The Experiences of Young African American Women Principals

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THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN PRINCIPALS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation in memory of my Uncle Marvin who left us too soon. I know you are looking down on me from heaven smiling!
Acknowledgements

. . .the race is not given to the swift, nor the battle to the strong…

*Ecclesiastes 9:11*

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor Dr. Charol Shakeshaft. I am so grateful for your guidance, patience, and unwavering support. Without your guidance, this would not have been possible.

I would like to thank all of my committee members: Dr. Stenmagen, Dr. Sesnowitz, and Dr. Siegel-Hawley for your patience and steadfast encouragement to complete this study.

This has been a long race to the finish line. I would never have been able to do it without God. God is truly awesome, and through it all He remained faithful, and I thank Him. Mom and Dad, I am so grateful to have been given the best parents in the world. Your continued prayers and support propelled me to the finish line. I am forever indebted to you both.

I must thank all of my family members, friends, and colleagues, especially Holly Simmons, for their constant prayers and encouragement.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES ................................................................. vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .............................................................................. vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Related Literature ............................................. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Leaders .................................................... 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Women in Educational Leadership ............................ 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Women Leaders .......................................... 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age and Leadership ................................................................ 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study ..................................................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation ......................................... 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................... 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Shortages .............................................................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History of Women in Education and Educational Leadership: Past and Present ................................. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Women in School Leadership and Challenges ................................................................. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age and the Principalship ..................................................... 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Feminist Perspective .................................... 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standpoint Theory .................................................................. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design .................................................................................. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample ................................................................................. 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Perspective .......................................................... 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure .............................................................................. 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis ......................................................................... 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility and Dependability .................................................. 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations ............................................................................ 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Study ............................................................................. 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings .............................................................. 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and Implications .................................................... 42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. HOW THEY LEAD: FAITH AND LEADERSHIP APPROACHES.......................... 45

Strength Through Faith and Prayer ........................................................................................................... 49
Leadership as a Mission and Servant Leadership ......................................................................................... 53
Other-Mothering: Surrogacy at School ........................................................................................................... 54

5. RACE, GENDER, AND AGE COMPLEXITIES ......................................................................................... 55

Race Challenges ............................................................................................................................................ 55
Age Challenges .............................................................................................................................................. 60
Gender Challenges ........................................................................................................................................... 62

6. SUPPORT SYSTEMS ................................................................................................................................ 65

Strength of Family ........................................................................................................................................ 70
Role of Women Mentors ................................................................................................................................. 70
Flexibility and Survival ................................................................................................................................. 73

7. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..................................................................... 74

Discussion .................................................................................................................................................... 74
Conclusions ................................................................................................................................................... 75
Recommendations ......................................................................................................................................... 76

LIST OF REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................. 88

APPENDICES

A. Interview Guide ....................................................................................................................................... 99
B. Institutional Review Board Approval ....................................................................................................... 103

VITA ............................................................................................................................................................... 105
List of Tables

Table | Page
-----|------
1. Background Information | 50
Abstract

The Experiences of Young African American Women Principals

By Tanya Roane, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Charol Shakeshaft, Ph.D., Professor
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The purpose of this study was designed to gain an understanding of how young African American women principals experience the principalship. Three research questions were explored in this study: (a.) What are the pathways to the principalship for young African American women? (b.) How do African American women experience the principalship? (c.) What are the barriers that young African American women experience and what are their strategies for success? The researcher examined the day-to-day experiences faced by these women as they related to race, gender, and age challenges within the field of education. Using qualitative research with Black Feminist Standpoint theory as the theoretical framework, the study allowed these young female principals from Virginia to share their personal stories and struggles related to their experiences as principals. They participated in depth one-on-one, semistructured interviews and, as a follow-up, some participated in focus groups that contained open-ended questions.
The findings indicated that these women rely on God, faith and family in their day-to-day work. Some of the women discussed the challenges that they face dealing with ageism, sexism and racism in the work place. Probing the reflections and experiences of these women will inform both research and practice, given their professional rise to principalship positions and their experiences once they attained the positions. It was crucial to add the voices of these women to existing literature because they bring a unique perspective to the practice of school leadership. Implications for this research include: college-bound students interested in school administration; university professors and school divisions interested in ways to support and provide professional development to these young leaders; feminist researchers; those interested in studying leadership theory and research, and aspiring and practicing principals interested in how African American principals support school improvement.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Grogan (2005), women comprised 51% of the general workforce in education. Elementary teachers were women 83% of the time, elementary principals (52%), central office administrators (57%), and assistant superintendents (33%) (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Although women have filled more than half of elementary principalships in the United States and have made inroads in school leadership, the most recent research done by the American Superintendent 2010 Decennial Study reports that women represented 24.1% of the superintendents in the nation (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). While this is the highest percentage reported, and greater than 13.2% reported in 2000, gender inequities continue to be problematic (Kowalski et al., 2010). “Researchers who track the pipelines” to top leadership positions “note a disparity between the number of qualified and experienced women [women are in the majority in administrative preparation programs] and those who actually hold top leadership positions” (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 231).

America has become a more diverse nation with respect to race/ethnicity (Kowalski et al., 2010). Based upon 2006 data, 56.5 % of students enrolled in public elementary schools were White; 17% Black; 20.5% Hispanic; 4.7% Asian; and 1.2% were American Indian (Kowalski et al., 2010). Although these numbers showed a significant increase in minority students in schools K-12 nationally, 82% of public school principals were Caucasian, 11% were African American; 7% were Hispanic; and less than 3% were identified as Asian and Native American (Battle &
Gruber, 2009). “When considering both gender and ethnicity,” the number of women leaders appeared “dismal” when examined against the general population (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 457). For example, only 5% of women superintendents were African American; 1% were Hispanic; and less than 1% were categorized as Native American or Other (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Thus, the percentage of females and persons of color in the superintendency increased over the past decade. Nevertheless, both groups continued to be underrepresented because their presence in the position did not reflect the diversity of both the total national population and the total student population in public schools (Kowalski et al., 2010). “Arguably, the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities is even more disconcerting, especially when one considers the rapid changes in student demographics” (Kowalski et al., 2010, p. 85). In fact, “perspectives on African American women’s advancement to and experiences within the principalship thus are sparse” in the literature on educational leadership (Loder, 2005, p. 243). There is a dearth of research on African American women principals. The literature on young African American women principals is even more limited. Once again, because age is considered as a variable, the population to study becomes virtually nonexistent.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how young African American women principals experience the principalship in Virginia. Thus, the women in this study shared their personal stories and struggles related to their experiences as principals. It was crucial to add the voices of these women to existing literature because they bring a unique perspective to the practice of school leadership. They have experienced race, gender, and age complexities that shape the way they lead. They have experienced both racialized and gendered role expectations while also encountering stereotypical thinking regarding young people. Examining the divergent reflections and experiences of these women has informed both research
and practice given their professional rise to principalship positions and their experiences once they attained the positions.

Overview of Related Literature

African American Leaders

Historically, perception of leaders of color as inferior has been prevalent in schools throughout the United States. “Black leaders often have been perceived as followers under the guidance of White principals, and for decades, their talents were considered inadequate compared to their white counterparts” (Foster, 1990, p. 130). Sizemore (1986) found that African Americans were perceived by their counterparts as “lesser leaders” in the world of school leadership and considered insignificant (p. 180).

Lomotey (1987) discovered leadership differences between Black and White principals. He noted that Black principals had a “strong commitment to Black students and a deep understanding that these students could learn. He also found that Black principals placed a higher priority on community involvement than White principals” (p.175). Sizemore (1986) found that Black principals functioned as role models for their students, and that they had a positive rapport with them. Likewise, Pollard (1997) noted that a Black principal’s “ethnic identity shaped the social constructs of his/her administrative role and defined his/her mission for schools” (p. 353). As a result, life experiences have played a significant role on leadership orientation of many African American leaders (Lomotey, 1987).

Black principals have often found themselves “facing significant odds when attempting to attain a principalship, especially in predominantly White schools” (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007, p. 111). The majority of African American leaders have been “employed in large, urban school divisions that were underfunded, had scarce resources, employed significant
populations of teachers who were not certified, and served students who underachieved” (Brown, 2005, p. 655).

**History of Women in Educational Leadership**

Women have never had a dominant voice in education or educational leadership (Blount, 1998).

Education has been a stumbling block keeping women from attaining equal status in society and separating them from their male counterparts. . . . Before women gained rights and privileges, they were believed to be lower-class citizens, not worthy of voting, or believed incapable of holding power to influence politics or even make decisions. . . . However, women were finally able to break free from these social constraints through education. (Horany, 2002, p. 1, para. 1)

Today, “aspiring female administrators work hard to gain understanding of the professional culture, the role responsibilities, and the mobility patterns that ensure success in leadership” (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 230). Despite these efforts, “research demonstrates that as female aspirants strive for competence, they also encounter the profession’s way of managing gender-based dynamics” (p. 230).

It has been suggested that this imbalance in school administration illustrates the perceived lack of women’s competence to serve in leadership roles within schools. One explanation for the differential treatment of women has stemmed from the assumption that women “lacked aggressiveness and leadership ability that is often required for management positions” (Harder & Waldo, 1983, p. 35). Data also indicated that although the majority of teachers are women, men hold the leadership positions (Lovelady-Dawson, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1999).
In fact, “the absence of a database of women in administrative leadership positions did not happen by mistake” (Alston, 1999, p. 526). According to Tyack and Hansot (1982), it has had “historical precedence” (p. 33).

Ortiz and Marshall (1988) and Marshall (1993) found that “women principals were more attuned to teaching, developing curriculum and instruction, and nurturing children, perhaps because they spent more time as teachers and as mothers before becoming administrators” (p. 170). However, Marshall (1989) contended that when “women talked, supervised, or led in ways that were not consistent with the dominant paradigm of leadership, their work was not credited as leadership, nor was their work as teachers or heads of households given credit either” (p. 5).

Blackmore (1989) supported Marshall’s (1989) contentions, adding that when “women’s subjective experience did not fit the reality of scientific management, it was treated as an aberration, and considered nonrelevant and deviant” (p. 5). Blackmore (1989) further added that “rather than viewing leadership as being value neutral, women view it as being relational morality, where context is a key factor to be taken into account in making moral judgments” (p. 121).

Furthermore, Blackmore (1989) contended that:

women leaders tended to focus more on relationships between individuals and communities and viewed power as being a multidimensional and multidirectional process to empower others, rather than as a force having power over them. Many women viewed leadership as being practiced by different people in different contexts, rather than merely being tied to formal roles. (p. 95)

Gosetti and Rusch (1995) asserted that because many women principals saw “discrepancies between the dominant leadership culture and their own experiences, women leaders not only
experience a different reality than the dominant group, but also provide a different interpretation of reality” (p. 15). “Women’s perspectives and experiences often challenge current theories, knowledge and assumptions about leadership, replacing them with dialogues and ideas that are more inclusive, open, and democratic” (Fennell, 2005, p. 149).

Enomoto (2000) suggested a means of “blending women’s visions of themselves as caregivers and mothers with that of visionary leaders” (p. 392). The blending of metaphors “forces an examination of educational management with women at the center, rather than at the periphery, of the construction” (p. 392). Enomoto concluded by echoing Shakeshaft (1989) stating that in order for women’s experiences to be fully understood, they must be studied on their own terms, rather than in relation to those based on the experiences of white men.

The inequities [in school administration were] baffling, in that women [made up the majority of students] in administrative preparation programs. . . .Despite research and despite years of affirmative action laws and policies, men or women who lead using traditional male-oriented approaches invariably are selected for sponsorship or available administrative positions. (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 231).

Once in administrative leadership roles, women often faced gender bias as it related to expectations (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 231). These included “male dominance in power positions, gender stratification in schools, sex discrimination, theory bias, cultural norms surrounding gender, transition issues, discriminatory access, and a lack of sponsorship” (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 231). When women attained these positions, socialization on the job reinforced inattention to equity.

New administrators who challenge the institutionalized equity filters and fight for persistent attention to issues of equity and diversity find their careers to be far more
complex, and perhaps, even short-lived career. . . . The persistent inequities in school administration suggest that institutionalized privileges, enjoyed by one group over another, are more potent than research that might equalize access to the profession. (Rusch & Marshall, 2006, p. 231).

The struggle for gender equity in school administration remained a challenge.

**African American Women Leaders**

According to Addi-Raccah (2006):

By referring solely to gender, minority women ignore their social position as subordinate members of an ethnic minority. As such, the relatively low social power of minority women reflects a doubly disadvantaged position, which is the result of both gender and ethnic discrimination. (p. 295)

Minority women leaders view the world from an “intersected positionality of both race and gender” (Collins, 2000, p. 10), but are often faced with the choice of “dedicating themselves to one cause or the other, rarely both” (Addi-Raccah, 2006, p. 295).

African American women aspiring to or residing in positions of school leadership often found themselves victims of double jeopardy or the double bind due to both gender and race discrimination (Banks, 2001; Doughty, 1980; King, 1995; Reed & Evans, 2008). Black women have faced even more discrimination than Black men since their “gender and race may evoke negative responses from employers” (Doughty, 1980, p. 165). African American women have struggled for “equitability and visibility within the field of education” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 339). These women have faced both gender and racial challenges. Both are underrepresented groups in school administration. Sometimes these leaders felt “pulled by two sides in determining which groups and organizations deserved their primary loyalty: women or
minority. If a woman chose to affiliate with both, extreme demands were placed on her time” (Banks, 2001, p. 121).

African American women leaders were found often in urban schools that were poorly funded (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). Their experiences with family, culture, and spiritual backgrounds influenced who they were as leaders (Alston, 1999; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Jackson, 1999) and prepared them to take on leadership roles at young ages (Jackson, 1999). African American women leaders reported relying on family to help with child care due to the numerous hours that had to work (Loder, 2005). This practice demonstrated the centrality of family in the African American way of living (Hill, 1997; McAdoo, 1997).

While African American women struggled to overcome gender and ethnic biases from society in general, some reported suffering “gender hostility from other women more frequently than from men” (Echols, 2006, p. 7). In fact, some indicated that hostility and exclusion came from other African American colleagues (Echols, 2006). With all of the gender and ethnic challenges that African American women principals confronted on a daily basis, many resorted to a practice known as “switching,” purposefully changing the manner in which they communicated (Echols, 2006, p. 8). According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003, p. 8), “African American women shift more than any historically suppressed race to ensure their survival.” In essence, these women felt the need to hide who they really were to appease others. They shifted to accommodate their difference. The practice of shifting included “changes of one’s hair, minimizing social distance, use of the English language, the use of facial expressions, and how one thought and communicated” (Echols, 2006, p.113).
Age and Leadership

Since the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1979, many studies have been devoted to discrimination based on a person’s age. However, many of these studies focused on older individuals. Younger workers were not widely targeted as a minority for a study within the field of age discrimination (Harrington, 1991).

As demands on school leaders increased and the population of school leaders became younger, some researchers contended “the preparation programs of today are not yet up to the task of equipping these leaders for the challenges of the 21st century” (Hale & Moorman, 2003, p. 19). To address this concern, Montgomery County, Maryland implemented an intensive principal training program that is considered by some as one of the nation’s best. Trainees completed a 2-year assistant principal development program and worked under a veteran principal before being able to apply for a principalship position (Vise, 2007).

New York has also seen a transformation in its school leadership population. More than half of the principals in the New York City public school system left their jobs between 2000 and 2005, making way for an influx of younger newcomers, some in their 20s and 30s with impressive credentials but limited teaching experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). According to the Department of Education, in October 2000, there were more principals over the age of 60 years than principals under the age of 41 years, and no principals under the age of 31 years were reported. However, as of 2005, there were 274 principals who were under the age of 41 years, more than four times as many as those over the age of 60 years. Furthermore, 24 principals were identified who had not yet turned 31 years of age.

According to Allis (2009), the trend of hiring younger school leaders was occurring in Boston as well. Kelly Hung, at age 33, was the 10th youngest of 135 principals in the Boston
public schools. As aging principals retire, young principals like Hung, who had only a few years experience as a classroom teacher and a brief tenure as an interim principal, were being hired to replace those retiring (Allis, 2009). These leaders, while they bring vitality and fresh ideas, also have had to overcome the challenges that their limited experience brought.

Collins (2000) asserted that there was a “lack of institutional memory existing among many young African American principals” (p. 223). Many of these principals failed to understand the struggles it took to promote social and racial change in the education profession. Collins further believed that this lack of institutional memory left an increasing number of younger African American women educators “unprepared politically to recognize and deal with new forms of racism, sexism, and other kinds of oppression” (p. 223). Consequently, many African American women principals felt a “sense of alienation from the experiences of the civil rights struggle as well as feelings of frustration, incompetence, and despair about their inability to promote meaningful change in contemporary schools” (p. 223).

Research on young African American female principals (defined here as 35 years old and younger) is virtually nonexistent; but as women achieve the principalship at a younger age, it will be helpful to gain an understanding of pathways to leadership that have proven successful. Moreover, due to the dearth of research available, simply understanding how young African American women experience the principalship will add knowledge to the field. Not only have African American women principals had challenges in regard to gender and race, the women in the study reported here have also encountered age intersections. According to Wood (2006), the role strain placed upon young, new principals was an issue that needed to be explored.

As more administrators encounter the principalship at a younger age, it is helpful to gain an understanding of what this population of leaders needs in order to be successful. (p. 5)
Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study explored the experiences of young African American female principals. Personal stories were gained through interviews and a better understanding of the way young African American women leaders emerged. This study highlighted the experiences of African American women principals in Virginia who were 35 years old or younger. Due to the lack of research about African American female principals, and specifically young African American female principals, this research attempted to give voice to these women. The “little research that we do have on African American women tells us that, though they struggle for visibility, their experiences with family, culture and spiritual backgrounds influence who they are as leaders” (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 459).

Examining the reflections and experiences of these young women proved to be informative, given their unique social realities. This study gave voice to young women in the field who shared strategies of success for those who will follow. As more female administrators encounter the principalship at a young age, it is imperative that there is an understanding of what skills they will need to possess to be successful in the position. This study can provide insight to future young African American female principals entering the world of educational administration.

I hope that through this research there will be an increasing body of literature on young African American women in educational administration. In addition, I hope that future African American women researchers will conduct research within their communities, using narrative storytelling. This research has implications for the following audiences: college-bound students interested in school administration, university professors and school divisions interested in ways to support and provide professional development to these young leaders, feminist researchers,
those interested in studying leadership theory and research, and aspiring and practicing principals interested in how African American principals support school improvement. In addition, the results of this study may help to prepare young African American female principals for “entry into the real world of administration” (Wood, 2006, p. 5).

In order to capture the lived experiences of young African American women principals, a qualitative study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. How do young African American women experience the principalship?
2. What are the pathways to the principalship for young African American women?
3. What are the barriers that young African American women experience and what are their strategies for success?

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 establishes the background for this research. It includes the statement of the problem, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 includes the review of literature. Also, included in Chapter 2 are the methodology and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 describes the research design, sample, pilot study, and researcher’s perspective. Chapter 4 describes the how these women lead. Chapter 5 discusses Race, Gender and Age Complexities. Chapter 6 discusses the support systems that they use. Chapter 7 concludes with discussion and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the literature relevant to this study. The literature review begins with a discussion about the principal shortage in education and how it is leading to young principals replacing the baby boomer generation. This is followed by a review of literature that describes the plight of women in education, African American women in educational administration, and concludes with age and the principalship. The literature review concludes with the theoretical perspective that was used to support this research, Black feminist standpoint theory. By using Black feminist standpoint theory, the experiences of the African American principals in this study are better understood by both the research scholar and the general reader. Knowing how these women principals saw themselves and their work through standpoint theory will help readers understand and comprehend why the young African American principals have behaved, responded, and acted the way they do in specific situations.

Principal Shortages

An aging workforce across the United States indicates that over the next 10 years, many principals of the baby boomer generation will retire from leadership positions in schools. Younger, aspiring principals will step into the shoes of retiring baby boomer principals. It is imperative that young principals be provided assistance as they prepare to take on these leadership positions.
Conservative estimates suggested that roughly 40% of principals will retire in the next several years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001; Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000), and that the number of principal positions needing to be filled will grow 20% in the next 10 years (Mitgang, 2003). This shortage is not only an issue of retirement, but also involves retaining highly qualified principals. It has become problematic. The revolving door of the principalship has been fueled by pressure and demands that make the job nearly untenable. Fink and Brayman (2006) speculated principals were frustrated because many felt that they were stripped of autonomy, which produced an increasingly rapid turnover of school leaders and an insufficient pool of capable, qualified, and prepared replacements.

According to Whitaker (2001), 40% of superintendents felt that their districts were facing a shortage, although 61% of urban superintendents reported an insufficient supply of principal candidates. Several states have collected data focusing on principal shortages. A study conducted in Utah found that about half of the superintendents surveyed documented principal shortages at all levels (Galvin & Sperry, 1996). In Colorado, a study reported that between 75% and 90% of the state’s public school superintendents indicated a moderate to severe shortage of principal candidates (Hirsch & Groff, 2002). Urban school districts, such as New York and Los Angeles, had a more difficult time hiring principals (Ferradino & Tirozzi, 2000). In fact, the New York Times reported that 163 New York schools began the 2000 school year with a substitute principal. In Kentucky and Texas, applicant pools were dwindling at an alarming rate for principalships (Whitaker, 2001).

According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals, there was a 50% turnover during the 1990s, and it was predicted that another 40% would turnover in the next several years (Kurtz, 2000). In Minnesota, approximately 75% of principals would be lost due to
retirement or attrition, while school enrollments continued to soar. Eighty-six percent of superintendents in Minnesota reported that filling these principal positions was “difficult” or “very difficult” (Sheldon & Munnich, 1999, p. 15).

While retirement was one of the major causes for principal shortages, there were others. Frequently cited was the role change that many principals faced (Whitaker, 2001). A California report on principal shortages stated that “stress levels are greater, work days and work years are longer, and the public expectations are higher” (Sandham, 2001, p. 25). Principals spent countless hours dealing with parent issues, discipline, community relations, facility management, and teacher evaluations (Whitaker, 2001).

A study by the National Council of State Legislatures documented the view of superintendents regarding the role changes faced by principals within the past 5 years (Hirsch & Groff, 2002). The superintendents (83.7%) attributed these role changes to the increased focus of state policymakers on standards and accountability for schools. In this same study, principal respondents verified that more testing, accreditation issues and focus on increased student achievement changed the role of school leadership. In a survey conducted by Public Agenda (Whitaker, 2001), 34% of principals agreed that higher standards and accountability would encourage more talented and committed leaders to stay in the position, while 44% felt that most committed leaders would leave because of unreasonable demands.

Although principal shortages have been discussed for many years, recent changes in the economy and accompanying job losses, suggested principal shortages were less common in 2011.

The History of Women in Education and Educational Leadership: Past and Present

Women have faced challenges in the field of education in attaining equal status.
While the glass ceiling has been broken in regards to access to educational leadership, females still face gender related prejudices and challenges in daily practice. . . . These women are often caught in a dichotomy between their gender and expectations of leadership. (Burkman, 2010, p. 70)

From 1890 through 1954 most leaders in education were male, White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Women began to obtain administrative positions from 1900 through the 1930s; however, most were on the elementary level. Even as women progressed in the field of education, they were paid less to perform the same duties as their male counterparts (Hyndman, 2009). In a study done in 1905, where 467 city school systems were studied, the average male elementary principal was paid $1,542 a year, while his female counterpart earned $970 (Hyndman, 2009). “By 1930, ten states had equal pay laws, but the laws were often ignored” (p. 110).

In the 1950s, there was a movement toward consolidation of one-room schools. “Women began moving from small rural schools or one-room school houses into larger organizational structures. . . .” (Hyndman, 2009, p. 115). In a 1950 study done by the National Council of Administrative Women in Education, “women dominated elementary principalships, yet only 10 years later that number had dropped to 4%” (p. 110). It was not until the passing of the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, that employers were prevented from discriminating against employees based on race, color, religion, gender, and national origin (Hyndman, 2009). With the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “women were then able to file grievances for gender-based job discrimination” (p. 112).

Despite all of the headway that women have made in the field of education, challenges still exist, particularly for those women who aspire to leadership positions within the field.
Women who have been interested in educational leadership positions in the 21st century have found themselves in a challenging situation, “...although they are the majority gender entering educational leadership preparatory programs” (Burkman, 2010, p. 75). Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) presented “evidence that consultants historically did not select women for superintendency positions (p. 75). So, as women educational leaders in K-12 attempted to attain superintendent positions, they have been faced with the following challenges:

1. The ratio of male vs. female applicants is still disproportionate.
2. Women are more satisfied holding highly visible, responsible administrative positions.
3. Women rarely have secondary leadership experience.
4. Men typically have more superintendency experience.
5. Few consultants search for women applicants.
6. Women lack an interest in the superintendency due to an avoidance of failure.
7. Boards perceive women as weak. (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 75)

Due to the stereotypes that existed regarding the way that women led, women were sometimes denied opportunities in educational leadership. Women were often seen as nurturing and concerned with human relationships, and this was considered a sign of weak leadership. “It has been suggested by some that this imbalance illustrates a perceived lack of women’s competence for leadership roles within schools” (Grogan, 2005, p. 25).

Recent data indicated that women compromised 51% of the general population in education: 52% were elementary principals, 83% were teachers on the elementary level, 57% were central office administrators, and 33% assistant/associate/deputy/area/superintendancies (Grogan, 2005). Although women still faced challenges in attaining leadership positions, they
were making significant strides. “They are finding their own ways to lead educational systems, and to manage all the unpredictable circumstances they are faced with in these turbulent times. . . .” (Grogan, 2005, p. 29).

**African American Women in School Leadership and Challenges**

With the passing of the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employment opportunities afforded women of color an opportunity to gain employment in white-collar professions and government jobs, and with the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, gender discrimination in any education program or activity was considered illegal. This helped to open doors for women of color to move up to the ranks of school leadership (Mertz, 2003).

Although there is a lack of voice in educational leadership for women, it has been greater among African American women. “Perspectives on African-American women’s advancement to and experiences within the principalship are sparse and sporadic in the education scholarship” (Loder, 2005, p. 243). In fact, there are virtually no statistics kept on African Americans in education administration (Doughty, 1980). The “number of women in leadership becomes dismal when considering both gender and ethnicity” (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 457). Because there were so few African American women in educational administration, there has been little research about their aspirations and the obstacles they faced as they pursued their goals (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1996).

Extensive searches of both qualitative and quantitative research on Black women principals in education produced limited results. The research that did exist on African American women in leadership and management was “situated within larger gender research on
women in corporate, public, and educational administrative studies” (Anzaldua, 1990; Lather, 1991; Marshall, 1989).

Similarly, Shakeshaft (1979) found that when assessing research on leadership and effectiveness of women, the male model was all that existed. She stated, “Beyond the fact that the male model is the norm in dissertations, women are not investigated as populations but as topics of study, much as someone would research whales or hurricanes” (p. 217). In fact, the current research on Black women versus White women in educational administration was considered a topic subsumed under the larger population of women’s studies (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). Furthermore, Shakeshaft (1979) continued by denouncing the lack of inclusion of women’s perspectives in educational research:

Rather than looking at the research on women in the problem area, research on women in general is often cited, giving a conceptual frame of reference but no understanding of the problem. This practice both illustrates our confusion on the subject of women and reinforces the idea that men are a population and women are a deviant subject.

(p. 217-218)

Despite the obstacles that these women have faced, the field of education has continued to be one among a few careers that afforded African American women an opportunity to advance into leadership, although barriers to their advancement continued to persist (Shakeshaft, 1999).

Trends indicated that the perception was that African Americans could only lead in schools that were predominantly Black, and White administrators were able to lead in schools that were more diverse (McCray et al., 2007). Once in such schools, minority principals were then expected to solve the problems that might have existed within these schools. Too often,
these leaders were defined as “ethnic experts and treated as an expendable resource, valued only during a crisis” (Dardaine-Ragguet, Russo & Harris, 1994, p. 298).

Age and the Principalship

The challenges that have been placed upon young African American female principals have yet to be explored. In fact, there is very little research on how being young affects young principals who are still developing. This does not contradict the fact that across the United States the profession of educational leadership, and in particular the principalship, “sits on the cusp of a significant workforce transformation” (Morgan & Hawkins, 2004, p. 7). An aging workforce indicates that over the next 10 years many of the baby boomers will retire from leadership positions in schools. As baby boomers retire, younger educators will take on these leadership roles. “The challenges facing these young educators are unparalleled” (Rooney, 2008, p. 84). These challenges include “high-stakes testing, student achievement, implementing complex special education policies, providing for diverse student populations, and dealing with parents who have misgivings about public education” (Rooney, 2008, p. 84).

As administrators are achieving the principalship position at a younger age, it is crucial that there is an understanding of the skills and talents they will need to be successful in their positions. While research on young African American female principals age 35 years old and under has been nonexistent, a new perspective can be gained by examining how these women lead, especially considering the fact that these women already have faced challenges as women and as minorities.

This workforce transformation exists in many professional fields across America. “The U.S. Department of Labor shows a continuing escalation of employees, age 20 to 34 years, in managerial positions” (McDermott, 2001, para. 1). These groups of young managers often have
been referred to as New Young Managers (NYMs). Their rise to top managerial positions has been “occurring fast and in large numbers” (para. 5). “Dun and Bradstreet report that roughly 15% of managers in their 20s and 30s hold top positions as CEOs, presidents, and business owners” (para. 5). NYMs typically face a “complex assimilation process and share baseline learning needs that smart organizations work hard to address” (para. 8). NYMs were often referred to as Generation Xers. They were often characterized by their “ambition, impatience, flexibility, independence, creativity, and techno-literacy—having grown up in the technological revolution” (para. 6).

Another “obstacle that NYMs have to face is generational diversity” (McDermott, 2001, para. 15). Multigenerational mixing and teaming in the workplace has led to conflict (McDermott, 2001). NYMs have had “less time and experience in the workplace which requires skills that include: building relationships, fostering collaboration, and handling organizational dynamics and politics” (McDermott, 2001). Due to these perceived deficiencies, there have been critics of these young managers. Age-related skepticisms have been a challenge for these new leaders. These same criticisms and skepticisms have continued to exist in educational administration as well.

In fact, some said the “bad news is that a radically new generation of school leadership is needed and the preparations programs of today are not yet up to the task of equipping these leaders for the challenges of the 21st century” (Hale & Moorman, 2003, p. 19). To address this concern in Montgomery County, Maryland, the school division established an intensive principal training program to prepare young principals for the challenges that they might face; in fact, it was considered one of the nation’s best. Trainees completed a 2-year assistant principal development program, working under a seasoned principal, before being able to apply for a
principalship position (Vise, 2007). For the duration of the training period, the young future principals met regularly with a team of administrators who served as coaches and evaluators.

Many of these aspiring administrators (90%) were homegrown. This program was instituted by the current school superintendent, Jerry D. Weast. Through this program there were dozens of new principals, some comparatively younger than the staff in their schools. Out of the 27 principals who started in the fall of 2007, all were in their 30s; whereas, the average age of a teacher in the county was 42 years. These administrators were regarded as “smart, energetic, and skilled in dealing with parental concerns” (Vise, 2007).

Many cited pressures from the job regarding student performance that caused some long-time principals to give up in frustration, as well as a wave of baby boomer retirements. In fact, New York has started a City Leadership Academy. Its purpose is to train new principals. Many of these principals, after leaving the academy, are gravitating towards small schools. These schools start with an enrollment of about 100 and ultimately grow to about 500 students; these schools tend to be more manageable than the city’s majority schools that typically have over 3,000 students.

In order to take a more in-depth look at the challenges that young African American female principals face, Black feminist theory was selected. It allows the lives of these women to be examined in multiple contexts as it relates to race and gender inequities. Black feminist perspective has recognized the challenges that these women have faced and has promoted “empowerment through voice, visibility, and self-definition” (Collins, 2000, p.223).

**African American Feminist Perspective**

“The suppression of ideas of African American women in research and epistemological knowledge construction remains a force that undermines the economic, political, and social
revitalization within the Black woman’s world” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 341). That is why a feminist perspective was needed to address the “nature of oppression based on race, class, and gender” (Bloom & Erlandson, p. 341).

An additional challenge involved the “paucity of teaching or administrative preparation specific to the urban setting” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 343). Their unique perspectives could only be presented by Black feminists because such research involved the recording of personal narratives, in addition to the later analysis of data. Because the personal narratives cited family, church, support groups, and even the Black arts movement, dating as far back as the Harlem Renaissance, these women revealed a perspective far removed from that sought, gathered, and examined in the traditional academy. With honesty and vision, these women revealed the inherent restrictions of the educational institutions they sought to enter and reform, while at the same time admitted the internalized compartmentalization historically Black colleges and universities have placed, unwittingly or intentionally, upon students (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003).

Black feminist thought has highlighted the impact of race, politics, class, gender, and economics. It has emphasized “exploring the lives of Black women in multiple contexts that conceivably impact leadership development” (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007, p. 127). There were two relevant themes in Black feminist thought which had to be addressed. The first recognized the importance of nonacademic institutions that serve to support and uplift the individual seeking change. Secondly, Black feminist thought has recognized the alienation of the Black woman in academic life, as well as in the broader social, political, and economic context. The two cannot be separated, for it is through the nurturing of family, church, and friendships that Black women
have gained the strength to challenge the institutions which have long denied them access, and once breached, have continued to restrict access from within.

Drawing strength from the community has allowed the individual to move forward, and this in turn has strengthened the community. The cycle has continued as the next generation of students has been nurtured by these same women who were shaped by their experiences both outside and inside the institution. My justification for such an approach was based, once again, upon the personal narratives of Black women who have achieved as minorities inside a majority institution (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Williams and Evans-Winters (2005), of all the Black feminists that I have read, most clearly articulated the struggle against the oppression of Black women within the academic institution. The personal narrative was used with great and moving intensity as it addressed the institutionalized racism that has continued to exist. The Evans-Winters’ accounts, dating from her childhood in a Black segregated elementary school through her career as a professor in a White majority institution, revealed the real, true, and human dimension of the “political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice” (p. 203). Furthermore, the gulf evident in the post-Civil Rights generation of Americans, both Black and White, was recognized as a further hurdle for Black feminists and the movement in general (Williams & Evan-Winters, 2005). The ongoing nature of Black feminism was recognized because the struggle has not been fully achieved. Within the institution, Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) offered a new model for training, mentoring, and evaluating Black women while defining success in the academic context. Because their experiences have been so vastly different from that of the majority student and professor, such a shift in mentality has been necessary. This enhanced sensitivity
has been necessary to promote identity and affirmation of life experiences for the next generation of Black female leaders (Williams & Evan-Winters, 2005).

**Standpoint Theory**

One framework for understanding Black feminist thought is standpoint theory. “Standpoint theory focuses on the production of knowledge that is emancipatory, anti-oppressive, nonhierarchical, negotiated, and politically focused. It uses languages and stories to produce alternative realities” (Bloom & Erlandson, p. 342). Yonezawa (2000) explains that “standpoint theory proposes that people gain knowledge through their positions or social locations (p. 111).

Yonezawa went on to discuss positionality, which means to explain how people’s positions in “larger social structure” influenced their awareness of and their interpretation of events (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 341). Consequently, “Black women viewed the world from unique perspectives based on their social positions, or positionality within the confines of the larger social structures of race and gender” (Collins, 2000, p. 85).

Hill-Collins (2000) argues “because of their position within the intersecting of hierarchies of race, gender, and class, black women as a group possess a unique angle of vision on the social world” (p. 269). Standpoint theory allows others to see the struggles and challenges that African American women have faced day-to-day.

In fact, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) asserted “standpoint epistemology and cultural studies models created new ethical and epistemological criteria for evaluating research” (p. 81). These perspectives in qualitative inquiry helped to develop criteria of evaluation based on ethics of caring, personal responsibility, and open dialogue . . . .” There are four assumptions of Black feminist standpoint epistemology. The first is that the content of thought cannot be
separated from the historical and material conditions that shape the lives it produces. The second assumption is that Black women will share certain commonalities. The third assumption is that there are diversities among Black women that are based on class, religion, age, and sexual orientation. Lastly, the assumption is that although a Black feminist standpoint theory might exist, all Black women may not recognize or accept its premise. (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 342)

By using Black feminist standpoint theory for this research, the experiences of the African American principals in this study have been better understood. Knowing how these women principals have seen themselves and their work through the lens of standpoint theory will help readers to understand and comprehend why these principals behaved, responded, and acted the way they did in specific situations. Sharing their stories “can inform and enlighten our current theoretical formulations about what it feels like to be an invisible change agent who works on the inside at an imaginary school, with only illusionary career opportunities for the future” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 347).
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the design and rationale for this study. Over the phone interviews coupled with focus groups provided the most detailed opportunities for gathering information, which is both personal and statistical. Also included is a description of the population, description of the survey instrument, procedure, and data analysis.

Design

Qualitative research has been founded on questions that “involve human consciousness and subjectivity, and values humans and their experiences in the research process” (Palmer, 1993, p. 62). According to Creswell (1998):

Qualitative research is approached with a paradigm, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions to guide the studies. People perceive the world from different perspectives; therefore, reality is relative to each individual. Consequently, multiple constructions of reality can be possible. (p. 20)

In qualitative research, the interview has probably been the most widely employed method. According to Palmer (1993), “The interview, that favorite tool of social data gatherers, is meant to be an ‘inter-view’ a way looking into other people’s behaviors and attitudes that opens our own lives to view” (p. 62). It seeks to describe and identify central themes in the life world of the subjects (Kvale, 1996). It is useful in getting the story behind a participant’s life experiences (McNamara, 1999). Interviews are completed by the interviewer, and based on what the
respondent says, the interviews tend to be a far more personal form of research in that the interviewer has worked directly with the respondent. Unlike the survey format, the interviewer has had an opportunity to explore or ask follow-up questions (Kvale, 1999). Qualitative research has varied a great deal in the approach taken by the interviewer. A semistructured interview approach occurs when the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide. Although a guide existed, the interviewee still had a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions that were not included in the guide could be asked as the interviewee picked up on things said during the interview that were pertinent to the study’s purpose (McNamara, 1999).

In order to capture the lived experiences of these women, a qualitative study was conducted and involved in-depth, over the phone personal interviews, semistructured in nature, as well as a five of the women participated in two focus groups. Of the 14 African American female principals in Virginia who were 35 years old and younger in 2010, nine were interviewed. The principals selected were from urban, suburban, and rural school divisions. This study shed light on the unique opportunities, constraints, and challenges that these participants have been confronted with on a daily basis as principals.

According to Patton (2002):

there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Researchers goals differ from study to study; thus one aims for the broadest possible sample. The sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what will be useful and what will have credibility. (p. 20)
Patton (2002) also indicated, “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 20).

Borg and Gall’s (2006) statement about small sample size in studies using in-depth interviews supported this concept. In many educational research projects, small samples were more appropriate than large samples. This was often true of studies in which role playing, depth interviews, projective measures, and other such time-consuming measurement techniques were employed. A study that probed deeply into the characteristics of a small sample often provided more knowledge than a study that attacked the same problem by collecting only shallow information on a large sample. (Borg & Gall, 2006, p. 111)

Consequently, the design of the study used naturalistic inquiry methodology. This has been a means of “increasing knowledge by using narrative storytelling to design explanatory and exploratory questions about the subject’s social setting” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 334). The belief among naturalistic inquirers has been that the people create within their own personal experiences. This type of inquiry has been used to help understand human experience and to interpret the perceived realities of the research participants. Harrison (1995) used this methodology to reduce the invisibility and silences of women of color in the world by concluding, in the process of redefining educational administration’s critical project and of reconstituting education authority, we must offset the persistent pattern of relegating the work of women—and that of women of color in particular—to the discipline’s periphery. (p. 242)
A qualitative study was conducted and involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews, semistructured in nature, over the phone interviews, as well as two focus groups. A total of nine African American female principals, 35 years and younger, were interviewed with the exception of one who had recently turned 36 years at the time the interview was conducted.

“The lack of women’s voices in literature on educational leadership, particularly those of young minority women”, drove the researcher to collect personal stories on the experiences of these women using qualitative research (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008, p. 1). In order to capture the lived experiences of young African American women principals, a qualitative study was determined to be necessary. Such a study would allow the researcher to explore both the women’s actual experiences and later follow up with analysis of their responses. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do young African American women experience the principalship?
2. What are the pathways to the principalship for young African American women?
3. What are the barriers that young African American women experience and what are their strategies for success?

Sample

On November 7, 2011, I contacted the Assistant Superintendent for Teacher Education and Licensure at the Virginia Department of Education via email. In my written request to her, I asked her to provide me with a listing of African American female principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia who were 35 years old and younger. These data were sent to me on November 10, 2011. These data were for the 2010-2011 school year. Based principally upon the 2010-2011 school year data, there were 14 female principals that matched the requested criteria as compared to 25 White female principals who matched the same criteria. After
conducting a pilot study with three of these women, 11 women (one of whom is presently over
the target age of 35) were contacted to set up the interviews and focus groups. Two of the
women were no longer in their principalship positions based on the 2010-2011 school year data.
Therefore, nine women were interviewed for this study. In addition, each participant was given a
verbal and written description of the study.

Nine African-American female principals, after they gave consent, were interviewed via
a phone conference. They each chose to be interviewed over the phone due to time constraints.
Each participant was identified in the research by a pseudonym. Each participant was given the
consent form, time to read and ask questions regarding their rights as volunteers in this study,
and was asked to sign and return the consent to the researcher. The focus-group interviews were
audio recorded so they could be transcribed verbatim. Each participant was informed that she
would not be identified in a way that could be linked back to her. At the end of the research, all
audio recordings will be destroyed and transcriptions did not contain personal identifiers.

Researcher Perspective

I am very excited about this research; this is a topic that is near and dear to my heart. I
became a principal at 30 years old. Due to my personal interest, I wanted to explore how these
women deal with challenges that relate to age, gender, and race. Were their backgrounds similar
to mine? Were their experiences like mine?

In 2004, I decided to pursue my doctoral studies. During that summer, I was accepted
into a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. I remember my first class in the program.
The professor went around the room and wanted to know what everyone’s occupation was. To
my surprise, almost everyone was a principal except for me. So, when he got to me, I said, “I am
an English teacher; I have been teaching for 8 years.” It was at that moment that I said, “I can do
what they do.” For the first time, I envisioned myself leading a school and effecting change from the other side. After that first class meeting, I set up an appointment with a local school division. At that meeting I expressed to him my desire to become a principal. To this day I still remember what he said to me, “Get in line, Tanya, so does everyone else.” His response was both shocking and upsetting. But I made up my mind that a principalship position was what I wanted. I immediately began inquiring in neighboring school divisions for administrative positions. One day I received a call from a good friend telling me that a school division approximately 45 minutes from my home was looking for African American administrators. So, I applied for an administrative intern position and received the position. I was 29 years old.

An administrative intern was a training position to prepare aspiring assistant principals to receive on the job training. Most school divisions will give interns administrative positions if there are any vacancies, and if the intern has done a great job. When I was first introduced to the staff by the principal, I could tell that by some teachers’ standards I was “young.” Soon, I would also find out that I was the first African American administrator to work in the building. When I found this out I was filled with anxiety. In addition to my being young, the teachers had never had an African American administrator. I asked myself, “How will they treat me? What will be the reaction from parents? Will they respect me?”

To my surprise the teachers were welcoming. However, as in most schools, I had a small group of teachers who were naysayers and thought that I was “too young” to be able to give them instructional suggestions or advice. To get the staff to acknowledge and accept my leadership, I spent a great deal of time discussing my own 8 years of experience as a classroom teacher. When giving faculty advice or suggestions for improvement, I would always say, “Well this is
what worked for me when I taught.” Gradually, after a few months, I felt completely at home in the school.

After being an intern for a year, I felt that I was ready to become an assistant principal. However, when I turned 30 years old, I received my first principalship. I was extremely nervous because my route to the principalship was quick. When I applied for this position, I never could have imagined the school board would hire me with just one year of experience. My only experience was that of an administrative intern on the elementary level for 1 year. This position was a middle school in a rural school division. Not only had I never worked in a rural setting, but I also had a larger challenge. This school had never met state standards. I knew upfront that my number one priority was to ensure that in the upcoming school year, the school would be fully accredited by the Virginia State Department of Education.

At my first meeting with the staff, I could see in their eyes that they thought I was really young. The stares and whispers let me know they were concerned. Their reactions let me know that I was in for a challenge. While some teachers congratulated me on reaching such a milestone at such a young age, there were others who were critical. I cried a lot my first year. I made lots of mistakes, and had to learn the job as I went along. Sometimes, I felt that some of the male teachers talked to me in a condescending manner, as if to say, “You don’t know anything.”

When the test scores came in over the summer, although the scores had grown, the school was still 2% shy of meeting state standards. Initially, I felt that I had failed, but it was that feeling which evoked a spirit inside of me that said, “Next year we will pass.” In fact, we did! After 2 years, the school became fully accredited by the state for the first time. It was at that
point that I knew that I had gained the respect and admiration of the faculty and staff. It felt good.

Now, I was ready for another journey. The 30-minute commute was starting to become too much. I now had some experience under my belt, and I would be able to talk in an interview about how I turned around a low-performing school. As I began looking for positions, I noticed that there were several openings in a neighboring urban school division. I applied, and once again to my surprise, I was given the job. When the HR director contacted me, I almost passed out when he told me that it was a high school principalship.

Being a principal on the high school level has been extremely rewarding and challenging at the same time. First, I had to let the students know that although I was young, I was focused on educational excellence and discipline. That quickly earned me respect among the teachers. They could see that I was not only an instructional leader, but also a disciplinarian who maintained a school that was both orderly and conducive to learning.

One day I was looking through previous years’ yearbooks, and was stunned to find out that I was the first African American female principal in the school’s history. This was shocking to me. The school was built in 1928 and was historically a White school. However, after integration, and “White Flight” in the 1970s, the school became almost 95% African American. So, it was a surprise to me that although the school had been predominantly African American for more than 30 years, no Black woman had ever been principal there. I felt honored and humbled at the same time.

While I did not feel that age, gender, or race had stopped me from obtaining administrative positions, they did present some challenges. Throughout my 5 years in educational administration, I had heard comments such as, “You are so young,” “Are you really
the principal?” and “How old were you when you started out?” These comments bothered and continue to bother me. While I felt that I had personally experienced more negativity for being a young administrator than for being an African American, I wondered if this was due to my working in a predominantly African American school division. I was curious to see if young African American female principals who work in predominately White school divisions experienced more racism. That is why I was interested in seeing if other young African American female principals had similar experiences. This is how the topic for my dissertation was born.

**Procedure**

These interviews were conducted over the telephone after each had signed the consent form. Each participant was scheduled a time that was suitable for her. During our conversation, I explained the purpose of the interview, why the participants were selected, and the expected duration of the interview. I discussed with the interviewee how her name would be changed in the research to protect her identity. I also discussed the use of a tape recorder during the interview. Once the interviewee had consented, the interview was conducted.

For this process, I selected McCracken’s (1988) long interview method. The long interview was formulated by McCracken as an ethnographic-type qualitative method of research inquiry. “It allows the researcher to participate with the respondents with the smallest amount of intrusion in the least amount of time” (p.9). McCracken argued that the long interview method “is one of the most powerful methods in qualitative armory” (p. 9). It permits the researcher to venture into the minds of the participants by allowing the researcher to see the world as it is perceived by the individuals in the study.
The long interview consists of structured and unstructured dialogue. There are four stages to the long interview process: “a. review of analytic categories and interview design, b. review of cultural categories and interview design, c. interview procedure and the discovery of cultural categories, and d. interview analysis and the discovery of analytical categories” (McCracken, 1988, p. 29).

The first step in McCracken’s (1988) long interview process begins with an “exhaustive review of literature” (p. 29). He states that the literature review is not a simple exercise in data collection. “It is a critical undertaking in which the investigator exercises a constant skepticism” (p. 29). In addition, a good literature review is critical to the formulation and construction of the interview questions (McCracken, 1988).

My literature review consisted of manual and electronic searches on ERIC Index to Education Materials including ERIC via EBSCO, ERIC via ed.gov, ERIC via CSA, ERIC via FirstSearch, PsycLit, LexisNexis Academic, ProQuest, Dissertations and Theses Full Text to identify preliminary sources which help facilitate the location of primary and secondary sources (i.e., journals, books) pertinent to the study. I used descriptors such as women in educational leadership, young female managers, African American women in educational leadership, age and principalship, race and principalship, and gender and principalship. In addition, I used secondary sources that included books, as well as numerous journals articles from Educational Leadership and Educational Management Administration and Leadership; and multiple online search engines, such as Google.com. I found that research on young African American women principals was limited. An extensive search of qualitative and quantitative research on Black women principals, with no specificity to age, produced limited results. I collected my data beginning in February 2010 through the end of June 2010.
The second step in McCracken’s (1988) long interview process involves self-examination.

The object of this step is to give the investigator a more detailed and systematic appreciation of his/her personal experience with the topic of interest. It calls for the minute examination of this experience. The investigator must inventory and examine the associations, incidents, and assumptions that surround the topic in his/her mind. (p. 32)

According to McCracken, in order for a researcher to become familiar with the culture under investigation, he/she must not bias the results. He/she must intensively scrutinize him/herself.

Because I am an African American female principal who is now 37 years old (but under 35 at the start of this research), in order to explore my cultural frame, I had to adhere to McCracken’s (1988) counsel by engaging in introspection. I spent time journaling about my personal feelings, reactions, beliefs, and biases.

The third step in McCracken’s (1988) long interview process involves developing questions for the interview. “These questions should consist of a set of biographical question followed by a series of question areas. Each of these questions should have a set of grand tour questions. Grand tour questions aim to explore the cultural categories under investigation” (McCracken, p. 37). Lastly McCracken stated that it is critical that there are questions that will allow the participant the opportunity and freedom to tell her own story.

My interview guide began with a set of preinterview questions regarding the participants’ backgrounds (see Appendix A). These were followed by questions divided into the following categories: family support, spirituality, and cultural background; leadership, race, gender, age; school community relations; and implications. The interview guide concluded with a general
question that allowed the participant the freedom to add any additional information to the interview.

The final step in McCracken’s (1988) long interview process is time consumption. This involves the analysis of data. “The object of analysis is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondents’ views of the world in general and the topic in particular” (p. 41). McCracken discourages taking notes during the course of the interview. Therefore, I made notes upon the completion of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. McCracken (1988) “believed that it was unwise for the researcher to transcribe recorded interviews, as this would have the potential of making the researcher both frustrated and too familiar with the data” (p. 41-42). Prior to receiving the typed transcriptions, the tapes were reviewed to develop summary memos and follow-up questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After receiving the typed transcriptions, they were reviewed to ensure accuracy of the audio-to-typed word for word transcription. A copy of the transcript was given to each interviewee within a week of the interview for confirmation and validation. If needed, follow-up interviews by phone took place with selected participants for member-checking purposes. Finally, McCracken (1988) stated that analyzing the recorded data was perhaps the most demanding step of the long interview process. He believed that data analyses were challenging and time consuming, yet critical.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I followed McCracken’s (1988) data analysis process and the interactive process of data analysis. Themes were identified from the transcriptions of the interviews (Erlandson et al., 1993). The data analysis followed both McCracken (1988), Creswell (2003), and Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) techniques of “unitizing data, creating and
deleting categories as the researcher reads and re-reads, developing descriptive sentences that will distinguish each category from the others, and starting over with each unit to refocus and refine” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 245).

Audio recordings were transcribed. These data were identified by initials, not names, and were locked in a cabinet. All personal identifying information was kept in password-protected files and these files were deleted. In addition, the transcriptionist, signed a confidentiality agreement, and was informed about the protocol as well as about the importance of confidentiality. All data were securely transferred back to the researcher using a secure electronic drop box. After the study ended, all transcripts and audio recordings will be destroyed.

To begin to analyze the data, words and phrases common to multiple sentences were highlighted and classified according to their similarities. Data were interpreted by identifying themes; themes were then grouped together into major categories. The research question and subcategories guided the development and naming of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, the researcher turned “interconnect themes” into a narrative (Creswell, 2003, p. 194). Lastly, the researcher made meaning of the data. Using the process of Erlandson et al. (1993), a Black feminist standpoint lens, this study highlighted the impact of Black women in a complex matrix of race and gender. A Black feminist standpoint provided the guiding theoretical perspective for this study, since it permitted “placing African American women’s ideas in the center of analysis in this study of leadership” (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007, p. 17). “Black feminist thought also has sought to explore of lives of Black women in multiple contexts as they related to leadership development and how they exercised leadership practices” (Collins, 2000, p. 342).
Credibility and Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that to ensure the credibility and dependability of a study a journal be maintained during the interview process. The journal documented the nonverbal cues, such as body expressions, gestures and tone of voice, as well as the surrounding environment. To further establish credibility, each participant was consulted to verify the transcript. Trustworthiness and dependability were achieved through securing credibility of the findings (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of member checking to ensure credibility.

There were many ways that member checking was effective. First, it provided an opportunity to understand and assess what the participants intended to do through their actions. Second, it gave participants an opportunity to correct errors and challenge what were perceived as wrong interpretations. Third, it provided an opportunity to volunteer additional information that might have been stimulated by the playing back process. Fourth, it provided an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings. Last, it allowed the participants an opportunity to determine the quality of data and preliminary results, as well as to confirm particular aspects of the data (Creswell, 1998).

Limitations

This study was limited to nine African American female principals, eight of whom were 35 years old and younger when achieving the principalship. Therefore, the study was limited to their perspectives and experiences. “It is possible that interviewees may not be willing to share all the information that is needed, or worse, may not always be truthful” (Wood, 2006, p. 25).

Subjectivity of the researcher is also a concern in qualitative research.
However, scholarly philosophers of science now typically doubt that possibility of anyone or any method being totally objective. Subjectivity is inevitable. . . . The point is to be aware of how personal perspective of the research affects the fieldwork, to carefully document all procedures so that others can review methods for bias, and to be open in describing the limitations of the perspective presented. (Wood, 2006, p. 25).

I hope that by having added a section entitled Researcher Perspective, I was open in describing my own thoughts and perspectives on this topic.

**Pilot Study**

In preparation for this research, a pilot study was performed. The experiences of three young female African American principals from a particular region were shared as a pilot to a larger study under way. They were interviewed in individual, face-to-face sessions using protocol that was semistructured in nature. Interviews lasted approximately 2 hours. The women’s ages ranged from 30 years to 35 years. Their years of experience as teachers ranged from 4 years to 7 years. Two of the women had served as assistant principals prior to gaining principalships, and one had served as a resource teacher prior to becoming a principal. Two women had gained their principalships after their first interviews, and one was appointed to her principalship without ever having actually applied and interviewed for the position. Two of the women were middle school principals, and one was an elementary school principal at the time of the study. Their school populations ranged from 300-1,000 students.

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how young African American women experience the principalship. In regard to how these women gained access to the principalship, it was clear that not one of them struggled to gain a position. All of them served
as teachers (from 4 to 7 years) prior to attaining a leadership position, and all of them served in an assistant leadership position (two as assistant principals and one as a resource/head teacher). Two of the principals interviewed only once for a principalship position and the other principal never actually had to apply and interview for her position. Rather, she was appointed. None of the women reported having problems in regard to their gender, ethnicity, or age with students, teachers, or the surrounding community. Two of the principals were fairly silent on the issue, and one felt that these three variables impacted her experience in a positive way. None of these women had trouble gaining principalship positions.

As I tried to understand how these women experienced the principalship through numerous questions and probes, several similarities became clear. They all relied on faith and spirituality to lead their decision-making processes; they all survived with the support of their extended families and husbands, and their leadership was purpose driven and focused on the needs of their students, teachers, and communities. They all described themselves as individuals with spiritual missions; leaders who exist to serve their stakeholders, nurturers and mothers; and participatory leaders who relied on collaboration. Gaining a sense of how these women felt about the task of leadership was less complicated than understanding how gender, ethnicity, and age impacted them. Because it was unclear how the women made sense of gender, ethnicity, and age as variables that affected who they were as leaders and how they led, I was unable to determine what barriers they encountered due to the intersections of these variables (or due to the variables individually). Thus, no strategies for overcoming them were shared.

**Discussion and Implications**

The findings indicate that further research on African American women leaders might explore in greater depth the influence of spirituality on these women and how faith might be
connected to resilience. It might also be helpful to study family structures that are particularly conducive to raising women leaders, as well as helping practicing women leaders maintain a balance between their home and work lives. One finding of particular interest was the fact that none of the women interviewed reported having problems with students, teachers, or the surrounding community due to their gender, ethnicity or age. This was entirely contradictory to the existing literature on women leaders and might be explained by the fact that the majority of these women had school populations that were reflective of their own ethnicity. Further research might question whether African American women leaders are more accepted in African American communities, and whether African American communities more readily attribute nurturing behaviors to women and are more accepting of women leaders.

While I was disappointed with the lack of voice these women were able to share with me in regard to how gender, ethnicity, and age have impacted their experiences as leaders, the findings of this pilot study helped me to refine my research questions and target other strategies for gaining stories of experiences from the rest of the women I interviewed. Black feminist theory, particularly Black feminist standpoint theory, allowed for stories that produced realities that were otherwise unknown to us. Because the purpose of this study was to understand how young African American women’s backgrounds and experiences influenced who they were as leaders, I had to work more diligently to realize my goal. I remained entrenched in the belief that Black feminist standpoint theory epistemology should be utilized to understand the experiences of young African American women principals. However, my interview protocol needed to be strengthened, and perhaps, conducted in a series of interviews that encouraged the women to let their lives unfold. This way we might understand how culture, history, and background experiences shaped their lives. I remained optimistic because, although these women shared
little as it related to gender, ethnicity and age, I still had nine other women to interview. I did in fact make changes to the interview guide based upon the results of the pilot study.
CHAPTER 4. HOW THEY LEAD: FAITH AND LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how young African American women principals experience the principalship. The nine women in this study shared their personal stories and struggles. These challenges shape the way that they lead; they experience both racialized and gendered role expectations while also encountering stereotypical thinking regarding young people. This study examined their divergent reflections and experiences. This chapter presents the leadership approaches that these women use within their day-to-day work as principals while it also discusses the role that faith and prayer play in their lives. Before discussing themes that emerged, I want to provide background information on each of the participants.

This study included nine participants: eight of the African American female principals were 35 years old or younger at the time of the interview, and one was 36 years old. These women, Nina, Jackie, Amy, Susan, Tara, Claire, Hope, Rose, and April (all pseudonyms), are described biographically below.

Nina. Nina has been in the field of education for 15 years, and became a principal at age 29. She spent 5 years as a teacher, and has been an administrator for the last 10 years. Nina grew up in the Midwest and attended inner city schools. She was raised by her grandmother, who was a school teacher, in a single-parent home. She described herself as a third-generation college graduate who grew up in a lower middle-class environment. Nina credits her
grandmother as being her greatest source of strength and her biggest cheerleader. When asked whom she drew on for support, her response was, “My husband, my grandmother, and my mentor are my pillars of strength and support. I am a very spiritual person who allows my beliefs to hold me to my convictions of doing what is right for kids.”

Nina’s quest to become a principal began when she had a brief internship at the U.S. Department of Education. There Nina met her first principal. It was at this point that she knew she wanted to become a principal. She started her career as a teacher, and later she became an assistant principal. When she interviewed for her first principalship position, she was told she was their top choice and was hired. Nina has a Bachelor’s in Secondary Education, a Master's in Education, and is pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership.

Jackie. Jackie became a principal at age 30. She grew up in the South in a middle-class neighborhood in the suburbs, which she describes as being a “tight-knit community.” Jackie attended a historically Black college (HBCU) on a presidential scholarship. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master’s degree. Prior to becoming a principal, she served as a tutor, a testing coordinator at a local community college, a middle school English teacher for 3 years, and an assistant principal on the secondary level. When asked why she became a principal, Jackie said this, “I became a principal because I felt that I had acquired great skills as an assistant principal under the former principal, and I was ready to go to the next level.” She has served as a secondary principal for the past 4 years.

Claire. Claire became a principal at age 29. She grew up in a two-parent household in a rural town in the South. Claire has a Bachelor’s, a Master’s, and a Doctoral degree. Prior to becoming a principal, Claire was an exceptional education teacher. When asked why she became a principal, her response was, “I wanted to make a difference in the lives of kids, not just
in the classroom. I saw so many needs in the entire student body.” Thus, she began her administrative career as an elementary assistant principal. She later moved into a high school principalship position, but currently serves as an elementary principal.

Amy. Amy, unlike the others, became a principal at age 36. She grew up in the South in a two-parent home in a working-class community. She has a Bachelor of Science degree and a Master of Education degree. Both her undergraduate and graduate studies were completed at HBCUs. Prior to moving into administration, she served as a classroom teacher for 8 years. She never had a desire to become a principal, but was encouraged to do so by her former principal. When asked what conditions had allowed her to be successful, this was her response:

It was the foundation that my mother put before me. Coming from a household where my father passed when I was in high school, my mother didn’t accept anything but greatness. It was about making sure that academics came first. Also, there was no question if you were going to college or not. It was which college are you going to go to? So I think that I always kept that before me, and I have always had a circle of friends and family that were always cheering for me and pushing me for greatness.

At the time of her interview, Amy had just completed her first year as an elementary principal.

Hope. Hope became a principal at 28. She grew up in a military family and was exposed to many different kinds of communities. She credited growing up in different types of communities, with varying demographics and racial diversity, to exposing her to an array of people and being able to adapt to whatever setting she was in. When she was asked what conditions had allowed her to be successful, this was her response:
I have been fortunate to have excellent mentors throughout my career. I have actually only been in my career for 11 years. . .to have great people in my life that took me under their wings and allowed me to move quickly through my career.

Currently, Hope is an elementary school principal.

Susan. Susan became a principal at 29. She grew up in a middle-class two-parent home in a rural part of the South. Susan began her career as a teacher. In fact, her mom was also a teacher, so education was very important in her household. When asked if there was a particular belief system that impacts and guides her life, this is what she said:

You do good to people, and they’ll do good by you. And that’s really, you know, in the past few years I’ve really seen that happen. I really have tried to show people I’ve mentored, sometimes things happened for a reason and you just can’t react because eventually if you do right by people, it’ll always come back around. So really I’ve tried to take that into my philosophy for here in life. And that’s really helped me out.

Susan has been serving as a secondary principal for 6 years.

Tara. Tara became a principal at age 32. She grew up in the South in a two-parent household. Despite growing up in a house with a father who had issues with drugs, and with financial struggles to keep the lights on, she knew early on that she wanted more for her own life. This is what she said about how she grew up. “I wouldn’t change my circumstances because I think that those things made me better. They made me work harder and do better.”

Consequently after high school, Tara pursued an undergraduate degree in special education and psychology, and later she went on to pursue a Master’s degree in Education, and an educational specialist degree in Special Education. She taught for 7 years and served as an assistant principal for 1 year. She is currently a secondary school principal.
Rose. Rose became a principal at age 34. She grew up in the South in a working-class community. Currently, she serves as an elementary principal, and she has served in this role for 2 years. Prior to becoming a principal, Rose served as a classroom teacher and as an assistant principal. Her spouse is also a principal. When asked what conditions allowed her to be successful, she responded, “It is about perseverance and having a goal. I am very goal driven. I have strong faith, and I am a Christian. I have a supportive husband.”

April. April became a principal at age 28. She grew up in the North in a working-class two-parent home. As a child, she attended magnet schools. As an adult, April has devoted her career to working in inner-city schools; she says this has been due to “wanting to touch students’ lives in the same manner in which I was touched.” She taught for 6 years before becoming a principal. When asked why she became a principal, this was her response:

I became a principal because I believe that all students can achieve at high levels if effective professionals were there to support them. School saved my life and I became dedicated to creating educational experiences that afforded them the same opportunities, or even better, in order to enable students to be college ready and to make better choices for their lives.

Table 1 describes the types of schools these women led, at what age they attained the principalship, and where the schools were located.

Strength Through Faith and Prayer

Seven of these women identified one theme that was the most essential or important to them to get through their day-to-day work as principals: They would have unanimously agreed that faith was the single most important factor that had helped them to act as successful leaders. These women were strong and forthright in their belief in faith and God. Claire said it simply
Table 1

*Background Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Age became a principal</th>
<th>Location of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Middle school 6-8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Middle school 6-8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Elementary K-5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Elementary K-5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Elementary K-5</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Pre-K-8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>High school 9-12</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>High school 9-12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Elementary K-5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
like this when asked if there is a particular belief system that guides and impacts her life. Her response was, “Jesus Christ, without Him I could do nothing.” Hope had this to say about her faith in God, and how her faith helps her through the job as a principal:

I am 100% Christian. I am a praying principal. I keep it first in every decision that I make, and one of the big things that comes out of that is reminding me that everything I do, I do for kids first. I do for kids. I look at my job not just as a job, but as a service. This is my way of giving back. This is my service, my ministry. And I take it very, very seriously. So I do go about it with a high level of passion, because I know even though I’m in the public sector where you can’t necessarily always wear your religion out there on your sleeve, it guides a lot of my decision making. It guides how I put my priorities in place. It guides how I interact with the people that I come across in day-to-day. I want to make sure that when I go to sleep at night I can look myself in the mirror, knowing that I made decisions that would be acceptable and pleasing to Him, as well as—and when I say Him, I mean God—as well as benefit my school and what’s best for kids.

Susan talked about how she leaned on God even more now since becoming a principal:

I’ve called on Him more than I probably ever have since I’ve become a principal. It has definitely strengthened my religious background. I’ve come—I’ve noticed that I’ve asked for things and He’s put people in my path that are going through the same thing. And I think that’s been huge for me. Anytime I want to think things are bad, He always puts somebody in my path that’s either worse or going through the same thing. And that’s been a big blessing for me to understand, you know. I mean, like I say, I’ve called on Him more lately than I ever have. And I’ve found that through my religion.
Rose talked about how Christianity guided her life and the way that she leads in her role as a principal:

Just to treat people well. You know, is basically the foundations of Christianity, to treat others the way that you want to be treated. To treat people the way they deserve to be treated, even when their actions do not support that. To love people past the wrongdoings that they show. Everyone falls, but we all have to—we all deserve a second turn, and sometimes a fourth chance. So, all those things do guide me in my everyday decisions as a leader.

April said that in her role as a principal, her prayer life has increased:

I definitely have faith in God, and that He will bring me through. And He brought me through all of these different experiences to get me through this point. Especially with the most trying experiences in the past 5 years that, you know, I look back and I say, my God, I got through it. So it cannot be harder than that. I know that He’ll—good or bad—bring me through it, and it’ll never be as bad as I thought. Faith and prayer have been more prevalent in my life since taking the role of principal. This has been one of the most challenging roles and with His grace and mercy, it has gotten me through.

Tara also talked about how important faith and God were to her. When asked to whom she turned to for support, she replied, “God and my mom.” She went on to further state:

My belief system is God makes no mistakes. And I truly believe that I’m here for a reason and for whatever time period he needs me to be. So I always look at things—I do the best I can for people and by people. And I always tell people, I sleep well at night knowing I did the absolute best I can. And I didn’t do anything to hurt you deliberately.

Nina emphasized that she credits God for being where she is in life:
Yes. I believe that with God all things are possible. And I know that’s a spiritual connection, but I mean that to the 10th degree. Because at 36 years old, I’ve been able to achieve things that most people don’t do in a lifetime.

**Leadership as a Mission and Servant Leadership**

Three of these women described themselves as spiritual leaders who wholeheartedly attributed their success to faith in God. It was no surprise to find that they described their positions as principals as spiritual missions that were best carried out by “servant leadership.”

Three women described their roles this way. Nina said this:

I think I have a very interactive relationship with my students. I think it’s one built on respect. I think the students realize that I support them wholeheartedly. The kids know that I’m committed to their education and to their well-being. (Interview 1)

This is what Claire had to say about the relationship she has with her students:

Oh, my students love me. I love them too. They’re great children; they really are. And they know. . .I have. . .as you can imagine, I have some students that are really challenging. And it’s not their fault, it’s due to their circumstances and some of the things that they’ve gone through, but they know that they can come see me and talk to me any time about anything and I’m not going to go around and spread it. We have a really good relationship.

Nina had this to say:

As a professional I think having characteristics such as being a good listener is very important. I think so many times we will run our mouth before we’re hearing what occurs. And I think you have to be an effective communicator. In addition, I think you have to be a cheerleader. When you’re standing out front, you need to be visible. You
need to be supportive. You need to be the motivator of the troops, whether it’s the parents in PTA, whether it’s your children on SOL tests, or whether it’s your teachers who are standing up in front of that classroom. You have to show support all the time for those who are working for you and with you.

**Other-Mothering: Surrogacy at School**

Another theme that emerged as I tried to understand how these young women experience the principalship was “other-mothering.” Some of the young women who participated in this study often referred to the care and attention they tried to give each and every student in their schools. Realizing that many of the students under their guidance did not come from stable homes, these principals tried and often succeeded in serving in the role of surrogate mother. Because some of the children came from economically, educationally, socially, and emotionally deprived homes, they flourished under a role model at school, whom they may have lacked at home.

One interviewee said this, “I was a special education student myself. And I also grew up with very few people that looked like me” (Interview 7). This young principal used her own personal experience in order to identify with her students. Another interviewee said:

I’ve only worked in school communities that were considered to be high risk. And I feel as though that as long as I went in, I went in knowing that I wanted to make a difference, knowing that I wanted to touch each child that came in there. (Interview 6)

As quoted above, some of these female principals found something of themselves in their students and took on their students’ obstacles as their own.
CHAPTER 5. RACE, GENDER, AND AGE COMPLEXITIES

This chapter presents the barriers that the study participants faced as related to race, gender, and age. These women were very open, direct, and honest. Some of these young principals work in predominantly African American schools. Others serve as principals in schools where there is a diverse racial demographic. In addition to confronting challenges connected to race, there is also the gender factor. These women have entered a field (public school administration) in which the majority of the employees are men. Finally, some of the young African American women principals feel gender to be an issue in their acceptance by their faculties, students, parents, and communities as a whole.

**Race Challenges**

Five of these women felt that they had experienced racial challenges, and related how they have had to participate in “shifting” behaviors to fit in. The practice of shifting includes “changes of one’s hair, minimizing social distance, use of the English language, the use of facial expressions, and how one thinks and communicates” (Echols, 2006, p. 6). This is what Nina had to say about the perceptions that she feels some Caucasians have about African Americans as they relate to the complexion of one’s skin in the workplace:

I think the lighter you are as an African American, the more. . .the greater the chance you have of being accepted into an administrative role. I know—in a predominantly White environment, I’ll say—you may come across, which is far and in between, darker tones
being in higher positions. It does occur. But you’re not going to see 10 of us in one building. You know, you’re not going to see five of us in one building. So I know that’s another factor that plays into it. And I think... so skin tone plays a part in it. And the last thing is, it’s just familiarity in the other direction, where Whites tend to probably associate intelligence with race. And I know that’s kind of like a bold statement to make because I’m here in this position. However, just based on what I’ve observed in my years in other localities—where White males have dominated the principalship at the high school level over and over again—that there have been actually studies done, and I heard something about the reason why they have males as the principals at the high schools. And it was stated that after September 11th they thought that they would be best suited to handle, I guess, volatile situations like that. And I believe that to some degree that’s an accurate way of thinking.

The question was posed: Do you ever feel like you are wearing the mantle for your race? This is what Susan had to say:

Absolutely. You know, another counterpart of mine who is African American always says, they have to give 90%, we got to give 120%! I do feel that way sometimes, that I got to be pushing to make sure that I don’t fail. Because I don’t want it to be. . .I don’t want a door to shut on somebody else just because of something I didn’t do.

Nina echoed what Susan had to say by agreeing that as an African American young female principal, she feels a “need to put my best foot forward.” She went on to further state that when things happen in the news she is often approached by her White colleagues asking her opinion on things. This is what she had to say about that:
Oh, my goodness. Well, I feel like I always need to put my best foot forward. Do I definitely think I represent the Black race even when I’m not trying to? Absolutely. Do I definitely have people asking me questions, whether it’s about hair, whether it’s about Trayvon Martin, whether it’s about my opinions on political events, how I think the President of the United States is doing because he’s an African-American man? Absolutely. Do I treat those questions like I would do with any other question being asked? If I don’t want to answer them, I don’t. Because the bottom line is I’m going to stay true to myself. And so I don’t make myself or put myself in a position where I’m the poster girl or the poster boy.

When I asked if she ever participates in shifting behavior, this is what April had to say:

I totally have to shift. I have. . ..My PTA also is made up of the affluent parents who choose to send their kids here, which they make very clear that they’re doing us a service. So I definitely have to shift to be accommodating to them. We had a very hard beginning of the year, following a principal who was here for a few years who started with them when they started this journey here at our school. So it took a lot for them to accept me and work with me and understand that I’m here for all kids, not just for Black kids. And I think they thought, you know, my hair is natural, I really wasn’t paying any mind to their kids. And I am. . .I just want them to understand their kids are going to be fine regardless. It’s our kids who are constantly struggling. So that’s my first job. But I’m going to make sure your kids are going to be okay. You know, I wouldn’t mistreat any child. So it took them a long time to trust me, but I still don’t believe that I could show them my true self, and that’s okay with me. I think it’s. . .there’s some
things that I just need to keep private. There’s some things I just need to keep for me and the people who I trust. So I don’t trust them. I work with them, but I don’t trust them. And I mean I think it’s the same with the people like my central office staff. I don’t feel. . .you know, I feel the same way. I don’t trust them.

You know, you see a side. It’s like that poem ‘We Wear the Mask.’

Hope talked about how race, age, and gender all can impact what she deals with on a day-to-day basis:

And I say that because I deal with that on a day-to-day basis, especially from men. I can speak to my first year here, my assistant principal’s an older Caucasian man, and he had a hard time. . .hard time. . .adjusting to his principal being younger, being a woman, and African American on top of that. Often times when—if anyone was coming to my building, asks for the principal, especially men—and when I look up and say, ‘Oh, it’s me,’ they kind of have this look of, really? Really? Yeah, and then when I open my mouth and begin to talk, it’s like, ‘Wow she really does know what she’s doing.’ But you do have to constantly find yourself proving that you’ve got to your place because you deserve to be there. And sometimes I enjoy the shock value. I do. You learn to kind of just get a kick out of it. And sometimes I’ll just sit and talk and just go right along, and they go, ‘Oh, by the way, where’s the principal?’ And I just reach my hand out and say, ‘It’s me.’ And they look like, ‘Wow, really? Are you sure?’ ‘Yes, it’s me.’

While dealing with the stressors of a demanding job, some African American female principals, also have to deal with racial challenges from the complexion of their skin, to their natural hair texture, to feeling an overwhelming sense of “I am carrying the torch for my race” to feelings that they are not free to be themselves without fear of being seen as the stereotypical
“angry black woman.” Amy concluded her statement by saying this: “Where other people can show emotion, you cannot. And sometimes I can temper my reactions, so sometimes I seem kind of passive. So again you don’t want to be that angry black woman.”

An unexpected theme that emerged from two of the principals was related to what they referred to as “crabs in a barrel syndrome.” The online Urban Dictionary defines it this way: “A syndrome where a group of like-situated people hurt those in their community trying to get ahead.” These women described a feeling that because they have accomplished much in their lives that they feel that other African Americans alienate them or have the perception that they think that they are trying to “act White” and “not Black enough.” This is what Nina had to say about this perception:

I remember my superintendent saying to me—my last superintendent—she said to me, ‘Well, it doesn’t look like you’re White enough for the Whites nor Black enough for the Blacks.’ She said, ‘But I’m cool with that, because if they like you too much I would think you weren’t being as effective.’ And she’s right. You have to look at it like that. I am not Black enough for the Blacks, because of course I’m not down, I’m not a sister girl. I’m too White. And then for the Whites, it’s like, oh she’s a racist. She’s always supporting the Black people. So you can’t think about that. You have to know that you’re doing what’s right for your kids and your building.

Susan described how she is received by the African American women in her school: “…it’s like crabs in a barrel. And that’s true especially for African American women. . .those are the hardest to grab at work.”

In addition to dealing with racism, ageism, and sexism, two of these women spoke about the crabs in a barrel syndrome in which they felt at a crossroads between the African American
community and the White community. These women felt because they had been successful, other African Americans had the perception they felt themselves too good for their own race. One interviewee talked about how she dealt with it more from African American female teachers. While this situation represented merely a perception on the part of some teachers, it nevertheless was a challenge that presented another layer of complexities for these women. This is how Echols (2006) addressed this same topic:

The crabs in a bucket idea can be consciously and unconsciously evoked when there has been one person of color in a work environment and a new person of color arrives. The newcomer’s arrival may create a feeling of competition and back stabbing by the former employee rather than generating a welcoming atmosphere where there is unity in numbers and collaboration. This behavior occurs in far too many cases; Black principals are victims who have been taught to problem solve coercive tactics rather than mind, intellect, and futuristic ideology (p. 10).

Age Challenges

All of these women, with the exception of one, became principals before age 35. In fact, two became principals at age 28. While some of these women are dealing with challenges as they relate to race, age can be an additional challenge for these women. They deal with parents being surprised to find out they are the principals at their child’s school or having their authority questioned by those they supervise. Nina talked about how being young is good due to having the energy to do the job, but that it can be perceived as negative:

I think it’s been like a double-edged sword. I think it has been excellent to be an administrator at a young age where I have this burst of energy and I can go home, lick my
wounds, come back the next day with the same amount of energy. I’ve seen principals over and over again who are in their 50s and 60s—they’re burned out. You know, and not all of them, but you just see it at the end of the day. They’re worn out, they’re burned out, they’re tired. And sometimes it exudes or comes across as negativity. And it’s not that it’s negativity, it’s that these principals have been doing it for 20 years. They’re 50, 60 years old, still raising families, and they don’t have that same level of energy.

Jackie also talked about how her youthfulness helps her maintain the energy, and she is able to relate more to the interests of her students while also dealing with parents being shocked to learn that she is the principal:

Well I think that with my age—certainly I’m not as far removed from the students that I serve, as far as age groups go—I can definitely tell them, when they begin speaking about things that they’re interested in now, I definitely know what they’re talking about.

Energy-wise, and this may not be associated with age, but I definitely have the energy to keep up with them. I like to get involved with them. I go down to the P.E. class and I like to kind of exercise with them. And so I think they find me relatable—they’re able to relate and I’m able to relate to them. And I think it’s odd because a number of the parents that I work with—some of them were [sic] younger than I am. And so that’s a little odd to me as well. But I think when I come into contact with parents, they say, ‘Oh, you’re the principal?’ And they only know because they see my name on my office door. But I think that they’re somewhat shocked as well because, and they will always say, ‘When I was in middle school my principal was much, much older.’ So I don’t think that that’s [sic] affected their ability to believe that I am there to support them and to assist their child, but certainly I’ve gotten those questions.
Tara believes that because she is young she is able to relate more to the students in her school:

Well I think that with my age, certainly I’m not as far removed from the students that I serve, as far as age groups go. I can definitely tell them when they begin speaking about things that they’re interested in now, I definitely know what they’re talking about.

Nina went on to further state how being young and in an authority position can lead some people to question or challenge one’s authority as a principal:

Even in my role as an assistant principal I was challenged in terms of questioning my authority. I’ve had teachers tell me, ‘Well you can’t talk to me that way. You need to ask me.’ And I would say, ‘No, I’m your supervisor. You need to do what I say.’ And then when they still don’t listen, unfortunately, I’ve had to go to my superior, my principal and say, ‘Hey, you know, this is what’s happening,’ and have the principal reiterate the fact that I am the supervisor. This went on throughout my assistant principalship experience. But I’ve had young people buck me as a young administrator. I’ve had older ones who became a principal. . .I’ve had older teachers challenge me, literally, debate me regarding curriculum to test my knowledge and my skills and my worth of being a principal at such a young age.

**Gender Challenges**

While confronting challenges relating to race and age, four of these young African American female principals also deal with challenges because of their gender. Women continue to be underrepresented in public school principalship positions in comparison to the number of female teachers. When I asked these women about this, these are the responses I received. Nina had this to say:
I think it goes back to equating leadership and strength to men. I think it’s still a male-dominated society as it relates to leadership positions. You can look at the presidential elections and other leadership roles where men run Fortune 500 companies. Men are always placed in constant leadership roles. I think the tides are changing slowly but surely. And I know within the last 10 years, the gap between salaries has continued to decrease in terms of we’re closer in terms of making the same amount of salary as our male counterparts, overall. In education we’re at the same level in terms of salary, but probably not in terms of representation. Again it goes back to what the ideal strength looks like on paper. And that goes back to the media. It’s what we teach our kids from day one. Girls should be prissy and wear makeup and things like that. Guys need to be strict and have that strong exterior. And men should lead the household. And we get away from the Bible of being equally yoked. And that’s not mentioned at all in the workplace as far as being equally yoked and equally represented, so.

Jackie also agrees that it has to do with society’s perceptions about the way men lead:

I think that society looks at leadership as...I think that they think men are more effective and are able to lead more effectively. That’s a bad situation, but I think that that’s what society perceives. And so I think...even more so in urban schools I think that, particularly with your more difficult challenging schools...I think that’s there’s always a push for men to be in charge just because of the notion that with a man maybe there might be more of a strong leadership presence than with a woman.

Claire agrees with both Nina and Jackie that men are perceived as better leaders, “It is perception, most people perceive men to be better leaders. It goes back to the control factor. Men can lead better, control better. That’s the perception. I’m not saying that’s what it is.”
When asked if they thought women lead differently than men, two of the women had similar responses. They talked about how they feel women show more passion and tend to be more emphatic in their day-to-day work as principals. Nina talked about how she feels that women are passionate leaders:

I do believe that wholeheartedly. I think women are...they lead with passion. I think men have passion. I think the passion is driven in different ways. I know I definitely lead by passion. I’m passionate about education. I think it exudes from my spirit. I think I lead with soul. And with strong convictions in terms of making sure that the whole child’s needs are represented. You know, making sure that my teachers are okay. Susan had this to say when asked the same question: Do women lead differently than men?

I think sometimes we lead more with our heart. And sometimes being more in a managerial role, and we try to be more in the personal, touchy-feely, want to make sure everybody feels okay. And that’s the only difference I see. Because sometimes I’ll make decisions, and I’ll be like, oh I thought with my heart. And I think that’s how sometimes we do vary in that way.
CHAPTER 6. SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Despite difficult, highly rewarding, careers in public education, these women cited family stability as one of the most important factors in their ability to do their jobs well. Without this foundation at home, which creates solidity in their lives while away from school, they would be unable to perform at optimum levels each day in demanding environments. Stability played a significant role in the performance and well-being of these women.

When they felt supported and loved in the home setting, that feeling of comfort offered strength that translated to hard work at school. A partner’s (husband) role was significant in simply being there for the young women to converse and lean on after school hours. Feeling this support, in the form of a good listener and partner, enabled these young women to return each day with a renewed sense of purpose.

Strength of Family

Five of the women interviewed spoke of the importance of their families to their successes in life and work, and how these experiences shape the work that they do on a day-to-day basis. This is what Nina had to say about family and what led her to pursue a path in education:

First and foremost, having a strong family connection and values are important to me. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to attend college. It wasn’t forced on us; however, it was just an innate part of how we lived our lives. So it was taught that
education was a key to freedom. Education was a key to success. And everyone around us was successful in terms of the people we were exposed to. And so although we lived in inner city where on one end of the block, literally, were drug dealers and the other end of the block were prostitutes, and it’s still like that today, we knew it was a path to attend college.

Jackie credited her family for being her strongest support system and how she leans on them for guidance in her day-to-day work as a principal:

My mother and father are married; they’ve been together for about 46 years. And they are huge supports in my life. I talk with them every day and share with them what’s going on in my professional life and certainly if no more than being a listening ear.

Susan also described her family as being a strong support to her in her principalship position:

My family, primarily, is my support system. Like I said, my mother grew up in education. My father was a supervisor of a __in the medical field. So I’ve gotten most of those points of views. That has really helped me throughout my educational process and also through my professional process.

Not only did these women turn to their parents for support, those women who were married talked about how supportive their husbands are to them in their principalship role. April had this to say about her husband:

My husband is fantastic. He is a great guy. He has toughed it out with me throughout the whole educational leadership experience. And it’s great too because he is an administrator as well. So now we, you know, our experiences mirror, so he would [sic] give me advice.
Nina had this to say about the support that she received from her husband after the death of her mother and having to return to her role as a principal:

You know, over and over again, I’m going to say my husband. He’s. . .God’s really blessed me 10 years ago. He is my rock. And he is my truth serum as well. When I’m having a pity party, he’s the first person to tell me to pull up my big girl panties and let’s move forward. Okay, you’ve had your time. And even with sensitive issues. I lost my mom last July, and my husband was right there giving me my moment to be depressed. And that’s what it was, you know, for 3 months, and then he looked at me, and was like, okay, you have a building to run, you have a family, you have a life to live, let’s move on. We don’t have to forget, but we do have to live our life. And I think having that type of support built on the grounds of truth is needed. And I’ve had that all my life. It started with. . .it’s kind of like I married my grandmother, but the male version of my grandmother. My grandmother wasn’t the one that made you cook. She was the one that, like, had her foot up your butt, saying, ‘Okay, look, it’s time to move on here. You’re not going to let one person stop your show. You’re going to have to move on.’ And I’ve needed that type of, kind of Darth Vader and Mary Poppins-type support all my life.

One principal talked about the role her parents played in her success. Observing generational stability within one’s own family certainly allowed these young principals to return each day to their schools, reinforced with and equipped by family love and support. Some principals mentioned daily contact with extended family as a source of strength. Thus, family attention to the principal was not limited to the spouse in one’s home. Speaking with parents
who represented stability in one’s childhood helped these women find their centers, returned
daily to the deeply held values they learned from those same loving and understanding parents.

Some women mentioned multigenerational stability within a single extended family, so
that parents and siblings alike contributed to a sense of well-being. This, in turn, fostered in
these women a spirit of daily renewal. One interviewee said this,

My brother is huge in my life, one of my brothers I should say, and sister. I speak with
them often about what I do, but oftentimes people don’t truly understand what an
educator does, unless you’ve had some experiences. But I do lean on them a lot when,
through frustrations, through big decisions that I must make, or those that are pulling me
away from the thing is they’re pulling me away from family time, and trying to get them
to understand what I must do. (Interview 6)

Siblings, possibly because they share a birth cohort with these interview subjects, also serve as
sources of strength and stability. The immediate connection as a result of similar ages with peers
helps these young African American women find strength within themselves. Simply by
listening, even when they themselves had no professional experience in education, siblings
provided an enormous boost to the morale of some of these principals.

As I tried to understand how these women got from their childhoods to their adult lives
through numerous questions and probes, it was clear that family played and continues to play an
important role in their lives. Some of these women came from middle-class homes in which
their parents were educated, while others were raised in homes in which the parents or
grandparents had only a high school diploma. Some were raised in homes where both parents
were present; others were raised primarily or exclusively by a single woman. In one case a two-
parent home contradicted the expectation of economic prosperity and social advancement. Thus, the presence of a father did not necessarily indicate stability in the home.

But my dad faced some drug issues and oftentimes I was more concerned in school whether or not we’d have lights on when I got home as opposed to worrying about studying. I was polite, you know, I can get it by listening, so I just sort of moved along. I think, just those things, and when you realize that you’re sleeping in a car and you’re bathing at Hardee’s, and you’re kind of place to place, then you eventually get to the point where you have, for me, I’ve always wanted to do better. (Interview 9)

In the case above, this principal’s concerns were not necessarily directed toward education while growing up, but rather were focused on simple survival from day to day as a child. Still, she was able to translate her home life and its lack of stability into a desire to do better though she did not initially recognize that education would be her path to escape and success.

Whereas some of the young women who attained principalships had childhoods in the suburbs, there were others who came from the inner city or even a small town-rural background. Even in the stable families, there was sometimes frequent movement, which by its very nature would cause emotional upset and a disruption of stability. One interviewee spoke about such changes within the family. Because of her father’s military career, one principal moved frequently during her childhood, residing in several widely separated states. Despite this somewhat transient lifestyle, she believes today that changing her home’s location actually helped her mature. This is because she encountered so many different geographical and cultural settings (Interview 5). Such diversity in backgrounds has allowed her to identify with students who come from varied cultures that reflect diverse values.
Role of Women Mentors

While talking about the important role that their families have played and continue to play in their lives, some of these women placed special emphasis on the important females in their lives. These women had varied characteristics, but were all loving, nurturing, and supportive of education, whether educated or of limited education themselves. One interviewee had this to say:

My grandmother, as a single grandparent, raised two children, and she did on a teacher’s salary, and actually she began as a school nurse. Took a pay cut to become a teacher, a significant pay cut. But as we got older, she realized during our middle school years, that she wanted to make sure she had the same hours we had as we were getting older.

(Interview 1)

Another interviewee talked about her mentor at work and the lessons she learned from her:

She would allow me to accompany her on classroom observations to just talk to me about content and leader instructions. She taught me the importance of looking for good instruction in the classroom. The framework of good instruction is always going to be there even if the content may differ. You know, what you put into that structure. And those are things she helped to teach me. She would show me what good reading instruction looked like, and what it meant to turn math and science into a verb and make it hands on. So she was just really a driving force in allowing me to come along with her and learn a lot about instruction. (Interview 5)

Flexibility and Survival

These young African American women used the following verbs to describe how they go
about their day-to-day work as principals. Among them were struggle, survive, cope—each one indicated a level of difficulty.

My day-to-day work currently includes constantly being in the classroom. On average, I have five meetings day, whether they’re IEP meetings, whether they are 504 meetings, whether they’re just general meetings or admin meetings or central office meetings, I’m constantly in meetings, which is quite different for me. (Interview 1)

This principal saw the demanding day-to-day schedule she followed. Each day brought new realities to her as the school’s chief administrator. She struggled to remain above the fray, to lead clearly and effectively. It was a daily struggle, but one she embraced. Survival in such a demanding environment meant recognizing that all challenges had solutions. Each problem and its solution was different, some more difficult and some easier, yet each had to be examined thoroughly.

The long-term vision for the students and the school were always kept in mind. These young women survived through a combination of their faith and professionalism.

Day-to-day is hard to explain because it changes in so many different ways. I mean I could come in here expecting to work on data and it turns into discipline. It just really matters what the mood of the building is. (Interview 4)

How does one cope with such change, such variety in one’s work day? Flexibility and adaptability characterized these young women. Repeatedly they described scenarios in which the reality was rarely what the expectation for the day had been. Life in a public school was in constant flux, and these young leaders coped because they constantly reminded themselves why they chose public education as a career and why they decided to seek the principalship.
It was at home, away from responsibilities of the children, the staff, and the building that these principals would unwind and, if necessary, complain aloud about their personal struggles at work. Through the understanding and empathy of attentive family members, these principals felt a sense of renewal and revitalization that allowed them to prepare for the next day.

Economic problems in the home were never far from these principals’ concerns because many of their students were described as coming from homes with multiple challenges “single parents, financial strains” (Interview 6). The commitment of these principals was reflected in the schools they chose to serve. While an environment of affluence and newness may appeal to some career educators, this is not descriptive of all. Though the challenges can be greater in difficult settings with marginalized student populations, some of these women chose these particular schools in which to serve. Two principals cited below characterized this attitude of accepting extraordinary challenges and viewing them as extraordinary opportunities.

I’ve only worked in school communities that were considered to be high risk. And I feel as though that as long as I went in, I went in knowing that I wanted to make a difference, knowing that I wanted to touch each child that came in there. (Interview 6)

The second principal talked about the environment in which she works: “The school that I work at is an urban school and district. . .the neighborhood has a very high poverty rate. My school is close to 90% free and reduced lunch” (Interview 5). These women, because they regarded their roles as encompassing more than the traditional “three Rs, ” willingly provided emotional support to children who were in need. Though demanding, this role is seen as equally important to the educational leadership these women daily demonstrate.

Growing up with an understanding of the importance of family impacted the women participants as leaders. They believed that support from their families and husbands allowed
them to walk through doors that had been opened for them and to be successful in positions that were extremely demanding and time consuming. Without the support that they had grown up with and experienced in their adult lives, these women believed they might not have been as successful.
CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how young African American women principals experience the principalship. Thus using Black Feminist Standpoint Theory as my theoretical framework, the women in this study used narrative storytelling to discuss their struggles. Each woman, based upon her own past experiences and background growing up, recounted her own experience as a principal dealing with sexism, ageism, and racism. It was crucial to add the voices to these women because they bring a unique perspective to the practice of school leadership that has been virtually untapped in research. Examining their lives will inform both research and practice given their professional rise to principalship positions and their experiences once they attained the positions. No one can better capture the experiences of these women than themselves. It is hoped that this research will “begin to change minds and social constraints about the “Others” in America’s public school districts” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 352). Research has as its goal the enlightenment and edification of the next generation. It is hoped that the research conducted for this study and the explanations and analysis of its findings will in some small way serve to alter the perceptions and interactions of those who daily work with young African American female principals and those young African American women who aspire to the principalship.
Conclusions

One interviewee quoted the famous poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar in her description of how she felt about her role working in an institution where she felt like she had to wear a mask at work.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask. We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile.
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask! (Dunbar, 1860)

Although this poem, written in 1860, describes how African Americans were forced to hide the truth about themselves behind a veneer of joy and contentment, even in the 21st century the historical challenges of the past continue to face young African American female principals. Each day these principals go to work consciousness of the way that they speak, how they wear their hair, how they dress and how others perceive them. They never want to be seen as the stereotypical angry black woman. They “wear the mask that grins; it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes (Dunbar, 1996). The standpoint of these racially marginalized women continues to be ignored. But despite challenges, these women “have succeeded in the American capitalistic system when the odds suggested that they would fail. Uprooted from the ancient, rich cultural heritage of West Africa, Africans in America have constructed a fragile hybrid national culture,
unique to the world” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 362). The enormity of this cultural influence radiates from home and faith, from spouses and siblings, from classrooms and administrative offices to impact all students the women of this culture touch daily with the dedication inherent in their lives.

These women continue to deal with stereotypical thinking that others have of them while also dealing with ageism, sexism, and racism. The standpoint of these women must be viewed through the lens that they employ every day if it is to serve as a catalyst for change. The challenges that these women face with regard to gender and race area issues that must be explored in America. Despite the odds against them, all of these women have been successful. Many of them credit God, faith, and their families for their sustainability and how they have been successful.

**Recommendations**

After reviewing the above research, interviews, and findings, I was lead to this question: How can we thoroughly prepare the next generation of young African American females for leadership positions in public education knowing the struggles and challenges that they may encounter?

Education certainly will play a significant role, an essential role, in preparing young African American women for positions leading public educational institutions. With the encouragement of committed teachers, counselors, and school support personnel, young African American women will surely receive the guidance and academic training necessary to assume the helm of public educational institutions, both primary and secondary. With excellent classroom and extracurricular training, young African American females will learn the skills necessary for leadership.
Beginning in the elementary grades, there must be an expectation of excellence for young girls. The young women in my study mention how much harder they must work to be accepted by the majority culture, how they may always be under the metaphorical microscope both in school and while on the job. This feature of their lives, the result of outside perception, may prove more difficult to influence and alter than specific features of the classroom and the administrative office.

One interviewee commented on how her normal speech was noted by a university professor.

And I remember growing up wanting to emulate my friends in my primary years. Talk like them, you know, and I guess for a lack of a better phrase, use ebonics, and I know that hasn’t been used in a long time. But that’s where I was, you know, when I was growing up in my primary years. However, correct English was always spoken in our household because I had this English teacher raising me. And so I’ve never felt uncomfortable with the way I. . .well you know what, except for one time in my life. And that was at. . . when my teacher made it a point, as the only African American in the classroom and I was presenting, to stop me three times, and she told me to stop ‘axing’ everybody. I’m not here to kill people. And it took me about three or four times to realize what she was saying. (Interview 1 p. 5)

This scrutiny of young African American women is not limited to the classroom setting. One principal described a situation at her school.

. . . they look at you, when they come in and see you, especially working in a predominantly White environment, they’re going to see that ABW [angry Black woman] first. And so when I have an angry parent come to me, I know it’s a performance I have
to give. And so when I have the mom come in and she doesn’t have her way, 9 times out of 10 that dad is going to come in next. And he’s going to try to intimidate me into giving him what he wants. And so I’ll just hold my hands, ‘Sir, I don’t like where this conversation is going. I think that I’m going to have to call my secretary so she can take notes. Because I don’t want you to misconstrue what I’m saying, and I want to make sure that I clearly understand what you’re saying.’ (Focus Group 1 SA p. 7)

It was only through such atypical assertion that this principal was able to establish her authority with this parent.

Developing a sense of self while still in school will afford these young women the confidence necessary to seek advanced degrees and ultimately leadership positions. Without teachers and other school personnel committed to the rigorous training of our young African American women, we cannot hope to see the next generation move into positions of educational leadership. Working harder and striving higher will only improve the opportunities for such students. While becoming accustomed to serious and demanding academic work, young African American women will simultaneously become comfortable in the classroom and the academic setting in general, feeling inherently that they belong, that this is where they can reach their highest potential while serving the greater society. That is the goal for these women, not only institutionally but on a personal level, as they develop long-lasting relationships with experienced teacher-mentors during their K-12 years.

Thus, the role of the teacher-mentor or administrator-mentor or counselor-mentor becomes all the more important for young African American females. Look to the interviews of the young African American female principals conducted as part of the research for this dissertation. Their schools were essential grounds for cultivating a love of education. Though
these women may not have known they would pursue careers in public education, the schools they attended and the teachers who encouraged them clearly helped create the women we see today.

Many of the principals described in glowing terms the individuals who had helped shape their lives.

I have. . .my primary mentor is a retired principal from__. And she has guided my past in terms. . .well for the last 12 years. And she’s been very supportive in terms of steering me in the right directions, in terms of saying, ‘Okay, it’s time to go back to school. I’m currently in a doctoral program.’ In terms of saying, ‘Okay, you need to go to this professional development opportunity or this conference,’ pushing me in places that I never saw myself. (Interview 1, p. 4)

Even when not envisioning careers in educational administration, young African American women will be receiving excellent preparation for leadership roles in business, private industry, noneducational government, and the nonprofit sectors. Perhaps, with just the proper push of mentorship, young women who do not envision a career in public education will shift direction and fulfill themselves through lives devoted to educating all young people.

The role of schools in preparing young African American women to become the next generation of educational leaders cannot be overemphasized. It is perhaps the single most important institutional requirement for preparing these young women for futures in education. Classroom instruction, institutional stability, noninstructional support, all serve to prepare young women to assume roles in leadership. In fact, it seems self-defeating to send young African American women to colleges and universities if they are not properly prepared for the rigors of higher education. Likewise, if they leave college unprepared for the challenges that they may
face working in public education, the system itself will have placed a latent barrier in their career path.

By treating the child in a school setting the way one wants her own children treated, with recognition and respect, the home environment can be extended into the school. This unique link between the two most important settings in a child’s life can be achieved with the sort of clear human interaction mentioned by one principal.

I’ve only worked in school communities that were considered to be high risk. And I feel as though that as long as I went in, I went in knowing that I wanted to make a difference, knowing that I wanted to touch each child that came in there. I wanted to get to know their name, I wanted to get to know their story. And I think that alone, just making them see that I care about them, pushes me to want to do better for myself. (Interview 6, p. 2)

The home setting is not always one that the school wants to emulate. In these cases, the values of the home and community are in direct conflict with the ones the school attempts to instill and encourage. One principal spoke of her frustration when facing such family and community dynamics as they relate to schooling.

And there’s many times that I’m very proud. And then there’s times I get really sad and I think of W.E.B. DuBois’ talented 10th theory. And I’m just like, Lord, there’s got to be more people man. How can there only be 10% of us who have enough sense to say, ‘Come on, let’s be okay. Let’s go to school. Let’s not stay outside until 11:00 at night when I’m nine years old. Let’s not do that.’ I don’t understand how people don’t understand that. So I get sad and then I get frustrated. You know, it’s lonely. (Interview 8, p. 8)
Whether raised by parents, grandparents, older siblings, or other extended family members, children feel either loved and accepted or ignored and rejected. Children learn from the adults present in their lives whether they are recognized as loved and respected individuals who can succeed or as burdens upon the family. Simply by loving children and encouraging them, much of the groundwork for success in school will have been prepared. It is up to the child in school to complete the work. However, the home will be where the girl spends the majority of her time, where she will dream and imagine, where she will do her homework which will allow her to succeed both short term and in the long run. By providing a home that reflects the values presented in school, parents must strive to ensure that children do not encounter a conflict in values between school and home. The concern for hard work and diligence, which is encouraged in school, will be reinforced in the home for a fully self-realized child. Whether the parent is educated, uneducated, or marginally educated; whether the home is affluent or economically deprived; whether the surrounding neighborhood is a nurturing or a dangerous one, the life within the home will determine what attitude the young lady brings into the school. With a positive attitude which supports the school’s efforts, parents will demonstrate to children that what they are doing in the classroom has value, will pay off, and will lead to a dream realized. Some parents are not initially receptive to a caring, nurturing individual in the school. It takes some getting used to for parents to accept such a situation. One principal cited her communication with a parent. In their conversation, the principal tried to convey

. . . that I want to support you in this journey and I love your kid just as much as you do. Because I’m their mom from 8:00 to 4:00 when they’re here. And this is what I would do if this were my child. (Interview 8, p. 13)
So how does nurturing account for so many significant changes in attitude over time? The answer may seem simple to provide. Students who are given a sense of well-being and positive identity will grow up to be fully realized individuals. Look at how important the interviewees in this research considered their home and school environments to be. Without parents and teachers who supported the goals and values of education, it will be impossible to foster adjustment among school children. Several of the principals interviewed mentioned their own schools and the populations they serve. These young African American principals, having learned through struggle and adversity, understand the need to demonstrate not only academic expertise, but also a sense of genuine human nurturing.

At the conclusion of my interview with each of the principals, they were asked this final question: What are your strategies for success for a young aspiring female who may be interested in becoming a principal? This is what Nina had to say. It goes back to the importance of faith and family:

Know more than your counterparts. You can’t stop reading once you leave the classroom. We have to be latest and the greatest up on our research. Think outside the box. If there’s any opportunities in central office that you can get into, where you can do consulting work, where you can work with others at higher levels. So you have to be able to know how to get in to other places. Go to those conferences because that sets you up for a different type of network and you meet new people. If you can go to workshops and present at workshops, present at those workshops. But never stop educating yourself. And at the end of the day, realize that it’s not personal. Even when you know it’s a direct attack on you and your character, just know when you go home it’s not about you. It’s about your relationship with God; it’s about your relationship with your family. And at
the end of the day, if you know that and your home is separated from your work life, then you can come back here and lick your wounds at your house and go in the next day and start it all over again.

This is what Amy had to say:

Don’t have friends at work. I know who my friends are, and that’s all that matters. But just really knowing that you can’t stop learning. You can’t stop learning. You’re going to have. . .and not thinking that you know it all. And you can’t go in there saying I’m the boss, and it’s all in what I think and what I say. You have to really make sure that you’re listening to what’s going on in your building and knowing what the needs are in your building. And be willing sometimes to give a little. You can’t just go in there and dictate. But you have to really go in there and be a true instructional leader. And don’t mind rolling up your sleeves and getting in that classroom. Don’t mind going in there.

Susan offered advice on the importance of being resilient while also focusing on the children:

My advice would be just always remember we’re here for the kids. And you’re gonna always encounter things that are gonna be tough. You gotta find outlets. I say that to a lot of people. You’ve got to find some other outlets cause this job can kill you if you allow it to. You’re gonna have to work hard. It’s not an easy fit. I mean, we’ve seen where. . .we’ve been in school where we never saw the principal. This is a different age. It’s all about instruction. There’s a lot of demands that are gonna be put on you that have never been put on you before. But just know you can do it. And just always remember do what’s right by kids and you can never go wrong, is what I’d always say.
April talked about the importance of having balance in your life while also remaining humble:

I think they definitely have to make sure they have a balance, a work-life balance, because you’ll burn out. And to make sure that you’re ready to work hard. This is not the day and age where you’re not gonna get your hands dirty and make some things happen for kids. You know, if you have to tutor a group, you gotta tutor a group. If you gotta...you know, you have to model a way for the people in your building. And you’re not above that, so you need to be humble. Definitely have balance and understand that whatever decision that you make, your goal is to make sure you’re making kids’ lives better.

Who better to seek advice from than those who have been successful in their quest to become principals? These strong women talk about the importance of God, faith and family in their personal narratives. Each one has overcome personal obstacles, some of which are experienced by most children, adolescents, college students, teachers, and administrators. Others, however, reveal an extraordinary will, attesting to the inner strength and determination of these young women. Sifting through the hours of interviews with these principals, reflecting on them in-depth, one discovers a pattern of responses and personal perceptions. Simply put, these women advise the next generation to be themselves, to confront difficulties with conviction, stay abreast of the latest research in education, and never to lose sight of the ultimate goal: The education of children in their charge despite the challenges one may face.

**Implications**

As I stated earlier in my research, I hope that through this research there will be an increasing body of literature on young African American women in educational administration. I
hope that future African American women researchers will conduct research within their communities, using narrative storytelling from a black feminist standpoint theory to fully understand these women’s realities.

What are the implications that this research has on school districts? They must prepare these young women to be successful in becoming equipped with the skills needed to be a successful leader in educational administration. I propose the following solutions:

1. Mentorship is crucial to their success. School divisions must look for ways to provide support and facilitate mentoring opportunities to these leaders. Programs such as the Center for Progressive Leadership, seeks to provide comprehensive, long-term leadership development for diverse leaders across the country. In fact, they target communities that have “traditionally lacked access to political power, including women, people of color, and GLBT individuals” (Center for Progressive Leadership, 2010, para. 8). They partner with local school districts to offer this support. Currently they support local school districts in Washington, DC, Michigan, and Arizona just to name a few. (Centers for Progressive Leadership, 2010)

2. Many of these women have strong connections to their church. The church could be a place where these young women “hone and develop interest in the profession. The church, as an organization, as well as the school community, has been the icon of social and economic progress for the Black community” (Echols, 2006, p. 12). It is at the church, starting at a young age, that these young ladies can be taught how to be problem solvers and decision makers.
3. Professional development to these leaders is extremely important. It promotes capacity building and allows one to grow professionally and build upon one’s leadership skills. Without this support, these leaders’s ability to be successful is impeded, and it shows the school leader that their school district is willing to invest in their success.

As I conclude, this research has implications for the following audiences: college-bound students interested in school administration, university professors and school divisions interested in ways to support and provide professional development to these young leaders, feminist researchers, those interested in studying leadership theory and research, those interested in exploring the issue of religion and church-state issues, and aspiring and practicing principals interested in how African American principals support school improvement. It is hoped that the results of this study will help to prepare young African American female principals for “entry into the real world of administration” (Wood, 2006, p. 5)
List of References
List of References


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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Background Questions such as the following:

Tell me a little about you. (family background, K-12 education, college, career path leading to administration). What are the personal experiences that make you who you are?

How many years of teaching experience (elementary / secondary) did you have before becoming a principal?

Were you an assistant principal prior to becoming a principal? For how long?

Why did you become a principal? How or what path did you take to become a principal?

How hard was it for you to attain your principalship position? How many times did you apply? How did the interviews go?

How many years have you been a principal in this district?

What attracted you, and what makes you stay?

Family support, spirituality, and cultural background questions that cover a range of topics such as:

Tell me about the community in which you grew up. Tell me about the community in which you currently live. What is the community like in which you work?

What conditions have allowed you to be successful? What competencies are most critical to your survival and success as a principal?

How have your cultural experiences shaped you as a leader?

Is there a particular belief system that impacts and guides your life? Do you attribute your success to this?

To whom do you turn to for support? Do you have a mentor? Family support system?
Leadership questions that cover a range of topics such as:

Please tell me about your work.

How do you make sense of your role as a leader? Can you give an example?

How do you experience your day to day role as a leader? Please share stories about your ‘lived experiences.’

Race questions that cover a range of topics such as:

In what ways do you "fit in" and "not fit in"? In what ways do you participate in "shifting" behaviors?

What are some of the challenges/obstacles that you face? Which have been the most significant/disturbing challenges? Is there a relationship between these challenges and your race?

Why do you think there are so few Black principals/administrators in predominantly White settings?

How do you deal with the times when you feel that you are “wearing the mantle or carrying the torch for your race”?

How do you feel discussing race, "the elephant in the room?"

How do you deal with issues of race? Is there a difference in how you respond? What is it like to be an African American principal? To what extent, does it impact how you lead? How you understand the world?

Gender questions that cover a range of topics such as:

Women continue to be underrepresented in public school principalships in comparison to the numbers in the teaching professions. What factors do you feel influence this?

Do women lead differently than men? If so, how? Can you describe differences you see? Do young women lead differently than older women? If so, how? Do African American women lead differently than other women? If so, how?

In what ways do you think gender has influenced your experiences as a principal, if any? Please provide some specific examples

How do you feel about the term, “double jeopardy” as it relates to gender and race? Do you think there is any validity to this claim?
**Age questions that cover a range of questions such as:**

What pitfalls have you experienced related to your position as an African American young female principal? What can be done to avoid those pitfalls?

How do you think age has influenced your experience as a principal, if any? Please provide some specific examples.

**School Community Relations questions that cover a range of questions such as:**

How did the community (teachers, parents, students), react to your being hired as principal?

How do parents, students, and the faculty treat you?

What is your relationship like with the students in the school? Teachers? Parents?

What do you do to try to engage the surrounding community?

How do you create a welcoming environment to the community? How do you engage them in honest conversations?

How do you maintain visibility in your school community?

Describe ways you contribute to collegial support and staff morale.

How do you promote acceptance, tolerance, and diversity in your school?

**Implications**

What has been your greatest accomplishment thus far in your career?

What are your long term goals, educationally and professionally?

Do you have any questions for me?

**Knowing that the purpose of this study is to understand how young, African American women experience the principalship, what questions have not been asked that are vital to gaining insight?**

**What else would you like to tell me?**

Focus Group Interview Questions

**Opening Questions such as the following:**

What do you remember about your first year as a principal?
What are some invaluable lessons that you have learned as a principal?

What are some things that you wish you would have known before entering the Principalship?

What are the demographics of your setting? Due to the demographics, what are the challenges that your community faces?

*Family support, spirituality, and cultural background questions that cover a range of topics such as:*

What are the personal experiences that make you who you are?

How have your religious beliefs/spirituality contributed to your success as a leader?

*Leadership styles/traits questions that cover a range of topics such as:*

Please describe what kind of a leader you are. Give an example of your leadership behavior.

What personal traits do you believe influence your leadership? How do you view these traits as contributing to your leadership effectiveness?

*School Community Relations questions that cover a range of topics such as:*

What is it like to be a woman principal? To what extent, does it impact how you lead? How you understand the world?

What is it like to be an African American principal? To what extent, does it impact how you lead? How you understand the world?

What is it like to be a young principal? To what extent, does it impact how you lead? How you understand the world?

Have you experienced complications or unfair treatment based on your race, age or gender as it relates to your role as a principal? Please share some of the experiences.

*Implications*

What advice do you have for women, young African American women in particular, who aspire to leadership positions?

What characteristics do you have that you feel have made you successful as a young African American female principal?
Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval

Office of Research Subjects Protection BioTechnology Research Park
BioTech One, 800 E. Leigh Street. Suite 3000 P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, Virginia 23298-0568 (804) 828-0868
(804) 827-1448 (fax)

DATE: March 28, 2013

TO: Charol Shakeshaft, PhD
School of Education. Educational Leadership Box 842020

FROM: Lisa M. Abrams. PhD Chairperson. VCU IRB Panel B Box 980568

RE: VCU IRB # : HM14264
Title: The Experiences of Young African American Women Principals

On March 28. 2013, this research study was approved for continuation, by expedited review according to 45 CFR 46.108(b) and 45 CFR 46.109(e) and 45 CFR 46.110 Categories 6 and 7.

VCU IRB APPROVED PROTOCOL (Research Plan): The Experiences of Young African American Women Principals, received 2/18/13. version date 4/12/112 VCU IRB Study Personnel Roster, received 2/18/13, version date 9/1/12

VCU IRB APPROVED CONSENT/ASSENT FORM: None

This approval expires on February 28, 2014. Federal RegulationsNCU Policy and Procedures require continuing review prior to continuation of approval past that date. Continuing Review report forms will be mailed to you prior to the scheduled review.

The Primary Reviewer assigned to your research study is Ananda Amstadter, PhD. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Amstadter at abamstadter@vcu.edu and 828-8129; or you may contact Jennifer Rice, IRB Coordinator, VCU Office of Research Subjects Protection, at irbpanelb@vcu.edu and 828-3992.

Attachment – Conditions of Approval
In order to comply with federal regulations, industry standards, and the terms of this approval, the investigator must (as applicable):

Conduct the research as described in and required by the Protocol.

2. Obtain informed consent from all subjects without coercion or undue influence, and provide the potential: subject sufficient opportunity to consider whether or not to participate (unless Waiver of Consent is specifically approved or research is exempt).

3. Document informed consent using only the most recently dated consent form bearing the VCU IRE "APPROVED" stamp (unless Waiver of Consent is specifically approved);

   Provide non-English speaking patients with a translation of the approved Consent Form in the research participant's first language. The Panel must approve the translated version.

5. Obtain prior approval from VCU IRB before implementing any changes whatsoever in the approved protocol or consent form, unless such changes are necessary to protect the safety of human research participants (e.g., permanent/temporary change of PI, addition of performance/collaborative sites, request to include newly incarcerated participants or participants that are wards of the state, addition/deletion of participant groups, etc.). Any departure from these approved documents must be reported to the VCU IRB immediately as an Unanticipated Problem (see #7).

   a. Monitor all problems (anticipated and unanticipated) associated with risk to research participants or others.

7. Report Unanticipated Problems (UPs), including protocol deviations, following the VCU IRB requirements and timelines detailed in VCU IRB WPP VIII-7.

8. Obtain prior approval from the VCU IRB before use of any advertisement or other material for recruitment of research participants.

9. Promptly report and/or respond to all inquiries by the VCU IRB concerning the conduct of the approved research when so requested.

10. All protocols that administer acute medical treatment to human research participants must have an emergency preparedness plan. Please refer to VCU guidance on http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/guidance.htm.

   a. Department of Health and Human Services Title 45 CFR 46, Subparts A, B, C, and D (for all research, regardless of source of funding) and related guidance documents.

   b. U.S. Food and Drug Administration Chapter I of Title 21 CFR 50 and 56 (for FDA regulated research only) and related guidance documents.

   Commonwealth of Virginia Code of Virginia 32.1 Chapter 5.1 Human Research (for all research).

[0105071]
VITA

Tanya Roane was born and raised in Glen Allen, VA to parents, Alvin and Robin Roane. After graduating from Hermitage High School, she went to Virginia Union University where she studied and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in English. Later, she earned a Masters of Art in English Literature from Virginia State University. She is an educator with a passion for children. She has 15 years of experience in education, and as been a principal for 7 years. Currently, she is the principal at Francis L. Cardozo High School in Washington, DC. One of Ms. Roane’s mantras that she lives by is from the great scholar, Dr. Cornel West; it states, “You can’t lead the people if you don’t love the people. You can’t save the people if you don’t serve the people.” Ms. Roane has dedicated her life to the field of education and ensuring that all students are afforded an opportunity to receive a quality education that will empower them to be life-long learners and to have the skills that they will need in order to compete in a globalized society. Her research interests are: black feminist theory, standpoint theory, experiences of minority women in the field of educational administration, and qualitative research.