child” and providing an education that will allow for each student to be able to live a productive life both inside and outside the school community. They empowered their stakeholders by encouraging them to develop their full potential as students and staff, and encouraging them to contribute positively more to the educational community.

These women principals demonstrated in their candid interactions with students, faculty, and parents that race and gender were significant in support of the role of the principal in achieving urban school improvement. The similarities in culture and feelings of belonging, as described by Lomotey (1989) and Pollard (1997), seems to be translated into the principals’ going beyond their formal job descriptions to make students feel accepted and motivated to succeed. In accordance with Vail (2004), these principals were also focused on taking care of the students’ social, emotional, physical, and psychological needs so that they may be academically successful.

This study indicates that the responsibility and or pressure felt by these African American women principals leading urban school improvement to educate African American or minority children. Lomotey (1987) wrote that African American leaders utilize their social context of the minority culture and community as a resource to foster school improvement. Throughout the literature, the African American woman was described as finding strength in the sense of her belonging (Collins 1998; Foster 2005; Lomotey 1989). These women
principals also helped the students in their educational communities identify with their culture by depicting positive aspects of the African American experience by serving as positive examples of strong African American women. Hopefully, this, in turn, allows for not only African American students to see African American women as valued and contributing members of society, but it also allows for other culturally diverse students the opportunity to see African American women in a positive light.

The evidence gathered from the study supports the findings of Asante (1991) and Lomotey (1987) that African American women have a good rapport with their students and because they have experienced similar racial and cultural experiences as their minority students they are effective in communicating with them. These women principals recounted their connectedness to their educational communities because of having similar experiences, both past and present. Further, the achievement of black students is positively related to the leadership of black principals (Lomotey, 1987). The findings of this research agree with that of Collins (1998) that African American women principals view their mission to effect change beyond their urban educational settings into the broader school community, resulting in sustainable school improvement and achievement.

These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement believe in parent, community and family involvement for both raising the academic achievement of their students and for staying in school. Black principals seem to place a high priority on community and parental involvement (Lomotey, 1989). Lomotey further contends that the success of Black principals in their educational communities may rely largely on their interactions with the community; they are active in involving parents and other community members in the educational community and asking for assistance with decision making.
These women principals all mentioned the importance of the larger community in bringing about improved academic success for their students. The practice of parental and community engagement in the educational community by these African American women principals agrees with Epstein (1992) that parental involvement in children’s learning activities positively influences their levels of achievement and motivation to learn.

The data gathered show that these women made significant efforts to keep students focused by serving as positive role models and providing them with environments in which they can learn and succeed academically. The principals’ success with school improvement agrees with Barth (1991) and Sparks & Loucks-Horsley (1989) that school improvement begins from within and that a positive change in school culture and climate provides a foundation for the educational community to grow and succeed both academically and socially. These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement believe that school culture and climate affect the academic achievement of students. These women all emphasized relationships. These professional relationships created risk free environments in which teachers could make changes to instruction to ensure academic success of students. They worked hard to create a healthy school culture to increase student achievement and motivation as well as teacher productivity and satisfaction (Stolp, 1996).

A school’s culture determines its climate; culture dictates its collective personality of the educational community (Purkey & Smith, 1983). According to Gruenert (2005) school culture is the personality of the educational community and school climate represents that organization’s attitude. These principals have made a significant effort to change and/or enhance the school climate; the attitude of the organization. The collective mood and morale, of the members of their respective educational communities is that of a building that is
focused on academic success. All three women have determined that in order to push their goals of academic success and school improvement they must concede to the belief that a happy teacher is considered a better teacher, and their attitudes influence the quality of instruction. A change in attitude has occurred at these schools where students perceive themselves as learners and teachers believe that all students can learn. Every member of these principals’ educational communities is motivated and driven to meet the high level of expectation.

The three African American principals of three urban educational communities involved in school improvement all set high expectations and standards for academic achievement and behavior for both students and staff, and held them accountable for upholding these standards. They led the way in the belief that all students can learn. They were instructional leaders for their educational communities. They kept instruction and learning at the forefront of everything said and done in the building. These principals hold teachers accountable for instructional practice by being visible in the school building, including classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms and by holding discussions with teachers regarding student progress, learning, and instructional practice. They know the instruction that is occurring because they are visible and observing daily. These successful women principals of school improvement monitored student progress and leadership as it related to curriculum and instruction.

These African American women principals engaged in urban school improvement all emphasized supportiveness, motivation, collaboration, open communication, and strong academics. These principals were attuned to the thoughts, needs, and feelings of their school communities and, in turn, have improved their school climate and attitude.
Implications

This section will provide recommendations for practice as well as suggestions for future research.

Implications for practice

1. Urban school systems should be aware of the literature concerning the leadership styles of African American women educators and should actively recruit African American women educators to serve as principals. These school systems should be aware that the leadership style of African American women educators brings improvement to urban educational centers.

2. These school systems should look for principals who build a connectedness with the community because this connectedness is important for the improved academic success of students.

3. Educational administration programs should prepare students for urban school systems by promoting the belief that a connection to the community will enhance the academic success and improvement of urban schools.

4. Graduate programs in educational leadership and administration should include and encourage research and discussion concerning African American women as effective leaders of urban school improvement.

5. Principals engaged in urban school improvement efforts should set high expectations for staff and students and hold them accountable for results. Accountability is key for achieving academic improvement and student success.
6. Principals focused on urban school improvement should focus on the climate and culture of the school building. Schools with a positive climate and productive school culture have higher successes of student achievement.

7. It is important for the principal to create a framework of collaboration. The principal should cultivate a climate where the importance of relationships is stressed and teacher leadership is encouraged.

Implications for research

1. A similar study should be conducted with African American males in urban educational leadership, studying their success with urban school improvement.

2. A study should be conducted to determine how women of other ethnicities lead urban school improvement.

3. This study found that African American women principals are attuned to the feelings, needs and intentions of the educational community. Research could be conducted to determine how this skill may be cultivated in principals.

4. There is a scarcity of research as it relates to school reform and African American women urban school principals. There is a need for more research that uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods techniques.

5. Research can be conducted to determine how the economic, social, and physical challenges of urban centers impact the leadership style of African American male school principal.
It is my hope that this study can be useful in informing the literature about African American women principals leading urban school improvement. It was my hope to prove that African American women principals are very knowledgeable and capable of performing the challenging duties that present themselves in any urban center. This study documents the narratives, leadership experiences, and the strong desire to excel in educational leadership and school improvement of three African American women principals. The study provides implications for practice and further research regarding African American women leading urban school improvement. This study helped to shine the light on three African American women principals and their urban schools that have become symbols of hope and success for their educational communities. The research was intended to provide a greater understanding of African American women leading urban school improvement.
References


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APPENDIX A

Adult Consent Form for Research

University of Cincinnati
Department of Education
Principal Investigator: Ms. Yejide Mack
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nancy Evers

Title of Study: Leading School Improvement: African American Women Principals in Urban Educational Settings

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Ms. Yejide Mack of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Education. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Nancy Evers.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how African American women principals lead urban school improvement.

Who will be in this research study?
About 3 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if:
1. you are an African American woman principal who has worked in your current position for at least one year;
5. you work in the chosen mid-western urban school district;
6. your school is currently engaged in school improvement efforts as evidenced by your school improvement plan; and
7. you are willing to participate.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to submit demographic information, respond to survey questions about your attitudes and beliefs towards urban educational leadership, evaluate administration modules, and assess student achievement. These assessments may include journal entries and evaluations of projects and activities. You may be asked to respond to these instruments at any time depending on the instrument.

This research study will consist of only one phase which will begin in April 2010 and continue into May 2010.
The following will be included:
  o Recruitment Letter – sent by researcher to perspective principal participants at
identified school sites.
- In depth 60 – 90 minute interviews – conducted by researcher to gather data from school principal participants. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed by the principle investigator. These interviews will be conducted by Yejide S. Mack, researcher.
- Participant observation – researcher observes participants during interview meetings and everyday work environments for a more comprehensive understanding of school improvement methods.
- Researcher explores archival data as it relates to research study

**Are there any risks to being in this research study?**
There are no anticipated risks or discomforts associated with this research study. Participants may discuss any discomfort or problems with the researchers (Ms. Yejide Mack at 513-531-2909, Dr. Nancy Evers at 513-556-6623, or the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences at 513-558-5784.

**Are there any benefits from being in this research study?**
Participants will receive the benefit of an increased understanding of her impact on the success of urban education. Participants will receive no direct benefit from my participation in this study, but participation may help teachers, parents, other school administrators and students better understand urban education.

**Will you have to pay anything to be in this research study?**
You will not have to pay anything to take part in this study.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**
You will not be paid to take part in this study.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**
If you do not want to take part in this research study you may simply not participate

**How will your research information be kept confidential?**
Information from participants will not be shared with anyone outside the study. No one other than the researcher will have access to interview notes, artifacts, transcripts, or audiotapes. Audio recorded data and all other data will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the file cabinet. Audio data will be destroyed after the researcher has transcribed the interviews. All other data will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study.

Pseudonyms will be used for all participants of this research study. Names of school sites will also be changed to maintain anonymity.

Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.
What are your legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you have questions about this research study?
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Ms. Yejide Mack at 513-531-2909 or mackyej@cps-k12.org. Or you may contact Dr. Nancy Evers at 513-556-6623 or nancy.evers@uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-S) reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the Chairperson of the UC IRB-S at (513) 558-5784. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB-S, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have.

You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should tell Ms. Yejide Mack at 513-531-2909 or mackyej@cps-k12.org.

Agreement:
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) ___________________________________________

Participant Signature _____________________________________ Date__________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent __________________________ Date__________
Dear ____________,

I would like to formally invite you to become a participant in a research study. I am a doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati. As I aggressively pursue my educational goals, I am concentrating on advancing my skills of perception, analysis, and research in order to develop a more critical and reflective understanding of African American women principals’ experiences and expectations while leading urban school improvement. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how African American women principals lead urban school improvement. I am asking you to help me to shine the light on African American women principals leading urban school improvement.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to submit demographic information and respond to interview questions about experiences of leading urban school improvement. If you are willing to participate, you would be involved in a 60 – 90 minute interview at any place convenient to you. You will be asked questions about your experiences and expectations in regards to urban school improvement. Your participation in this study and your responses will be strictly confidential. An “Informed Consent Document” will be provided to you when you accept to be a part of the study.

Finally, as a participant in this research, you will receive the benefit of an increased understanding of your impact on the success of urban school improvement. You will not, however, receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help teachers, parents, other urban school principals and students better understand how African American women principals lead urban school improvement. If you would consider assisting me, please contact me to set up an appointment for the interview or to clarify any questions you may have.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to participate in this research study.

Sincerely,

Ms. Yejide Sefiya Mack, MS, MEd
Urban Educational Leadership
University of Cincinnati - Department of Education
e-mail: mackyej@cps-k12.org
cell phone: 734.717.8842
APPENDIX C

Sample Interview Guide

Principal Investigator: Ms. Yejide Mack
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nancy Evers

(Review Informed Consent, answer any remaining questions, sign forms to formalize agreement to participate)

This interview consists of questions about your experiences as they relate to urban educational leadership. I will ask questions for clarification and detail and I will monitor the time. So here is the first question:

BACKGROUND, EDUCATION and CAREER PATH

1.1 Will you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? What was your childhood education like; your upbringing?
1.2 Can you talk a little bit about your college experience that led you to education?
1.3 How did you become a principal? What was your path?

SCHOOL CLIMATE & CULTURE

2.1 What do you perceive as the top priority as a school administrator?
2.2 What are the characteristics of a successful school?
2.3 What three expectations do you have of students?
2.4 How have you had a positive influence on the lives of your students as an administrator?
2.5 Would you say your school has nurturing a safe, supportive, encouraging school environment? If yes, how would you describe it and what have you done to create it?
2.6 What role do parents and adult family members have in the school?
2.7 How would you describe your relationship with teachers and staff in your building?

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

3.1 Define your leadership style. How do you lead? What would I observe when watching you work with staff?
3.2 How do you as an African American woman deal with a leadership role? Does your race as an African American woman make a difference in how you lead? Give examples?
3.3 What do you see as constraints to your success as an African American woman leading school improvement?
3.4 What special characteristics do you think you have as an African American woman that makes you a successful principal?
3.5 Do you think that being an African American woman has influence on your schools’ success?
3.6 Can you give three important characteristics of a successful leader that you see in yourself?
3.7 What role do you take in team meetings?
3.8 What do you look for when observing teachers?
3.9 What characteristics do you look for in a teacher candidate for your learning community?
3.10 What three expectations do you have of your staff?
3.11 What is your greatest strength?
3.12 What areas do you feel you may improve upon?
3.13 What three words would your staff use to describe you?
3.14 What three words would your students use to describe you?

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
4.1 What does school improvement mean to you?
4.2 What are your school improvement initiatives, and how have you led the school in these initiatives?
4.3 How have you impacted this school in terms of urban school improvement?
4.4 What evidence do you have that you’ve impacted school improvement?
4.5 What are your current goals for the school?
4.6 What is your vision for a school in the 21st century?
4.7 Do you stress continued education for your teachers and staff? How? What evidence do you have that supports this?
4.8 What do you expect of students’ parents and adult family members?
4.9 How do you help other members of your educational community in leadership positions further your goal of school improvement?

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP
5.1 What unique responsibilities do you feel as an African American woman in urban education?
5.2 What unique pressures do you feel as an African American woman in urban education?
5.3 Where do you see yourself five years from now?
APPENDIX D

Observation Guide

The researcher’s observation of African American urban school principals during interview meetings will provide additional data valuable to the research study. If willing, participants will be observed within their school, home, or other convenient settings that will provide census, map, and calendar data. This data, along with interview data, will be used in data analysis for a more comprehensive understanding of their school improvement methods. Opinions, actions and interactions of participant with interviewer will be noted in a detailed, objective, and nonjudgmental manner. These field notes will provide concrete descriptions of what has been observed. The researcher is hoping to discover recurring themes, behavior and interaction patterns between participants and researcher, and information relating to the participants within their perspective on social settings where interviews are to be conducted.

Observer comments will include analytical notes about the participants’ comments, actions, and interactions with the interviewer which will help focus the data collection process. These comments may also lead to future, more in-depth questions.

During the observation process the research will takes notes on the following:

- Census – Who are the participants? What are their racial, gender, and social demographics? What are their perceived roles in a child’s educational process?
- Map – What are the physical locations of the interview sites for principal interviews?
- Calendar – How does the interview participant interact with the researcher during the interview process?