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## **A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of African American Female School Leaders in Suburban School Districts**

Armentress Denise Robinson  
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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS IN SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2013

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# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS IN SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

ARMENTRESS D. ROBINSON

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. These school districts were identified as suburban locations because of low to no student poverty, stellar performances on standardized tests, high graduation and college going rates, and champion academic and athletic team honors. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design to allow the researcher the opportunity to investigate and gather data through open-ended, face-to-face, one hour interviews with study participants. Three theoretical frameworks—critical race theory, racial identity development theory, and black feminist thought theory—were utilized for this qualitative study.

Ten African American female school leaders serving as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators from four suburban school districts in the southeast region of the United States were involved in this study. Each district was located only miles from a major metropolis. After data analysis, seven themes emerged from the thick, rich descriptions provided through study participants' interviews. The seven themes were (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) caring for family and

self, (c) resilience and spirituality, (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking, (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships. Study participants had a multiplicity of positive and challenging experiences as African American female school leaders. They were resilient and spiritually-grounded which aided them in answering the call to leadership.

The study of the lived personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female suburban school leaders may be helpful to educational researchers and practitioners, colleges and universities, boards of education, school districts, schools, and all African American females who aspire to become school leaders in suburban school districts. By exploring the lives of these school leaders, greater insights may be gained to open the door to this underrepresented population. This research may be valuable for professional development planning and educational leadership programs with the objective of recruiting and retaining more African American female suburban school leaders.

Keywords: lived experiences, minority, school leader, sociocultural, suburban

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the little Black girls who are never told that you are loved, you are beautiful, you are smart, and you are more than good enough!!!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All praise and thanksgiving belong to my Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. He truly gave me the much-needed grace and strength to complete this research study. This has truly been quite a phenomenal experience which has enriched me spiritually, personally, and intellectually. I learned two powerful lessons while completing this phase of my educational journey. First, I realized how much I did not know. Second, I realized how much I needed God. I am grateful for the blessings this experience has given me.

I acknowledge with the deepest of heartfelt gratitude the wisdom, guidance, and quick wit of Dr. Loucrecia Collins, my dissertation committee chairperson, mentor, and othermother. God knew exactly what He was doing when He allowed our paths to cross. To my other committee members, Drs. Tondra Loder-Jackson, Evelyn Nettles, Tonya Perry, and Michele Sims, I am truly grateful for the sacrifices you made to offer your advice, support, and expertise throughout this process. This dissertation would not have been possible without the 10 phenomenal study participants. Thank you for trusting me to tell your stories.

To my biological, church, school, and community family and friends, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers, encouragement, and support throughout the years. You are indeed the best village a girl could ever have. You are simply the best!!!

To my parents, Floyd and Bertha Robinson, there are not enough words to express how much you mean to me. You have always been my greatest cheerleaders. I have been able to count on your support throughout the years. I am so thankful that God gave me to

you. Thank you for telling me that I am loved, I am beautiful, I am smart, and I am more than good enough. You are truly the wind beneath my wings. I love you with all my heart!!!



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Women comprise approximately 84% of the teaching workforce in public schools in the United States, yet female leaders only comprise approximately 29% of principalships in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008). Women are “overrepresented in teaching” but “underrepresented in administration” (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 100). The irony of it is that women are the majority of students enrolled in educational administration programs (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007; Sherman, 2005). With expansive research on educational leadership, equity, diversity, and social justice have become significant topics of interest (Horsford, 2012; Loder, 2002). Women are still in the minority as school leaders with African American women comprising even smaller numbers in leadership positions (Alston, 2012; Brown, 2005; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Jean-Marie, 2008). Moreover, the stigma of gender and racial biases are quite common in today's society, including school districts where women and people of color are often ignored for leadership positions (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Society plays a critical role in forming gendered norms and expectations for men and women (Lorber, 1994). African American men and women encounter race and gender issues as part of society's “fundamental organizing principle of social structure” (Collins, 1998, p. 209).

Educational leadership in the 21st century requires individuals who have the ability to build positive working relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds

with diverse experiences (Tatum, 2007). A key factor of this realization is the need to recruit and retain more African American women in school leadership positions (Brown, 2005). The history of women in leadership does not provide a fair and proportionate representation compared to their male counterparts (Shakeshaft, 1999). The significant contributions of African Americans, especially women, in the areas of education and educational leadership have been greatly undervalued (Jackson, 1999; Reed & Evans, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative to know the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female school leaders in order to garner a different perspective of educational leadership.

For the most part, African American women have been ignored unless they had the benefits of a sponsor—someone willing to speak up for them (Campbell, 1982). Even with having a sponsor, African American female school leaders and Caucasian American female school leaders have received varying degrees of support because of race (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011/2012). Mainstream tradition and stereotypes need to be eliminated through empirical research about their lived experiences as African American female school leaders (Campbell, 1982). Again, the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American female school leaders need to be an integral part of the conversation regarding educational leadership. Most school leadership positions are held by Caucasian men (Brown, 2009). According to Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000), “Because the majority of educational administration positions are held by Caucasian males, the limited perspective of the aforementioned population aids in the current marginalization of women and people of color from the ranks of administration” (p. 533).

However, traditional scholars have suggested that gender is no longer a major concern when it comes to leadership because enough has already been done for women (Gardiner, Grogan, & Enimoto, 1999). Historically, women have been the minority in holding leadership positions (Shakeshaft, 1999). Chin (2011) confirmed, “Women are still considered an anomaly compared to men when in high positions of leadership” (p. 2). The challenge within the leadership arena is to increase the number of women—as well as the number of women of color—in leadership positions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). African American women can serve as “bridge leaders and role models for educational leaders in twenty-first century schools” (Horsford, 2012, p. 12). By sharing their personal, professional, and personal experiences, African American female school leaders may provide the insight needed for current and aspiring minority female school leaders.

For a century, from 1870 to 1970, African American teachers instructed African American children in “all-Black schools” resulting in unity and leadership within the African American community (Fairclough, 2007, p. 5). African American teachers and administrators were viewed as community leaders (Fairclough, 2007; Loder-Jackson, 2012). However, the monumental turning point for African Americans in the area of education was the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas (1954). The role of African American school leaders within the African American community was crucial following the *Brown* (1954) decision (Tillman, 2004a). African American school leaders were the bridges that connected home and school as they worked with parents to gain resources for school and served as instructional leaders (Tillman, 2004a). Tillman (2004b) stated, “...one of the consequences of the

desegregation of America's schools was the loss of Black principals and thus the exclusion of voices and perspectives that were critical to the education of Black children" (p. 113).

In addition to *Brown* (1954), the passing of federal laws such as *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964* prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, color, sex, or national origin (Sharp & Walter, 2003). *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972* prohibited discriminatory treatment based on gender which included the employment of all personnel (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). The aforementioned federal laws were instrumental "to the advancement of African American women to the principalship" (Loder-Jackson, 2009, p. 226). Consequently, women were ideal candidates for teaching positions thus making it more difficult for them to cross the traditional gender boundaries of school leadership which had been set several years before (Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1999; Williamson & Hudson, 2002). Even if women in leadership positions performed well, they were identified as masculine because these roles were traditionally for men (Blount, 1998; Williamson & Hudson, 2002). Nevertheless, an increased effort to "recruit and retain women of color at all levels" of educational leadership is drastically important (Tillman and Cochran, 2000, p. 50). Although women have made modest progress over the years, not much is known about the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of minority women as leaders in the educational field (Celikten, 2005).

### **Rationale**

The voices and lived experiences of African American female school leaders are important to the study of leadership (Alston, 2012). By studying the lived experiences of 10 African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts, a better



understanding of leadership and recognition of certain abilities exhibited by these women may be achieved (Mendez-Morse, 2004; Reed, 2012). This study provided insight and voice to the individual lives of these 10 African American female study participants, thereby addressing the gap in literature pertaining to this minority group (Grant, 2012). This research study added to the conversation of the lived experiences of African American females in educational leadership.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of 10 African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts located in southeastern United States.

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: What perspectives do these study participants have regarding their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? The subquestions for the study were: (a) What challenges have participants encountered as an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (b) How do participants deal with these challenges? (c) What positive experiences have occurred as a result of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (d) How do participants acknowledge these positive experiences? (e) How do participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position?

### **Significance of the Study**

Because there is a small percentage of African American females in school leadership positions, this study was significant in that it provided insight into the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of this minority group, especially as the student population within suburban schools was becoming more diverse. Study participants had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings regarding their roles within the K-12 school setting in demographically-changing suburban school districts. Attention to diversity in educational leadership needed to be given with the increase of students of color in the PreK-12 school setting (Brown, 2005).

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was that data collection and analysis were confined to the participating 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts in the southeastern United States. This research study did not account for the experiences of other minority females in those particular school districts. The only data collected were study participant interviews. Participants were not observed in their daily routines as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. Teacher perspectives of participants' leadership style and ability were unaccounted for in this study. Researcher bias was a crucial component of the methodology and could not be completely omitted. However, I utilized member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2008). Although these strategies were advantageous in decreasing researcher bias, qualitative research takes into account the researcher's experiences. As a result, the conclusions drawn in this study were subject to other interpretations and analysis.

### **Assumptions**

There were a number of assumptions that served as catalysts to this investigation, including the following:

- African American female assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators in the southeastern United States would participate in this study.
- Study participants would be able to verbalize their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences through insights, thoughts, and impressions.
- Study participants would provide truthful and accurate accounts of their individual experiences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework provided an overall orienting lens for the study of questions of gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalized groups) (Creswell, 2009). This lens [framework] provided became an advocacy perspective that shaped the types of questions asked, informed how data were collected and analyzed, and provided a call for action or change (Creswell, 2009). As a result of the historical aspect of race and race relations as well as gender within the educational setting, I chose to employ three theoretical frameworks: critical race theory, racial identity development theory, and black feminist thought theory.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical race theory (CRT) surfaced in the 1970s in the school of critical legal studies (Closson, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) defined critical race theory as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2). CRT emerged

from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both of whom were disturbed about the slow movement of racial reform in The United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Bell (1993) felt that CRT was crucial for reform by addressing the issues of inequality experienced by African Americans. CRT was delineated as “a logical outgrowth of the discontent of legal scholars of color” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). It could be described as an analysis of racial reform efforts (Closson, 2010). CRT has been commonly associated with secondary and postsecondary education (Jain, 2010). The overall purpose of CRT in the field of education was to address the inequalities of school experiences by students of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The premise behind CRT served as a theoretical framework as I explored the lived experiences of African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. One key aspect of critical race theories was that participants were able to name their own reality or had their own voice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory has a storytelling nature which allowed study participants to share their lived experiences (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). By sharing their lived experiences, participants gave voice to a group which had been described as marginalized (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Similarly, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) stated, “As we attempt to make linkages between critical race theory and education, we contend that the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system” (p. 58). Having a need for these voices, Collins (1998) further explained, “I also know that, lacking a collective voice, individual voices like mine will become fainter until, one day, many may forget that we spoke at all” (p. 76).

According to Alston (2012), “Critical Race Theory provides such a framework for the examination and discussion of racial issues, especially the lives of Black female leaders who work in culturally incongruent racial settings” (p. 128). By utilizing CRT as a theoretical framework, participants became empowered as they heard their own personal stories as well as the stories of others (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Fitzgerald (2003) indicated the following as it related to the lived experiences of minority women in educational leadership:

In order to uncover the complexities and contradictions that women of colour as well as women from a range of ethnic and Indigenous groups face as educational leaders, it is imperative that a conscious attempt is made to understand the historical, social, economic and professional circumstances of women’s lives and intersections of class, social location and ethnicity. (pp. 8-9)

### **Racial Identity Development Theory**

The research of the racial identity development theory has been conducted since the 1970s when Cross wrote an article entitled *The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience: Towards a Psychology of Black Liberation* (McMahan, Singh, Haston, & Urbano, 2010). This was the time of research and development of black psychology. Originally, Cross’s theory:

tracked the identity development stages that Black American adults traverse in movement away from an identity that places low or even negative salience on Black identity toward the achievement of an identity that places positive emphasis on race and Black culture. (Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006, p. 70)

The ultimate goal of racial identity development theory was that one’s racial identity was entirely integrated into one’s total identity (Sneed et al., 2006). However, Tatum (1992) opined, “It is assumed that in a society where racial-group membership is emphasized, the development of a racial identity will occur in some form in everyone” (p. 9). Cross’s

article analyzed the stages and levels of awareness as people moved from being Negro to being Black (McMahan et al., 2010).

In focusing on Cross's Model of Psychological Nigrescence (becoming Black), the racial identity development theory was based on five stages: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment (Henry, 2008). Cross (1971) acknowledged, "I have attempted to construct a model depicting the various stages persons traverse in becoming Black oriented" (p. 14). It was believed these stages led to the progressive result of becoming psychologically healthy (Henry, 2008). Psychological health occurred when one's attitude shifted from accepting society's belief about one's ethnic or racial group to utilizing one's "Blackness" as a social frame of reference with regard to identity (Henry, 2008, p. 18). In today's race-conscious society, there is a crucial need for people of color to possess a positive racial identity of themselves (Tatum, 2007).

### **Black Feminist Thought Theory (BFT)**

Historically, the African American voice in feminist theory has been suppressed (Collins, 1991). African American women's ideas and experiences were ignored rather than embraced by Caucasian women (Collins, 1991). The feminist theory focused mainly on Caucasian, middle-class women rather than African American women (Collins, 1991). Collins (1998) purported, "In its broadest sense, feminism constitutes both an ideology and a global political movement that confronts sexism, a social relationship in which men as a collectivity have authority over women as collectivity" (p. 66).

Black feminist thought consisted of "specialized knowledge created by African American women, which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women" (Collins, 1991,

p. 22). It encompassed the realities lived by Black women (Collins, 1991). These realities provided a unique perspective regarding womanhood which was “unavailable to other groups” (Collins, 1991, p. 33). African American women were able to have authority of their experiences through freedom and reflection (Collins, 1998). Black feminist thought provided African American women with the opportunity to view themselves differently as well as their world in a stark contrast to the perspective offered by “the established social order” (Collins, 1989, p. 750). The purpose of Black feminist thought was to counter the invisibility of African American women “by presenting sociological analyses of Black women as fully human subjects” (Collins, 1986, p. S28). Black feminist thought theory provided “observations and interpretations regarding what it means to be an African American woman” (Collins, 1986, p. S16). Black feminist thought brought validation to unique experiences as lived by African American women (Grant, 2012).

The aforementioned theories were pertinent to explore how African American female school leaders functioned in suburban school districts where they were the minority rather than the majority and the impact of their presence within these suburban school districts. Study participants utilized their voices and shared their lived personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences as African American female school leaders in suburban school districts.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, there was a list of defined key terms:

- Black feminist thought theory: “Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women” (Collins, 1991, p. 22). BFT “encompasses theoretical

interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1991, p. 22).

- *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas (1954): *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas (1954) was the case in which the Supreme Court unanimously declared that separate but equal schooling was not equal (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).
- Content analysis: Content analysis is a technique of data analysis in which detailed review of text content leads to themes (Lichtman, 2012).
- Critical race theory (CRT): Critical race theory began in the 1970s in the school of critical legal studies. It was delineated as a movement of "activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2).
- Criterion sampling: Criterion sampling was when all cases meet some criterion; beneficial for quality assurance (Creswell, 2007).
- Hermeneutical phenomenology: Hermeneutical phenomenology "combines both interpretive/hermeneutic methods and descriptive/phenomenological methods for the purpose of examining the lived experiences or lifeworlds of people being studied" (Hatch, 2002, p. 29).
- Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Interpretive phenomenological analysis "involves the detailed examination of the lived experiences of individuals" (Lichtman, 2012, p. 260).



- Lived experiences: Lived experiences are “in a phenomenology, the experiences described by participants that lead to the essence of the experience” (Lichtman, 2012, p. 324).
- Minority: Minority means “a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group” (*Britannica Academic Edition*, 2012).
- Phenomenology: Phenomenology was a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identified the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2009).
- Qualitative research: Qualitative research is  
a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner (Creswell, 2008, p. 46).
- Racial identity development theory: Racial identity development theory has been conducted since the 1970s; five stages were developed as African Americans transitioned to being Black-oriented (Cross, 1971).
- School leader: School leader was a school administrator (principal and superintendent) “charged with leading our nation’s schools and school districts” (Levine, 2005, p. 5). For the purpose of this study, school leader also included assistant principal and any central office leadership position.
- Sociocultural: Sociocultural involved a combination of social and cultural matters (<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/sociocultural>, 2012).

- Suburban schools: Suburban schools “are located in residential areas on the outside of metropolitan areas and compared to many urban schools, often have higher standardized test scores, college going rates, and attendance rates” (Tefera, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1). Suburban schools generally were “the best routes to the best colleges, which provide the best career and life opportunities” (Anderson & Summerfield, 2004, p. 29).
- Suburbs: Suburbs “are settlements outside of cities...” (McDonogh, 2006, p. 471). They “signify fresh air, trees, and grass...” (Anderson & Summerfield, 2004, p. 30). Suburbs were depicted “as white-flight, middle-class enclaves, the epitome of artificiality in Western culture” (Anderson & Summerfield, 2004, pp. 29-30).
- Themes: Themes were also known as categories; similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database (Creswell, 2008).
- *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*: *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964* prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, color, sex, or national origin (Sharp & Walter, 2003).
- *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972*: *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972* was originally interpreted to apply only to students, prohibiting, on the basis of sex, the exclusion of a student from participation in any education program or activity receiving financial assistance from the federal government. This law was broadened by the Supreme Court decisions in the 1980s to include employees as well as students (Sharp & Walter, 2003).

- Transcendental phenomenology: Transcendental phenomenology involves the researcher setting aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated. The researcher relies on “intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 237).

### **Philosophical Paradigm**

With any qualitative study, researchers bring their own perspectives, experiences, and belief sets to the project or research study (Creswell, 2007). There are four worldviews which lend themselves to qualitative research, including: postpositivist, social constructivist, advocacy and participatory, and pragmatic. Social constructivism emphasizes “the importance of the participants’ view...and highlighted the meaning people personally held about educational issues” (Creswell, 2008, p. 50). Participants desire to comprehend their lives (Creswell, 2007).

For this phenomenological study, I utilized the constructivist viewpoint which took into account multiple perspectives. It was not limited to looking at a research question or study from one vantage point. The constructivist viewpoint was about pulling various perspectives to get as much of the whole picture as possible. According to Plano Clark and Creswell (2008), “...there are diversities of viewpoints with regard to many social realities but that those viewpoints need to be placed within political, cultural, historical, and economic value systems to understand...” (pp. 74-75). In looking at the worldviews of logical positivism and constructivism, the constructivist worldview was most appropriate regarding this research study of the lived experiences of African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Women and people of color have made significant contributions in education and educational leadership (Jackson, 1999; Reed & Evans, 2008). With regard to educational leadership, the aforementioned groups have been the minority when compared to their Caucasian male counterparts. Historically, African Americans have been underrepresented in educational leadership positions (Brown, 2005). When selected as school leaders, African American principals were placed in high-poverty, low-performing schools which resulted in longer work days and shorter tenures (Brooks, 2012). However, in recent years, a demographic shift has occurred with more students of color moving to suburban school districts (Brooks, 2012). Between 1950 and 1970, there was an increase of middle class families moving from urban communities to suburban communities causing an increase in "racial disparities" thus leading to more segregated schools (Clotfelter, 2004).

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the percentage of African American and Hispanic American students in the fall of 2009 in large suburban school districts was 38% compared to 54% Caucasian American students. In mid-size suburban school districts, the percentage was 30% to 65%; in small suburban school districts, the percentage was 27% to 67%. To emphasize these statistical facts, Brown (2005) stated, "As open systems, schools in a racially diverse society will require

leaders and models of leadership that will address the racial, cultural, and ethnic makeup of the school community” (p. 585).

Whether it is in a small or large quantity, diversity can be seen in urban, suburban, and rural school districts (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007). Schools are the primary institutions where children of diverse backgrounds are assembled together for extended periods of time over the course of several years (Evans, 2007; Tyson, 2011). The preparation and placement of minority school leaders needs to be reflective of demographically-changing schools. With this in mind, Coursen, Mazzarella, Jeffress, and Hadderman (1989) suggested, “If the schools are to retain members of all cultural and racial groups, they must have leadership that is representative of all these groups” (p. 86).

As demonstrated in the literature, when a minority female advances to a school leadership position, she is usually assigned to poor, underperforming schools (Bridges, 2010; Loder, 2002). Yet, there is the opportunity to increase the number of African American female school leaders in suburban school districts (McCray et al., 2007). Madsen and Mabokela (2002) indicated “the representation of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in leadership positions was very low, and in some districts there were no minorities at all” (p. 39). Even though women constituted 84% of the teaching workforce in public schools in the United States, female leaders only comprised 29% of principalships in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008). In terms of African American women, the percentages were much lower with 10% principals in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008).

Few studies have been conducted regarding the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of minority women as school leaders (Haar & Robicheau, 2009;

Katz, 2012; Loder, 2005a; Sherman & Wrushen, 2009). The personal experiences of minority women as school leaders have focused on race and gender and role variance in school leadership (Holtcamp, 2002; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt & Buchanan, 2008; Smulyan, 2000). The professional experiences of minority women focused on mentoring partnerships and contributions made in school leadership (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Cattapan, 1998; Mendez-Morse, 2004; Peters, 2010; Wrushen & Sherman, 2008). The sociocultural experiences of minority women focused on historical activism and community involvement in school leadership (Johnson, 2006; Loder, 2005b; Randolph, 2012).

### **Personal Experiences**

In a previous qualitative study, the personal lives of women played an integral part in functioning effectively as school leaders (Haar & Robicheau, 2009). Women shared personal stories and insights regarding how their personal experiences developed them as school leaders (Holtcamp, 2002; Settles et al., 2008; Smulyan, 2000). As stated by Loder-Jackson (2009), "...African American women principals must rely on their own resourcefulness and ingenuity to get the job done both at work and at home" (p. 227). Race and gender in school leadership and role variance in school leadership were the focal points of the study participants' personal experiences as a school leader.

**Race and gender in school leadership.** Much of the early research on educational leadership, conducted by White male researchers, did not explore race and gender differences (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis). In some cultures, being a woman and a minority were viewed as a double disadvantage (Racciah-Addi, 2005). Race and gender were critical issues with regard to school leadership (Reed, 2012). The characteristics that

women brought into the leadership role were generally “undervalued” in educational leadership (Reese, 2012). However, the combination of race and gender may provide a deeper understanding of perception on the part of African American school leaders and other individuals within the field of education (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009).

Smulyan (2000) described the impact of gender in a woman’s life by acknowledging that the role of gender in one’s life seemed to imply an inability to function competently as a school leader. The case studies of three women principals were investigated in order to better understand the role of gender in school leadership. The investigator found that gender influenced principals’ personal and professional lives. The process of being a principal was also affected by principals’ race, class, personal and professional background, and the context within each principal worked.

Chisholm (2001) emphasized the overwhelming presence of women in the education profession in South Africa. However, this was not the case for educational leadership and management; women were indeed the minority. Chisholm noted that the constructs of leadership were race and gender. The three issues which emerged as a result of this study included: acceptance of authority, visibility and recognition, and relationship between public and private life. Participants admitted that they drew strength and support from others which helped tremendously as they faced the challenges of being an educational leader.

In Holtcamp's (2002) investigation, certain factors affected female principals because of the social acceptance of men in leadership roles which caused reluctance in women to pursue educational administration positions. Characteristics and attributes of female public school principals were analyzed to gain a better understanding of personal

characteristics which transcended cultural and ethnic boundaries. Five personal characteristics were highly significant to participants: driven to achieve, spiritual, involved in professional organizations, important to community leaders, and valued personal relationships. All of these women faced the same challenges, shared common values, and possessed similar beliefs.

Reed's (2012) multicase study involved three African American female urban high school principals. Participants indicated that they were not taken as seriously as their male colleagues. All three principals admitted to dealing with racism and sexism on their jobs.

**Role variance in school leadership.** It is crucial for school leaders to be cognizant of the critical role they play in the lives of their students (Espinoza, 2012). Lyman (2008) asserted, "Leadership practices of women of color often emerge from values of nurturing and protecting the children as well as expecting the best from and for them" (p. 188). According to Beauboef-Lafontant (2002), being maternal was seen as having "a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of black children and black people" (p. 76). School leaders were able to meet the academic, social, and psychological needs of students through interpersonal caring and institutional caring (Walker & Archung, 2003).

Reitzug and Patterson (1998) performed a naturalistic inquiry study of an African American female urban middle school principal, "Debbie". Debbie exemplified "caring and empowering practices" while interacting with her students (p. 153). Debbie expressed that her role as principal was to facilitate learning and empower others.



Wood's (2005) mixed methods study involved the principal's role in the success of novice teachers within their respective schools. Urban high, middle, and elementary school principals were purposively selected for this study. The findings indicated that principals had three major roles in relation to novice teachers, identified as as: school culture builders, instructional leaders, and coordinators of mentors.

Loder (2005a) investigated the dilemmas that women in educational administration faced which were similar to those faced by women in the corporate sector. In this course theory study, she explained the differences and similarities in how women administrators negotiated work-family conflicts. The overwhelming responsibility for managing work-family conflicts fell mainly on female administrators.

In a study by Witherspoon and Arnold (2010), the role of spirituality in the leadership styles of four African American female school principals was documented through a narrative research study. Participants expressed that spiritual values and beliefs influenced their experiences as school leaders.

### **Professional Experiences**

In looking at the professional lives of women in previous studies, it was noted that women were key people in the success of their schools (Lewis, 2007; Lyman, 2008). These school leaders provided examples from their professional lives which aided in their growth as educational leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Fennell, 2005; Mendez-Morse, 2004). Mentoring partnerships in school leadership and recognition of contributions in school leadership were the focal points of the study participants' professional experiences as a school leader.

**Mentoring partnerships in school leadership.** Mentoring was a critical factor in the development of school leaders and served as a means to train current and aspiring school leaders (Riley, 2009). Findings suggested that aspiring leaders in nontraditional fields and minority females would benefit greatly from mentoring partnerships (Alston, 2000). African American female principals emphasized the importance of having mentors who supported and encouraged them as they fulfilled their responsibilities as educational leaders. It was essential for formal and informal mentoring partnerships to occur between veteran and novice African American female school leaders to result in positive results for mentors, protégés, schools, students, and communities (Reed, 2012). According to Crawford and Smith (2005), “The task of the mentor is to afford the protégé with opportunities to learn and practice and to reward him or her so that acquired knowledge, performance, and motivation increase” (p. 64). Mentoring was the essential component for social capital which “derived from interacting with colleagues and establishing positive relationships” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 172).

Allen, Jacobson, and Lomotey (1995) explored the importance of mentoring partnerships to account for the limited research about African American women as educational administrators and the role of mentors and sponsors in heightening their careers. This exploratory study was developed to understand the roles and significance of mentors and sponsors to African-American women principals. Mentors and sponsors both played important roles in the success of African American school administrators.

Cattapan's (1998) study examined the role mentoring played in the lives of women administrators. Four women in various stages of their administrative careers were interviewed in order to understand the importance of being mentored. Participants

identified fellow colleagues who encouraged them to pursue leadership roles. Also, participants expressed the fact that their respective school districts had no formal mentoring programs. However, not having a formal mentoring program did not deter them from acting informally as mentors to others—whether teachers or administrators.

Gardiner et al. (1999) conducted research regarding women being mentored into educational leadership roles in their respective schools. They indicated that participants struggled with conflicts between the public role of leadership and the desire to maintain personal priorities and values. Mentors were essential in demonstrating the need to successfully balance professional and personal lives.

In another study, Enimoto, Gardiner, and Grogan (2000) described how mentoring provided access for women of color into educational administration. Study participants included 14 African Americans and four Hispanic American female educational leaders who served as mentors or protégés. The roles of the mentor were viewed as supporter, guide, protector, and advocate. Six needs of protégés were identified: “(a) gaining political savvy, (b) accessing networks, (c) finding mentors who are similar to their protégés, (d) seeking mentors who were different from their protégés, (e) having more than one mentor, and (f) securing alternative support systems” (p. 577). It was suggested that mentoring could be utilized for diversity among educational leadership and promote those who may lead differently.

Mendez-Morse's (2004) study addressed the limited knowledge of how Latinas were similar to or different from white or other minority female educational leaders. An investigative study documented the impact of role models, mentors, or other influences on Latina school leaders in west Texas. She determined that participants' role models

were unique, tangible matches of gender and ethnicity. Individuals in educational leadership programs could dialogue to form partnerships with district administrators or school board members concerning people and women of color who exhibited leadership skills.

Peters (2010) researched the mentoring relationship between a first-year African American female elementary school principal and her mentor in an urban school district. The mentor was delineated as a navigator, teacher, coach, sounding board, model, and mutual learner along with the protégé. The mentoring partnership resulted in professional and personal growth for both participants. The mentor aided the protégé through leadership challenges while allowing the protégé to express her unique leadership vision and style.

### **Recognition of contributions of African American females in school**

**leadership.** Historically, men were recognized for their contributions in African American educational leadership, however, African American women made significant contributions as well (Reed, 2012). Despite racism and sexism, African American women contributed to the development and leadership of African American schools (Reed, 2012). The role of African American women in educational leadership was evident in the efforts of Lucy Laney, Mary McCleod Bethune, and Nannie Helen Burroughs (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). These educational leaders “built schools that responded to the needs of Black children, families, and communities” (Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 598). African American female school leaders had to overcome obstacles in order to provide an education for African American children (Reed, 2012).

Freiberg's (1993) study revealed the efforts of an elementary school principal in an urban school district. "Ms. Jones" formed alliances with parents, teachers, students, and other community stakeholders, such as local businesses and churches. The principal was delineated as a community leader who was an advocate for students and teachers and worked diligently to ensure they had the resources they needed.

Gupton and Slick (1996) conducted a study in which 15 participants shared their experiences as female school leaders by offering advice to aspiring female school leaders. Participants communicated the need to be prepared by having the necessary degrees and credentials and being well-read regarding the most current issues within the education profession. They also shared the importance of being diligent and professional at all times by excelling in performances and maintaining positive working relationships with others. Participants emphasized the need to honor, preserve, and protect integrity by being their own unique self—maintain your values while respecting the values of others. They reported that reaching out to and through others were essential to career advancement by way of mentoring and being mentored. Finally, participants indicated the best way to lead was definitely by example. It was expressed that school districts needed to overcome sexist barriers and misleading perceptions in order to embrace women school leaders by choosing more of them to lead within their school districts.

Benham (1997) revealed the lived experiences of three African American female school leaders. Through a narrative study, the investigator shared stories of these three women as teachers and school leaders. Participants shared critical experiences which expanded their knowledge and understanding of school leadership. Participants identified the importance of collaboration, school leadership, and best practices.

Jackson's (1999) study explored the lived experiences of current and former African American female superintendents. Each participant was highly educated and had a resume of serving in various leadership positions before taking the helm as superintendent. The “voices” of these women were heard as they shared their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences. Participants discussed family, church involvement, teachers/mentor, leadership style, boards, power, and politics, and gender and race.

Bloom and Erlandson (2003) demonstrated how working as a principal in a large urban school could be difficult and dangerous. The researchers used naturalistic inquiry to expose the lived experiences of three African American women principals in urban schools. It was revealed that racist and sexist practices operated in public school systems. Also, it was crucial to listen to the voices of African American women in leadership to change minds and social constructs in public schools.

Wrushen and Sherman (2008) found a limited number of studies focused on African American, Hispanic American, Native American, and Asian American women school leaders. This qualitative study clarified differences and similarities of women leaders from various backgrounds. Investigators uncovered that the experiences of participants were quite similar in terms of personal backgrounds and early influences, personal and professional balance, gender and leadership, ethnicity and leadership, and power. Participants voiced that individuals preparing individuals for secondary level leadership should allow aspiring leaders opportunities to discover their own leadership style.

In another study, Sherman and Wrushen (2009) developed a qualitative study which focused on the leadership experiences of four minority women principals in secondary schools. Participants viewed themselves as collaborative and servant leaders within their schools. They all described the importance of spirituality as the guiding force in their daily actions and decision-making as school leaders. Participants acknowledged the impact of having positive experiences with women administrators who served as their mentors. As a way of showing their appreciation to the women who mentored them, participants mentored and advised aspiring female school administrators.

Haar and Robicheau (2009) studied the underrepresentation of minority women in school administration. The purpose of this study was to add to the literature regarding the lack of minority women in school leadership positions. Researchers examined the experiences of these women with the belief of sharing their perceptions with leadership preparation programs at colleges and universities. Researchers elucidated that there was a need for leadership preparation programs to be more cognizant of minority women. Colleges and universities needed to make a conscious effort to reach out to minority women.

In an interview, Clayton and Slaughter-Defoe (2012) conversed with Dr. Constance E. Clayton, regarding her 11-year tenure as the first African American female to serve as superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). During her tenure, Dr. Clayton made it a point to visit every school within the district. Her desired legacy was that she was an advocate for children and respected them and their families.

## **Sociocultural Experiences**

The sociocultural experiences dealt with the past contributions and social contributions of African Americans in educational leadership. In a historical case study, the life of the first African American woman principal in New York City was examined (Johnson, 2006). In viewing the social aspect of their lives, African American women reflected on the progress they had made since the Civil Rights era to present day (Loder, 2005b). African American schools and communities were impacted by social changes (Loder, 2005c). Historical activism in school leadership and community involvement in school leadership were the focal points of the study participant's sociocultural experiences as a school leader.

**History of activism in African American school leadership.** Historical biographies of African American men and women served as a bridge to link the past to the present in terms of how leaders worked within the African American community to educate African American children (Randolph & Sanders, 2011). Even in the midst of racism and sexism, African American school leaders were actively involved to improve the quality of life for others through education (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Despite these obstacles, educational leadership had been performed by individuals of African descent throughout "all periods of U.S. history" (Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 592).

Boukari (2005) discussed the advancement of African American females as they progressed from students to educators. The researcher highlighted the contributions of Anna Julia Cooper, who served as a school principal; Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who founded the Parker Memorial Institute at the age of 19 at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Mary McLeod Bethune who established the Daytona Educational and Industrial



Institute which later merged with Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College. The struggles endured by these women, as well as other African American female educational leaders, were viewed as the ultimate sacrifice for all African Americans.

Loder's (2005b) study illustrated the stories of African American women principals as they reflected on their roles and positions as school leaders. She addressed the limited knowledge and understanding that accompany the tradition of African American education pre- and post-Civil Rights. This study examined African American women's reflections on being principals prior to and after the Civil Rights era. It was indicated that those from the pre-Civil Rights era had to overcome great barriers to become principals and assistant principals. However, those from the post-Civil Rights era communicated that they did not have any barriers to prevent them from becoming principals and assistant principals.

Murtadha and Watts (2005) provided narratives regarding the contributions of African American men and women in educational leadership. These individuals were influential in rising above adverse circumstances and horrific challenges to make a positive impact in the field of education. There were the formations of African American societies and institutions which included churches and schools. African American leaders formed fraternal orders and literacy groups. It was suggested that the study of African Americans in educational leadership could serve as a valuable resource for mainstream theories which were deficient in knowledge regarding leadership styles and practices in diverse cultures.

Katz's study (2012) investigated the leadership of an African American female superintendent in a suburban school district. This was viewed as historical because “Delia” was the first woman and the first African American to serve in the capacity of superintendent. Previously, Delia worked in an urban school district for 24 years as a teacher and an administrator before crossing the border into new, uncharted territory as an African American woman. The researcher found that “Delia” formed community alliances and worked to eliminate unfair practices within the school district.

**Community involvement in school leadership.** As the minority population continued to grow in suburban school districts, educators had the great responsibility of educating this population (Evans, 2007). The suburbs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were representative of the diversity in America; therefore administrators and teachers should express the need for diversity to be appreciated (Tefera et al., 2011). School leaders had the responsibility of facilitating communication and positive working relationships between the school and the community which helped to bridge the gap between the two (Brown & Beckett, 2007). According to Katira (2003), “...relationships are vital in leadership that is effective” (p. 253). School leaders had a responsibility to build an alliance of parent and community involvement which led to positive results for all (Johnson, 2007).

Sanders and Harvey (2002) explained the significance of community involvement in their case study involving an urban elementary school in which the community was actively engaged with the school. The school’s female principal formed partnerships with local businesses and corporations, universities, healthcare organizations, government agencies, faith organizations, and senior citizen organizations. Each was responsible for a

program, activity, workshop, or service within the school. The key factors for developing and maintaining purposeful community partnerships were “a high commitment to learning, principal support for community involvement, a welcoming school climate, and two-way communication about community involvement” (p. 1366).

Morris's (2004) ethnographic study involved two urban schools located in St. Louis and Atlanta. Mrs. Jones, the principal at Lincoln Elementary in Atlanta, worked with the community within the school as well as the community outside of the school. The investigator identified key characteristics which demonstrated the vital role of community involvement and school leadership, including:

school personnel reaching out to families, intergenerational and cultural bonding, the significant presence of Black teachers in the school, and African American principals who bridged their schools with the surrounding communities and with outside agencies. (pp. 102-103)

Johnson (2006) conducted a historical case study on the life and many contributions of the culturally responsive, 43-year veteran educator, Gertrude Ayer. Ayer left a legacy of forming community alliances, incorporating cultural knowledge into the classroom, partnering with parents, community activists, and progressive politicians, and advocating for education equity.

In Sperandio and Kagoda's (2011) study, they focused on the aspects of community building of 12 female school leaders who were successful in leading school reforms. Despite a lack of professional leadership training, these women had an instinct for building positive working relationships inside and outside of the school. School-community partnerships as well as in-school communities were developed by these female school leaders. Being able to build strong communities was viewed as an essential skill in educational leadership.

Randolph (2012) engaged in a historical qualitative research study on the life of Ethel T. Overby. Overby was the first African American female school principal in Richmond, Virginia. Overby voiced the strong belief that people had a right to change things in a democracy which were in opposition to what was to be executed fairly among all people regardless of skin color. The researcher revealed that Overby challenged parents, teachers, and students by educating them of their rights as citizens in the community, state, and nation. She was an advocate of social change, civic engagement, and voting rights. Overby's influence extended beyond the classroom walls and school building. Overby was determined to make democracy a reality not just a theory in her community.

For the purpose of this phenomenological study, I explored the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. I examined (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) caring for family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality, (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking, (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships. By studying the lived experiences of study participants in these various dimensions, I discovered the experiences which were unique to the suburban school district as well as those that were commonly shared with urban school districts. It was pertinent for African Americans to have their voices heard in suburban school districts (Loder-Jackson, 2009). For that purpose, Tillman (2012) revealed, "...we must continue to follow the path that many strong, accomplished Black women have paved for us. This path was dotted with countless stories of survival, resilience, and success" (p. 125). With this in mind, Judson

(1999) noted, “Our success and our presence will encourage others and will help create an environment which may be more inviting and comfortable for African Americans and other minorities and more supportive as well” (pp. 109-110). Prior to this research study, I had not identified another study pertaining to African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Because of the primary focus on the lived experiences of study participants, a phenomenological study was conducted. I believed this approach was the most logical choice in answering the research question. A phenomenological study delineated the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals (Creswell, 2007). The objective was to focus on what participants had in common—shared, lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Two types of phenomenological approaches were identified in qualitative research. The first approach was known as hermeneutical phenomenology in which the research was adjusted toward participants' lived experiences (Van Manen as cited in Creswell, 2007). The second approach was known as transcendental phenomenology in which the researcher identifies a phenomenon to be studied, bracketed the researcher's own experiences, and collected data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, hermeneutical phenomenology was utilized because of an interest in the real-life experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. According to Hatch (2002), hermeneutical phenomenology “combines both interpretive/hermeneutic methods and descriptive/phenomenological methods for the purpose of examining the lived experiences or lifeworlds of people being studied” (p. 29).

## **Sample**

The choice of a sampling strategy depended on the research problems and questions that the researcher wanted answered (Creswell, 2008). For this study, I employed criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) because participants represented individuals who experienced being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district. According to Creswell (2007), “It is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied are representative of people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 128). Ten individuals identified as African American females who served as principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators with at least three years of service in suburban school districts were selected for this study. These participants were employed in four different suburban school districts in southeastern United States. Suburban schools “are located in residential areas on the outside of metropolitan areas and compared to many urban schools, often have higher standardized test scores, college going rates, and attendance rates” (Tefera et al., 2011, p. 1).

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this phenomenological study consisted of open-ended, face-to-face, one-hour interviews with study participants at sites designated by them. Prior to the interview, participants received a printout of the questions that they were asked to answer. As we progressed through the interview, I asked follow-up questions in order to garner more details with regard to their experiences. Interview(s) were audiotaped with a digital recorder and transcribed in which study participants had the opportunity to review and check for accuracy. By asking open-ended questions, I provided study participants

with the opportunity to share their lived experiences without restraint from me or other past findings (Creswell, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis was done concurrently with data collection. Data analysis was completed with the first interview, observation, and document. This allowed me to make any adjustments and have the most reliable and valid data. During this time, a tentative comprehensive list of themes was established. By employing the phenomenological approach, I read all written transcripts five times so that I could attain an overall feeling for them (Creswell, 2007).

In order to prepare for data analysis, Creswell (2008) stated, “Initial preparation of the data for analysis requires organizing the vast amount of information, transferring it from spoken or written words to a typed file and making decisions about whether to analyze the data by hand or by computer” (p. 245). I organized data according to interviews of study participants. I maintained multiple copies of the data (Creswell, 2008). I completed the transcriptions by typing the text files collected during interviews (Lichtman, 2012). From each transcript, I identified key phrases or sentences which related to study participants’ experiences. I formulated meanings from these significant phrases and sentences which allowed common themes to surface (Creswell, 2007). This approach was defined as interpretive phenomenological analysis which involved “the detailed examination of the lived experience of individuals” (Lichtman, 2012, p. 260).

After reading each participant’s transcribed interview, I created a table in Microsoft Word. The table consisted of three columns for data organization. In the first column, I typed actual statements or raw data (Saldana, 2009) from each participant’s



interview. In the second column, I typed codes based on notes from my preliminary jotting of the responses provided by participants (Creswell, 2007). A code was defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). These codes originated from the actual statements of study participants. In the third and final column, I typed themes which emerged from the combination of preliminary jotting, actual statements or raw data, and codes. Themes surfaced as a result of the repeating ideas which study participants had in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Initially, I began with 14 themes, but I viewed this as an excessive number. So, I looked at how I could pair each theme with another theme as opposed to viewing them as separate entities. When I did this, the pairings strengthened the expressions of lived experiences of each study participant. For example, study participants were African American women not just African American and not just women. Instead of focusing on a single minority, I was able to bring attention to a double minority group. In my opinion, this communicated volumes considering the scarce number of minority females in educational leadership positions. African American female school leaders in suburban districts were not nonexistent. Therefore, their experiences needed to be voiced and disclosed to educational researchers and educational practitioners.

As a result of this decision, seven themes emerged which gave credence to the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female suburban school leaders. Although responses varied among participants, themes provided a more vivid picture of their lived experiences as school leaders. According to

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), “Most QUAL analytic techniques involve generating emergent themes that evolve from the study of specific pieces of information that the investigator has collected” (p. 252). After identifying themes, I was able to connect them with actual statements from participants’ transcribed interviews. All data were secured and locked in a combination safe kept in my home.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

When checking for credibility and trustworthiness, researchers test whether the information gathered is accurate (Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). There are strategies for researchers to utilize when determining validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). These strategies or techniques serve as a means to strengthen the credibility of qualitative research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Qualitative researchers generally employ more than one strategy to check for credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For this phenomenological study, I established credibility and trustworthiness by employing the following strategies: member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions of respondent reports.

**Member checking.** Member checking was utilized by asking study participants to check the accuracy of themes, interpretations, and conclusions based on interviews (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). I communicated with each participant individually and asked for open and honest feedback regarding the findings through their interviews (Creswell, 2008). I asked participants about the various components of the study in terms of an accurate and complete description of their experiences (Creswell, 2008). Also, I emphasized the importance of participants being able to communicate truthfully the

accuracy of themes and interpretations based on their initial and possibly subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2008).

**Reflexive journaling.** Reflexive journaling was used to maintain a diary of information regarding the investigation, such as possible biases and methodological discussion (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). I reflected on my experiences as an urban educator. I had the chance to discover the similarities and differences of decision-making, policies, and procedures in suburban and urban school districts. I examined the cultures of each type of school district. As an aspiring administrator, I gained knowledge which may be beneficial to me if I become a school leader in an urban or suburban school district. I wanted to know firsthand what African American female school leaders do in order to be successful in their current leadership roles.

**Descriptions.** Thick, rich descriptions were employed because qualitative research allows the various stories or experiences of participants to be heard (Gamson, 2000). I wanted the reader to get the feel of what participants have experienced in their personal, professional, and sociocultural lives. Also, readers could actually think about placing themselves in these experiences. I painted a picture with words in terms of the reader visualizing in their minds what participants faced as African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Because participants are minorities in the area of educational leadership, I believed their experiences needed to be included in current and future research.

An audit trail was established by meeting with my committee chair, methodologist, and other committee members, maintaining entries of research activities,

conducting interviews, having discussions with fellow colleagues, completing transcriptions, initializing coding, and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007).

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is important to note that ethical standards for research is well-documented by several professional organizations, such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Medical Association (AMA), and the American Psychological Association (APA) (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). In the United States, ethical guidelines are closely aligned with the federal government's order of conducting human research (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). For this research study, I adhered to the standards as outlined in the APA manual which stated, "...basic ethical and legal principles underlie all scholarly research and writing" (p. 11). Whether or not the work was submitted for publication, "issues related to institutional approval, informed consent, deception in research, and participant protections should be carefully considered..." (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 20).

The inclusion of human participants required approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Respondents were sent a formal letter via email explaining the purpose of the study and inquiring about their interest in participating; they were given two weeks to respond before follow-up. Follow-up was not necessary because study participants responded within the two-week timeframe. A list of participants was compiled, which was used to schedule interviews. Approximately sixty-minute "in-depth, open-ended" interviews with study participants were conducted (Creswell, 2007, p. 289).

The next step in the process was to create an informed consent form which referred to the participant's agreement to participate in a research study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). It was vital to obtain consent if the study posed a threat to the safety or welfare of the participants (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The consent forms addressed the participants' right to privacy which included anonymity and confidentiality (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). For this research study, to protect the participants' identity, I assigned each participant a pseudonym.

In order to garner support, I conveyed to participants that they were participating in a study and informed them of the study's purpose (Creswell, 2008). However, study participants were given the option to discontinue their participation in the research study at any time without negative consequences. I provided this information in the consent letter as well as a verbal explanation upon meeting with study participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I played a critical role in the qualitative research process (Lichtman, 2012). I was the principal component in data collection and data analysis (Lichtman, 2012). I was a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. I was a 14-year veteran educator in the urban school district. For this phenomenological research study, I chose to bring in my experiences as an urban educator (Creswell, 2007). I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study which allowed me to reflect on my years of experience as an urban school educator. As an aspiring school administrator, I wanted to discover firsthand what study participants deal with on a daily basis in their personal, professional, and sociocultural lives as African American female school leaders

in suburban school districts. As Collins stated (1991), "...each of us must learn to speak for herself" (p. xiv).

Although I had experience in urban school districts, I may eventually become a school leader in a suburban school district. I thought it would be beneficial to know what to expect. As a result, I could make sure that I was prepared yet open-minded to create as many positive experiences as I possibly could. I felt that these suburban school leaders had a major advantage over urban school leaders because they had more resources available to them. As an urban educator, I knew the challenges which were involved with inadequate funding and scarce resources. I expected to find school leaders who were pleased with the material benefits of being in a suburban school district.

On the other hand, I discovered how receptive members of the community truly were to an African American female school leader. I imagined that there were individuals who embraced it and those who did not. I was hopeful that there were more individuals who were forward- thinking with regard to having an African American female school leader.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Report of Research Findings**

#### **Introduction**

As indicated in Chapter 3, this research study was designed to explore the lived experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Because my primary focus was on the lived experiences—personal, professional, and sociocultural—a phenomenological study was conducted. According to Lund (2007), “Qualitative phenomenological research evidence is believed to be representative of reality as perceived, not removed from the participants’ experience by several layers of theoretical interpretations offered by the researcher” (p. 384). A phenomenological study delineated the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals (Creswell, 2007). The objective was to focus on what participants had in common—shared, lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). As Mogadime, Mentz, Armstrong, and Holtam (2010) stated, “The goal of qualitative research that has emancipatory ends is to be able to understand particular experiences and how such lived experiences might contextualize social conditions that would otherwise remain silenced” (p. 816). As the researcher, I wanted to give voice to the experiences of these school leaders so that their stories would not remain silenced.

This phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: How have personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences played a role in being a school leader? The subquestions for the study were: (a) What challenges have participants encountered as a result of being an African American female school leader in

a suburban school district? (b) How do participants deal with these challenges? (c) What positive experiences have occurred as a result of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district? (d) How do participants acknowledge these positive experiences? (e) How do participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position?

### **Context**

Ten individuals identified as African American females who served as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators with at least three years of service—not just in leadership—in suburban school districts were selected for this study. Participants were employed in suburban school districts located in the southeast region of the United States. As defined in Chapter 1, suburban schools “are located in residential areas on the outside of metropolitan areas and compared to many urban schools, often have higher standardized test scores, college going rates, and attendance rates” (Tefera et al., 2011, p. 1). This research study spanned across four distinct suburban school districts. Actually, the three smallest school districts were birthed from the largest of all the districts. The largest and oldest district began in the early 1800s and was so expansive that it was home to urban, rural, and suburban schools. With such profound reputations for academic and athletic excellence, the three smaller school districts had not been in existence for a long period of time. Two of the remaining school districts were formed in the same year—1970. The final district did not begin until the late 1980s.

### **Participants**

For this research study, to protect the participants’ identity, I assigned each participant a pseudonym. I utilized this action in order to ensure confidentiality. Each of



the participants was briefly described below with regard to their pseudonym, year their educational career began, highest degree attained, job title, and years in current position as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Summary Data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year Began in Education</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Years in Current Position</b>
Angela	1993	Doctorate	High School Assistant Principal	5
Beverly	1986	Doctorate	Director of Student Support Services	7
Celeste	1998	Master's	Elementary School Assistant Principal	2
Diane	1998	Educational Specialist	Elementary School Principal	2
Elise	1991	Doctorate	Middle School Principal	2
Faith	1999	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Gabrielle	1995	Doctorate	Elementary School Principal	1
Henrietta	1980	Educational Specialist (currently pursuing Doctorate)	Elementary School Principal	6
Ingrid	1997	Doctorate	Administrative Manager	2
Jaqueline	1992	Doctorate	Curriculum and Technology Coordinator	1

Wives, mothers, caregivers, sisters, mentors, Christians, volunteers, support systems, nurturers, advocates, disciplinarians, and girlfriends. These were just some of the delineations or descriptions of these 10 African American female suburban school leaders. They came from a varied background of experiences yet shared the common bond of sisterhood when it came to being school leaders. Their journeys to leadership

were distinct and remarkable as they rose above challenges and setbacks to reach the pinnacle of school leadership.

The candid conversations I had with these phenomenal women occurred over a one-month period. Interviews were scheduled in Spring 2013. They were conducted during weekday mornings and afternoons as well as on the weekend. Eight of the ten interviews were held in participants' respective offices. However, two of the interviews were conducted at local area restaurants. I was impressed with the positive attitudes of each participant. Despite the challenges they faced, study participants remained resilient and spiritually-grounded. As a result, they received the fruits of their labor as they were chosen to lead in suburban school districts.

### **Participant 1: Angela**

Angela grew up in Miami, Florida. She was born into a blended family. Each of her parents had been married before—both having had six children before Angela. She was the seventh child and the youngest child of them together. Angela stated that her parents “came to know God and decided to get married”. She was seven years old when they married and actually served as their flower girl in the wedding. Neither of Angela's parents completed school. Her mother had a fifth grade education; her father had an eighth grade education. Although they were not school graduates, Angela described her parents as hard working individuals who knew the value of an education. They were successful in making sure that each of their children graduated from high school. Angela's mother always said, “If you want to have a good life, go to college”. Angela received a college scholarship and attended the University of Miami where she earned a Bachelor's degree in chemistry with a minor in math and Spanish.

In 1993, Angela began her teaching career at a high school in Florida before relocating to her current school district. In 1999, she began her teaching career as a high school chemistry teacher. The road to educational administration was not easily traveled. Angela applied for the same assistant principal position at her school three times. Initially, she was not going to apply for the position a fourth time. However, due to "divine intervention", she changed her mind and applied for the job. Angela was hired as an assistant principal at her school. She had been in her current position since 2008. Angela was married with one college-age son.

### **Participant 2: Beverly**

Beverly grew up in Detroit, Michigan. She relocated to the southeast after graduating from high school. While in Michigan, Beverly attended a Renaissance High School noted for having a high standard of excellence. This was definitely a new experience for Beverly. Her elementary and middle schools were all Black. Now, she would attend an integrated high school. Beverly shared that she did not feel prejudice at that point. She explained that they were just kids. Her interest had always been in education because of the number of educators in her own family. Her grandmother became a teacher when she was told at the courthouse that she had pretty handwriting. Her great great-grandfather was one of four men instrumental in starting a school for Blacks. While in college, Beverly changed her major from psychology to elementary education. She graduated from college at 20 and began her teaching career. Beverly was a fourth grade teacher for 10 years before she came to her current school district. She had been a third grade teacher, technology specialist, and an elementary school assistant

principal. Beverly served as the district's Director of Student Services. Beverly was married with two college-age daughters.

### **Participant 3: Celeste**

Celeste grew up in a community which was not too far from the district in which she was currently employed. She attended college on a basketball scholarship. Celeste indicated that she had a passion for working with struggling readers. This was near and dear to her heart because she had a sibling who had difficulty with reading. Working with struggling readers became Celeste's lifelong goal and passion. She began her teaching career in the current school district in 1998. She taught fourth grade for three years. Then, she taught third grade for one year. Celeste had been an interventionist at the elementary and middle school levels. She had also been a middle school reading teacher followed by an elementary school reading coach. Before Celeste became an assistant principal, she applied for an administrative position for seven years straight before she was finally hired for her current position. Despite the wait, Celeste was resilient and remained optimistic. She never lost hope in reaching her goal of becoming a school leader. She was a second-year elementary school assistant principal. She was only the second African American to hold this position. Celeste was married with two children and three stepchildren.

### **Participant 4: Diane**

Like Celeste, Diane grew up in a community which was not too far from the district in which she was currently employed. She attended college on a basketball scholarship as well. Diane grew up with both parents, two sisters (she had a twin), and a brother. She still had dreams and aspirations of becoming a lawyer and a counselor. Diane said that thinking about law conjured up thoughts about counseling. She had been in education 14 years. Diane had been in her current school for nine years and in the

current school district for 13 years. Her first teaching experience was team teaching while attending graduate school. Her first official teaching job was in a neighboring suburban school district at one of the middle schools. Diane was a split teacher in which she taught special education classes—with no certification in special education—the first half of the day. Then, she taught sixth grade study skills and social studies for the second half of the day. Diane explained that she received “a special call” to work in her current district with a school on school improvement. She taught sixth grade before accepting a teaching assignment at her current school. Diane taught all subjects her first year. Then, she was able to teach her two favorite subjects—social studies and math. Diane was promoted to assistant principal where she served for seven and a half years. She made history when she was selected as the first African American—male or female—principal of her school. She had been the school’s principal for two years. Diane was married with two young sons.

#### **Participant 5: Elise**

Elise grew up in Fort Benning and Columbus, Georgia. She graduated from high school in 1986. She was the first person in her family to attend college. Elise joined the Army Reserve because she needed extra money for school. She admitted that being in boot camp taught her how to be an advocate for herself. Elise was raised by her mother, grandmother, and great aunt along with her older and younger sister. She acknowledged that these three women were the most prominent influences on her life. Elise graduated with a Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree in secondary mathematics (7th-12<sup>th</sup> grades) from the same university. Her teaching career began in 1991 where she team taught with another teacher. At the end of the year, she resigned and began teaching a self-contained

special education class. Elise said that she cried to and from work. Finally, she was released from her contract to teach in her area of certification at her previous school. After a while, Elise and her husband relocated and she taught at yet another high school. Elise came to her current school district where she taught at the high school for three years. Elise was promoted to assistant principal, while pregnant with her youngest daughter, at one of the district's middle schools where she served for eight years. Elise was a history-maker as well in that she was the first African American—male or female—to serve as principal in her school. Additionally, she was also the first person to be promoted within the same school to the head leadership position. Elise was married to her college sweetheart with one adult stepdaughter and three school-age daughters.

#### **Participant 6: Faith**

Faith grew up in a small town known for its productive workforce. She was the older of two siblings (she had one brother). She was raised by both parents and grew up in a middle-class family. Her parents were in the first African American class to graduate from the local area high school in 1971. They actually were a part of the integration which occurred during that time. Faith's parents encouraged their children to do their best at whatever they did. She described her mother as a strong individual who pushed education. Faith said that her mother was a big influence on her life. Both of Faith's parents succumbed to cancer. Her mother died of breast cancer, and her father died of colon cancer. After graduating from high school, Faith attended a historically Black college before transferring to a predominantly White university. She earned her Bachelor's degree in elementary education. Faith's first teaching experience was quite a unique one to say the least. She began her teaching career at a juvenile detention facility.

She said it was one of the best teaching experiences she ever had. She worked there for three years. Faith transitioned into the public school system as a fifth grade teacher where she remained for three years. Her principal later moved her to third grade because of her strong classroom management skills. She taught third grade for two years before marrying and relocating. Just as Elise did in a neighboring school district, Faith earned her first assistant principal position while five months pregnant with her son at a suburban elementary school. Faith was in her first year as an elementary school principal in the same district in which she began her teaching career. Faith was married with one young son.

#### **Participant 7: Gabrielle**

Gabrielle grew up in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia. Both of her parents were educators. Her grandmother was a teacher and a principal. Her father had been a teacher, principal, and college dean. Her mother had been a teacher and a college professor. Gabrielle noted that she grew up in an affluent community similar to the one in which she now worked. She said that felt very comfortable because she understood what the African American students were experiencing in her school. Gabrielle graduated from a comprehensive high school. She attended a historically Black college for two years before the family moved in order for her father to take on a new position. Gabrielle wanted to be a psychologist until her parents had a heart-to-heart conversation with her in which she discovered that teaching was her true calling. When she changed her major to elementary education, she knew that it was the right choice for her. After graduation, she returned to teach in her former school district as the only African American in the entire building. She cried in the beginning but realized that she could rise to the challenge.

Gabrielle took on some leadership responsibilities after being at the school for two years. She returned to school for her Master's degree in counseling but had a chance encounter with a professor who informed her that she "seemed to be an administrator". According to Gabrielle, this happenstance changed the course of her destiny. Once again, Gabrielle changed her major and pursued a degree in educational administration. While working on her Doctorate, Gabrielle accepted a teaching position in an inner-city middle school which she described as "my favorite teaching experience". In addition to teaching, she served as the school's substitute administrator. Gabrielle had been with her current school district since 2002. She began as a middle school assistant principal. She was in her first year as principal of one of the elementary schools in the district. Gabrielle was married with two small children.

### **Participant 8: Henrietta**

Henrietta was the youngest and only daughter of five children. She was raised by both parents. Henrietta attended an all-Black elementary school before being one of the first African Americans to integrate an all-White high school. She described those days as very difficult times, but she persevered. She was a trailblazer and a pioneer in her own right by being the first African American representative on the school's Homecoming court and the school's beauty pageant in which she won. Henrietta attended a predominantly White college and earned a degree in elementary education. At the time of this study, she was enrolled in a Doctoral program for educational leadership. Henrietta began her teaching career in 1980. She was a kindergarten teacher in the same district in which she is now employed. After more than 20 years, Henrietta became the school's technology coordinator for about a year and a half. She continued to move up within the



district when she became assistant principal of instruction. Henrietta had been the principal of her school for the past six years. She was proud of the fact that her entire career had been in the same suburban school district. Henrietta had been married to “a wonderful gentleman” for almost 37 years. They had two adult sons. One son was a police officer; the other son was a magistrate in a neighboring suburb.

### **Participant 9: Ingrid**

Ingrid was the youngest of five raised by “a strong, Black mama”. She attended the neighborhood elementary school but decided to attend a different high school to gain her own identity as an individual. Ingrid loved her community and had several teachers who were her neighbors. She expressed that she absolutely loved her childhood. She graduated from high school in 1986. When Ingrid entered college, she majored in pharmacy even though her passion was to be a teacher. Her oldest brother, whom she looked up to as a father-figure, told her that she was too smart to be a teacher. So, she majored in pharmacy to please him. Later, Ingrid pursued another path and graduated from another university with a degree in Medical Records Administration. She enjoyed her work but then started a family with her husband who told her that she could not keep up with caring for twin daughters while still at home and working. So, she quit that job before their third daughter was born. Ingrid worked at a law firm which opened the door of opportunity to pursue her passion of teaching. Reluctantly, she became an active participant of the law firm’s adopt-a-school program. A university professor observed her presence in the room with the students and told Ingrid that she had a gift. She responded by returning to school and obtaining a Master’s degree in elementary education. Ingrid was hired before graduation. Her teaching career began in 1997 as a fifth grade teacher at

a suburban elementary school. She was one of only two African American teachers in a school with a student population of 900. Ingrid taught for seven years before transferring to her current school district. She served as the assistant principal for two elementary schools for a year and a half before being placed at one of the schools for five and a half years. Ingrid was in her second year as the Administrative Manager for the school district. She and her high school sweetheart had been married for almost 24 years and had three college-age daughters.

### **Participant 10: Jacqueline**

Jacqueline grew up in a small, predominantly Black town. She was the third of four children born to her parents. Her father was an educator who began his career as a social studies teacher but retired as a university professor. Her mother began her career as a secretary but returned to school in order to become a social worker. Jacqueline explained that her parents were strong supporters of education. She attended a small, liberal arts university on an academic scholarship. She always knew that she wanted to be a teacher. Prior to graduation, Jacqueline was offered a corporate position due to her background in math. Instead of corporate America, she followed her heart's desire of becoming a teacher. She graduated in 1991. Jacqueline returned home and began teaching college math courses to nursing students. She was unhappy because she wanted to teach high school students. Jacqueline was hired for a high school math position and did not even have to go for an interview. In 1992, she began her teaching career as well as made history by being the first African American teacher at this particular school. She remained at the school for 13 years. Jacqueline resigned from her position in order to pursue her Doctorate degree. Her journey as a school leader began as a high school

assistant principal for three years. Another opportunity became available in her current school district. She became an assistant principal at the district's only high school where she served for four years. Jacqueline was in her first year as Curriculum and Technology Coordinator. The position had only been in existence for two years. So, she was the first African American—male or female—to serve in that capacity. Jacqueline was unmarried with no children.

### **Themes**

Saldana (2009) defined theme as “an outcome of coding categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 13). A theme is the “implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 38). In the search for themes in qualitative data analysis, Teddlie and Tashakori (2009) purported, “There is a search for themes, which are the dominant features or characteristics of a phenomenon under study, across all types of QUAL data analysis” (p. 252). In order to describe and develop themes from the data, the major research questions must be answered in order to have an “in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through description and thematic development” (Creswell, 2008, p. 254). Themes which are gathered may be compared with study participants’ “personal experiences or with existing literature on the topic” (Creswell, 2009, p. 64).

A fifteen-question interview protocol was developed for study participants. Initially, study participants were asked about their background (ex. upbringing, education, interests, etc.). The open-ended, face-to-face interviews were 60 minutes with study participants with the exception of one participant's interview which was 90 minutes in length. Although one interview was conducted with each participant, follow-up

questions were asked to garner more details with regard to their experiences. Interviews were audiotaped on a digital recorder and transcribed in which study participants had the opportunity to review and check for accuracy. Transcribed interviews were sent via email to each study participant. Four participants responded with corrections to their transcriptions. By asking open-ended questions, study participants were provided with the opportunity to share their lived experiences without restraint or other past findings (Creswell, 2008).

Upon completion of verbatim transcriptions of the 10 individual interview recordings for study participants, the process of data analysis began. By reading each transcript multiple times, a deeper understanding was gained of each participant's experience (Saldana, 2009). Transcripts were read five times while writing preliminary jottings (Saldana, 2009) in the right and left hand margins of the transcript. These jottings were the first phrases which came to mind while reading each transcript several times (Saldana, 2009). As stated by Saldana (2009), "They [jottings] don't have to be accurate or final at this point, just ideas for analytic consideration while the study progresses" (p. 17).

After reading each participant's transcribed interview, I created a table utilizing Microsoft Word. The table consisted of three columns for data organization. In the first column, actual statements or raw data were typed (Saldana, 2009) from each participant's interview. In the second column, codes were typed based on notes from preliminary jotting of the responses provided by participants (Creswell, 2007). A code is described as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data"

(Saldana, 2009, p. 3). These codes originated from the actual statements of study participants. In the third and final column, themes which emerged were typed from the combination of preliminary jotting, actual statements or raw data, and codes. Themes surfaced as a result of the repeating ideas which study participants had in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Also, a reflexive journal was maintained (Creswell, 2007, 2008) in which thoughts and feelings were expressed at least twice a week reflecting on each participant's experiences as well as personal experiences as an urban school educator and aspiring school leader.

Textural descriptions were written “of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) with exact quotes from participants’ transcribed interviews. These descriptions aided in credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Thick, rich descriptions were employed because qualitative research allows the various stories or experiences of participants to be heard (Gamson, 2000). A picture was painted with words in terms of the reader visualizing participants’ experiences as it truly happened.

In addition to textural descriptions, structural descriptions were employed as well. Creswell (2007) defined structural descriptions as “how they (participants) experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context” (p. 60). Examples of structural descriptions were meetings with fellow colleagues, parents, teachers, and students, working relationships, and/or conversations and discussions. According to Creswell (2007), “a combination of the textural and structural descriptions” conveys an overall essence of the experience (p. 60).

After analyzing the data, the following themes emerged from this research study: **personal experiences** (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) caring for family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality; **professional experiences** (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking; **sociocultural experiences** (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships as shown with codes in Table 2. The themes served as a reminder of what study participants encountered on a daily basis as they worked to serve their families, their schools, and their communities.

Table 2

*Summary of Codes and Themes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being African American</li> <li>• Breaking down color barriers or walls</li> </ul>	Race and Gender in School Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male vs. Female</li> <li>• Women as natural-born leaders</li> <li>• Family as priority</li> <li>• Personal and professional growth</li> <li>• Remembering what is important</li> <li>• Celebrating self by celebrating others</li> </ul>	Caring for Family and Self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being spiritually-grounded</li> <li>• Strong connection and relationship with God</li> </ul>	Resilience and Spirituality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining your own identity</li> <li>• Being courageous to lead</li> <li>• Education as priority</li> <li>• Preparation through leadership programs</li> <li>• Doors of opportunity being opened</li> <li>• Transitioning from teacher to administrator</li> </ul>	Education and Upward Mobility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making connections</li> <li>• Empowering others</li> <li>• What to do vs. What not to do</li> <li>• Support systems</li> <li>• Consistent, constant, and open</li> <li>• Listens to others</li> <li>• Teamwork with colleagues/cohesiveness</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> <li>• Sense of duty</li> <li>• Leaders with a heart for children</li> <li>• Working with families</li> <li>• Serving the community</li> </ul>	Mentoring and Networking  Effective Communication and Positive Working Relationships  Child Advocacy and Community Partnerships

## **Race and Gender in School Leadership**

The first theme to emerge from this study was race and gender in school leadership. Patton (2009) revealed, “Although African American women share common experiences with both the men of their race and White women, they also possess an individual, yet collective standpoint that warrants additional research and provides information about their unique presence...” (p. 510). Study participants were candid about their experiences of being African American and female in a leadership position in their respective suburban school districts. Despite promotion within their school districts, study participants experienced challenges and disappointments.

Diane, an elementary school principal, was the first African American principal—male or female—in her school's history. She commented:

But, I am the very first Black person to be a principal at this school period. We’ve had a Black assistant, but we’ve never had a Black principal. We didn’t make a big deal out of it, but, we didn’t know how it was gone go when I got the job. But, it does make a huge impact on our Black students here. They are so much more respectful. They see an influence that I can be better.

Although Diane was a history-maker as her school's first African American principal, she seemed extremely nonchalant about it. She even admitted that it was not made into a big deal at the time because she was not sure how her appointment would be received by others. There was no celebration or special recognition for her being promoted to principal.

Consequently, Ingrid faced a challenging situation as she attempted to make the transition from assistant principal to principal. A male with less education and less experience was always selected for the desired position of principal.

But, when it came down to making hiring decisions, one example is I had four maybe five years of experience and my Doctorate at the time, and they chose



someone with two years' experience—Master's. And, he was still working on it by the way had not earned it at the time. He was a person that I had mentored. He was one of my teachers as a matter of fact when I was an assistant principal at that particular school. The next person they choose happened to be an African American. He was the person that replaced me. So, once again, less experience, less education. The next person was another person I had mentored. I mean so on and on and on. Nobody ever had the same amount of experience, credentials, anything that I had. And, I was always told I was not the right fit. I was not the right fit. So, it was hard to take.

Even with Ingrid being highly qualified to become principal at her school, she experienced great disappointment when someone else was always selected for the position. She was told that she was not the right fit. During that time, she began to second-guess her identity and her purpose. Not being selected as her school's next principal was difficult for her to comprehend.

With regard to gender, Angela admitted that there were situations in which a male was needed. Then, there were situations in which she was called to the rescue as a female.

Then, there's some parts, you know, I don't hesitate to call a male and say, "Ya'll handle this", you know or whatever. Or, they will call me in when it's a female. They'll say, "You handle this with a lady or whatever". So, there is a strength in having a balance. You know, it's not that you couldn't handle it. You would if you had to, but one of the beauties of it all is that you realize that you don't have to do this alone. You don't have to have all the answers.

In Angela's situation, being a female was not necessarily good or bad. Her gender was viewed as advantageous when male colleagues needed her assistance in dealing with certain disciplinary issues. By the same token, having a male administrator was an advantage for her when she was in need of assistance.

While serving as assistant principal, Faith had experiences with racism from parents at White and Black schools. She attributed their actions and reactions to the school culture.

I've been called the racist names by parents that are upset at something that I did as a discipline issue to their student or a call or the way that I wanted something done in my particular school. And, that was usually when I was at majority White schools. However, when I was at my majority Black schools, I wasn't necessarily viewed, but then, I was just considered other names because I wasn't seeing it the way that they wanted it to be done. I have seen racism at both parts whether it's parents or things of that nature. But, I think it was just at that particular time the culture that you were in that played a part in it.

Despite dealing with racism from Blacks and Whites, Faith maintained a positive attitude. She believed that those challenges were results of the culture at that time. She did not take it personally. Therefore, she was able to remain focused and do her job as a school leader.

Of the ten study participants, Henrietta was the senior veteran educator with over 30 years' experience. When people came to see her, they were surprised to discover that an African American was the principal. However, people's reactions did not bother Henrietta at all.

It is not a surprise to me anymore that when people come into our school building and they ask for the principal of the school and I appear out of this office that their face is, ah, it tells the story. I've seen it many times. I cannot deny that they are not surprised it's not because I'm a woman. It's because I'm an African American. And, I just smile and introduce myself and put them at ease. And, they quickly know that I am the principal here and I do know what I'm doing and I do know what I'm talking about. Yet, I understand that they're a little bit off-balance, but I'm not off-balance. And, that's what's important.

The reactions of others did not cause Henrietta to lose focus of who she was as a school leader. Her confident and pleasant demeanor signified that she was more than capable to serve as the school's principal (Sernak, 1994). As long as she remained balanced and focused, Henrietta said that she was quite capable of fulfilling her role as school principal.

Like their minority urban female counterparts, study participants experienced the challenges of racism and sexism (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Chisholm, 2001; Holtcamp, 2002; Reed, 2012; Smulyan, 2000) but rose above those challenges to become school leaders. They also made history by being the first African American females to serve in their respective positions (Boukari, 2005; Clayton & Slaughter, 2012; Katz, 2012; Loder, 20005; Randolph, 2012). They were able to rise above the challenges and overcome the obstacles in order to be in positions of leadership. African American women can serve as “bridge leaders” who are responsible for “leading diverse school communities” as well as role models “for educational leaders in twenty-first century schools” (Horsford, p. 12). As indicated in Chapter 2, the combination of race and gender provided a deeper understanding of perception on the part of African American principals and other individuals within the field of education (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009).

### **Caring for Family and Self**

The second theme to emerge from this study was participants’ responsibility of caring for family and self. To explain the value of what women contribute, Milkie and Peltola (1999) purported, “The literature on women’s and men’s daily lives is fairly consistent in reporting that the total demands on employed women (paid work, housework, and child care) are higher than on employed men” (p. 478). Study participants identified the obligations to their schools and their families. But they had the dilemma of remembering to take care of themselves while caring for everyone else. In many cases, taking care of “self” involved taking care of others.

Gabrielle revealed that it was quite challenging for her with all of the responsibilities that came with being a school leader, wife, mother, and volunteer but that she managed with “her village” and compartmentalizing.

I manage all of those things by having...I have two iPhones, two iPads, two calendars, and all of these things, and I have a community of friends and family who I can plug into different things to help me. It takes a village for real. (laughs)

So, I just I try to compartmentalize. That’s some advice I would give people. Compartmentalize some of your life. As a school leader, especially as a woman, because if you’re fortunate, you will have work, you’ll have your parents, your extended family. So, you’re a daughter, you’re a mother, you’re a principal or administrator of some sort or teacher or whatever you do.

Gabrielle, a first-year principal, relied on her electronic devices and the kindness of family and friends to assist her with family needs. Although balancing family and work was a challenge, she had a can-do attitude about everything. By compartmentalizing her life, she was able to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and school leader.

Initially, Elise was hesitant about moving to a new area, which was home to her husband, especially with having a strong support system in her own hometown. However, in her opinion, the move proved to be “a blessing” because of her in-laws willingness to lend a helping hand.

And, my husband’s family lives here. So, that was a blessing. I didn’t wanna move, but it was a true blessing. The Lord do better than me because I can always call on them to come help out although they live a distance of about 30 minutes away. They always help out when they can. Well, which is all the time.

Even as a school leader, Elise realized that she still had the task of being a wife and a mother. She was responsible for taking care of her family. Yet, she was fortunate to have her in-laws step-up and provide assistance whenever needed, which she said was quite frequently.

With regard to taking care of self, Beverly chose to “cut back on some things” because of health challenges with having multiple sclerosis (MS).

And so, one of the things with MS, you just have to pay attention to your stress level because your stress will (finger snap) (indistinct sound) of MS quicker than anything. So, when I feel it when I feel it, I say, “No, I can’t”, you know. No, seriously. I have to do that. I come home. I get a glass of wine, get my book. And say...And anybody who knows me knows when I say “no” that’s it.

Beverly dealt with the challenge of MS. Because of this debilitating disease and the toll it took on her body, she learned the power of saying, “No”. She knew the importance of her taking care of self. She knew when enough was enough. Therefore, she had no problem with saying, “No”.

For Jacqueline, taking care of self meant establishing boundaries with others. She had to learn the importance of respecting her own boundaries and expected the same from others. She felt the strong need to help herself because she was too consumed with work, “But anyway, I feel like I make sure that people know what my boundaries are, and that I (laughs) respect my own boundaries and that I expect that they do so. That has helped me with the manage piece”.

By establishing boundaries, Jacqueline was able to care for herself and aid others with being responsible for their own work. She realized that she could not be an effective school leader without establishing and respecting the boundaries which she set.

Taking care of family and self were critical to the success of study participants just as it was to the success of minority urban female school leaders. Study participants had the major responsibility of taking care of family (Loder, 2005a). Although taking care of family was important, they realized the need of taking care of themselves as well (Gardiner et al., 1999). By taking care of family and self, study participants were able to

focus and fulfill their obligations as school leaders (Jackson, 1999). Even though caring for family and self meant different things to each participant, they realized that they had a responsibility to do that as wives, mothers, and school leaders. It involved caring for small children, volunteering, saying no, and establishing boundaries. Family and work are viewed as two circles of women's dual roles (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). The successful combination of both is dependent upon the responsibilities of those who were an integral part of both worlds (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Being able to balance both roles is a developmental process (Napholz, 2000).

### **Resilience and Spirituality**

The third theme which emerged from this study was resilience and spirituality. Although resilience is an important quality for school leaders to possess, individuals have to make a personal choice to be resilient (Allison, 2011/2012). An integral part of making that choice is to renew one's self. A resilient leader engages herself "physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually" (Allison, 2011/2012, p. 80). By renewing themselves, school leaders are able to carry out the demands of their job (Allison, 2011/2012).

Study participants were no strangers to setbacks, disappointments, and challenges in their personal or professional lives. Regardless of the obstacle, they were able to persevere and epitomize resilience. As a new principal, Faith had to deal with the death of her mother to breast cancer. She took the helm at her school in July 2012 and her mother died the following month. Without giving thought to her own grief, she focused her attention on the needs of her teachers who were dealing with their own grief as well.

My father had colon cancer. My mother had breast cancer. My father died the week before his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. And, my mother died probably six it's been six

months before her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. And, they'll tell you I don't mind them coming to me about personal...I've had teachers that have lost a lot people in their lives—lost people that were close to them this year. And, I didn't have time to have my self-pity party because I lost my mother. I had to step up to the plate and offer advice that would be comforting to them.

In the midst of her own grief, Faith focused outward by turning her attention to the needs of others. She was a source of comfort and strength for those she led as they faced adversities in their own personal lives. She embodied true selflessness when she could have chosen to focus on her own loss.

Celeste remained resilient after applying for an assistant principal position seven consecutive years. She also maintained a positive attitude despite disappointment.

That's the big thing that...it took seven years before I became a principal. I applied for seven years straight. I never gave up. I didn't get down and out and say, "What's wrong? What am I not doing"? I learned that it is important where you go. It's...don't just go to any school. It is important where you go.

It would have been much easier to give up than persevere. Despite waiting for several years to become a school leader, Celeste remained positive and did not quit on her desire. In essence, timing and being in the right school were essential. Her persistence paid off because she was hired as her school's assistant principal.

While facing disrespect and humiliation at the hands of her principal, Ingrid was reminded by her youngest daughter to remember her purpose.

And my youngest daughter looked me in the eye, and she said, "Mama, remember why you do what you do". And, I looked back. I straightened my little self up. I put my heels back on, fluffed out the hair, and my focus shifted back to the children. So, that has been that piece that has really impacted my life. So, every day I think about that. Remember why you do what you do.

From the encouraging words of her youngest daughter, Ingrid was able to regain focus and remember why she was in education; it was all about the children. Once she

regained her footing, Ingrid was able to move forward in her role as a school leader in a different capacity.

A major influence in study participants being resilient was their spiritual beliefs. Through their conversations, it was obvious that spirituality was of great importance. Spirituality was actually the core of their decision-making and their relationships with others. There needed to be an inner strength and power to be able to endure what they faced on their journey as school leaders. Although leadership positions and actions varied among study participants, they exhibited behaviors which identified them as “partnering with God as their leader, and they, in turn provided leadership to their schools” (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 226).

Diane recognized her faith in God for being in her current position as principal. She believed that her faith made all things possible.

If I didn't have the faith that I have in God, I don't think I would be where I am. We have the choice to make every single child in this school to be successful. And I know they say, “Oh, my gosh, that's not possible”. All things are possible. As long as you think it's not possible, it's not.

Diane attributed her faith in God and believing that all things were possible to her success as a school leader. She remained optimistic that every child in her school could be successful. It took the willingness of teachers and students to believe this was true.

Beverly attributed her decision-making to God which was a little bit scary to her. Her faith in His guidance provided her with the courage needed to fulfill her role as a school leader.

So, it's just that, you know, God has had His hand on me every step so which scares me a little bit. That means there's something fantastic I'm supposed to be doing in my job right now—there is. There's something big I'm supposed to be doing. And, it kinda scares me about what the Lord wants me to do. But, I'm trying to stay in touch with Him. Trying to stay in touch to see what it is that He



wants me to do on this job. Listen to Him and see what His direction to me is. And so, with the Backpack Program, He told me what I need to do with that. And, He's guiding me.

By crediting God with leading her, Beverly was able to respond to a need to eliminate child hunger in her school district through the Backpack Program. Again, her faith in God's guidance allowed her to make quality decisions in her role as a school leader.

Resilience and spirituality were significant in the lives of study participants as well as in the lives of urban school leaders. Because of their faith in God and trusting His guidance for their lives, they were able to survive, thrive, and persevere. In order to be resilient, it was quite obvious that study participants had to be disciplined by preparing themselves to meet and overcome the challenges of being a school leader. According to Allison (2011/2012), resilient leaders are optimistic without being blind or naïve to the challenges around them.

By being spiritually liberated, these school leaders were able to employ spirituality in assisting them “with leading their schools” (Dantley, 2010, p. 219). Study participants communicated that being spiritually-grounded gave them the strength they needed to bounce back after grief and disappointment and to move forward into educational leadership. They felt strongly that God directed them in their decision-making as school leaders (Sherman & Wrushen, 2009; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Therefore, spirituality played a vital role in their personal and professional lives (Holtcamp, 2002).

## **Education and Upward Mobility**

The fourth theme to emerge in this research study was education in the lives of study participants and how it played an integral part in their upward mobility. According to Cheung and Halpern (2010), “An important path toward success for most of the contemporary women leaders was through education” (p. 188). Study participants learned the value of obtaining an education. Parents instilled in them that the way to a better life was through education. In many instances, promotion to leadership positions came as a result of higher levels of education. At the same time, however, there was a sad reality that higher levels of education did not always lead to a desired outcome.

Even though Angela’s parents were not college graduates, they believed strongly in education and insisted that all of their children at least complete high school. Angela described how her mother instilled in her that having a good life meant going to college:

So, I had to use my brain, and my mom told me...She said, “Your brain would be your ticket, and it’s going to change your quality of life”. And she said, “If you want to have a good life, go to college”.

In Angela's case, she learned from her mother that education was the key to a better life. Her mother encouraged her to learn all that she could. Angela heeded her mother's advice and learned all that she could which resulted in a Doctoral degree and a better way of life.

Although pursuing a Doctorate degree in educational leadership consumed a great amount of her time, Henrietta offered this piece of wise advice specifically to African American women:

My interests right now are all focused on finishing this degree. I, everything that I read, everything that I touch, everything that I think (laughs) has to do with this degree. And by all means, as an African American woman, get all of the education that you can get behind you and expect excellence. And, you darn sure better deliver excellence yourself.

As a graduate student, Henrietta made a tremendous sacrifice as she pursued her Doctoral degree. She encouraged African American women to prepare themselves for leadership and always exhibit a spirit of excellence.

After earning her Ph.D. in educational leadership, Elise explained why she needed to earn her Ph.D.:

I finished my Ph.D. in May of 2011. I decided to get my Ph.D. as opposed to my Ed.D. because I didn't want anyone to ever say to me that I couldn't do something or have something because I didn't do the highest possible. I'm not knocking Ed.D. because it's only three courses three or four course difference. I'm not knocking Ed.D, but I didn't ever want anyone to say "Well, if you had this..." So, I wanted to have the highest that you could possibly get...

By earning her Ph.D., Elise viewed this accomplishment as the highest educational attainment. Her rationale was that she did not want to run the risk of being told that she was not qualified enough for any leadership position. She did not want to miss any opportunities that she felt she rightly deserved.

Just as Angela's mother told her that going to college would afford her a better life, Ingrid had been taught the same philosophy by her "village" while growing up. She held the strong belief that being highly educated would result in being promoted.

But, I think what has really caused my heart the most anguish is that I was always taught by my parents and church leaders, people in my community that if you worked hard, if you became educated, if you did all these things to sit yourself in a position to be promoted that you would. And, that's not true. So, I had seven different opportunities that I applied for. I would say six of those I was the most qualified, most educated, most experienced, and I did not get those positions. So, that kinda devastated me. It really did. It began to make me question if I really was able to do the things that I thought I could do.

Even though Ingrid was more than qualified to become a school principal, she was faced with disappointment when she was not hired for the position. This setback caused her to wonder if she would be successful in what she desired to do as a school leader. It left her feeling devastated and asking questions because she did everything she was supposed to do to receive the promotion.

A former principal and mentor was instrumental in persuading Faith to pursue her Master's in educational leadership. As she commented, he saw something in her that she had not seen in herself:

And my principal at that time, (name of principal), saw something in me and decided that he was gonna give me more responsibilities as, you know, working in the leadership. So, he pulled me out of the classroom and gave me a reading intervention position which gave me an open leeway to kinda help more with the administration.

All it took was encouragement from a former principal to get Faith headed in the direction of school leadership. She noted that her principal saw leadership ability in her and allowed her to take on leadership roles within her school. With her principal's blessing, Faith returned to school and furthered her education which prepared her for her role as a school leader.

For study participants, education was the catalyst which elevated them to leadership positions within their respective school districts. This was also true with regard to minority female urban school leaders. According to Karpinski (2010), education has long been valued by African Americans. In past centuries, African American men and women formed schools and worked tirelessly to instill the importance of education as a way of uplifting the African American race (Boukari, 2005; Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Additionally, study participants learned education's value and benefits and were taught this at an early age even though education was elusive to previous generations. Parents imparted to these individuals that education was the key to a better life. Wernick (1994) admonished, "The human capital theory suggests that individuals are rewarded in their current jobs for their past investment in education and training" (p. 13). Colleges and universities with educational leadership programs need to make a conscious effort to reach out to more minority women (Haar & Robicheau, 2009). For advancement in their professional careers, school leaders have to accept the challenge of graduate school and beyond (Gupton, 1996; Wernick, 1994).

### **Mentoring and Networking**

The fifth theme which emerged in this research study was the role of mentoring and networking in the professional lives of school leaders. Mentoring involves the development of others within an organization (Grady, Krumm, & Peery, 1998). As a companion to mentoring, resilient leaders make connections by networking with other professionals, colleagues, and/or family members (Allison, 2011/2012). Study participants served as mentors and protégés while networking with others. Only one of the school districts had an actual mentoring program in place for new administrators. School leaders in the other school districts discussed how they received advice from others in more informal ways when needed.

Diane took the time to mentor her teachers and even encouraged them to pursue educational leadership. She was instrumental in building leadership capacity in others.

I also I'm a mentor to my teachers who want to be administrators one day. Whenever there's a workshop, and I'm a member of the (name of the organization), I invite them. I send them or take them with me so that they can see what administrators do. Anytime I have information about being an instructional

leader I give it to them. I also email some other teachers and say I think you'd be a great teacher leader or administrator.

As a result of Diane's mentoring teachers who aspire to be school leaders, she was building leadership capacity within her school. Her ability to see the leadership in others was a testament of her strength as a school leader. She was already blazing the trail for future leaders to follow her.

Gabrielle mentioned that there was no official mentoring program for a new administrator. However, she did have a mentor from the central office.

The one thing I have said 10 times is that there is no mentor for a new principal. There's so many things that you don't know. In our district, there's an attempt to mentor, but in most schools and districts, things are so political that you're very cautious about sharing too much or giving too much, and to find someone who you feel very comfortable sharing your flaws with. But, I will say that I have been fortunate to have a mentor.

Consequently, Gabrielle longed to have an official mentoring program in her school district. With the challenges of being a first-year principal, she felt that an official mentoring program was needed in order to assist in answering the many burning questions that first-year administrators have. Despite the lack of an official mentoring program, Gabrielle was fortunate to have an unofficial mentor who helped her.

Unlike Gabrielle's school district, Faith's school district had an established mentoring program for new administrators. Her mentor provided support when needed which was beneficial to Faith as a first-year principal.

I have a mentor in (name of school district). They assigned a mentor—a principal to every new principal coming. Her school is quadruple in size of my school. However, she is there if I need her. I can shoot her an email if I gotta question. I can call her—anything. And, she is my mentor for two years. So, for whatever I need, she is there.

Faith was grateful to have a mentor who assisted her in making the transition from assistant principal to principal. She was able to have whatever she needed addressed whenever she needed it. Having a mentoring program for new administrators was critical to Faith's success as a new school leader.

Networking with the other middle school principals in her district and communicating with mentors outside the district kept Elise from going out on a limb and away from everyone else.

I don't wanna go out on a limb and end up out there by myself. So I talk to the other principals at the other middle schools. I have some mentors outside the district that I call--African American mentors--African American female, African American male, some that have been my administrator's administrator, some who are currently administrators who are not central office personnel. If I have a question, I pick-up the phone because the last thing I wanna do like I said is go out there on a limb and then look back and everybody else is still on the tree.

For Elise, she did not want to be out-of-the-loop in her school district. She remained in constant contact with the other middle school principals as well as others outside of the district. She did not want to be caught-off-guard with anything happening in her district. Therefore, her mentors provided her with the information she needed to make the best possible decisions.

Angela summarized perfectly the impact that mentoring and networking had on the professional lives of school leaders:

And, when you realize that you cannot do it by yourself, that's the beginning of your strength. Because I like to refer to myself as a turtle on a fence, there's no way I could have gotten up there by myself. And there's no way I could stay up there unless somebody's helping me out. And as long as we know we need that help, we can go places. Somebody's gotta put you there first before you can be on the top. If you think you can do it by yourself, you're never gonna get there...

Even with the hard work and long hours that came with being a school leader, Angela knew that she was in her position because of people who helped her along the

way. She could take no credit for being on the top because someone assisted her with being there. For Angela, it was about not forgetting those who were there for her when she needed them.

Just as urban school leaders benefited from mentoring and networking, study participants benefited as well since mentoring and networking provided them with the support and guidance needed as school leaders (Allen et al., 1995; Gardiner et al., 1999). Mentoring and networking were highly valued (Enimoto et al., 2000; Peters, 2010). The advice and encouragement of others was instrumental to study participants thinking seriously about pursuing educational leadership (Cattapan, 1998). Leadership opportunities were provided by former principals, serving as mentors, to grow in their leadership abilities while serving as classroom teachers (Mendez-Morse, 2004). These mentors supported study participants in furthering their education and obtaining graduate degrees in educational leadership. Also, study participants took the time to mentor aspiring school leaders as they encouraged them to pursue their aspirations of school leadership (Sherman & Wrushen, 2009).

With regard to networking, Bolman and Deal (2008) stated, “Getting things done in an organization involves working through a complex network of individuals and groups. Friends and allies make things a lot easier” (p. 204). Study participants networked with other school leaders who kept them informed of pertinent information. Mentoring and networking proved to be invaluable in that study participants knew they were not alone; there were others to aid them in their success as school leaders. According to Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011), “Women have much to contribute to the leadership of educational institutions; their talents and abilities should be utilized to the



fullest. Women need mentors to show them the way and to help them succeed as leaders” (p. 22).

### **Effective Communication and Positive Working Relationships**

The sixth theme which emerged from this research study was effective communication and positive working relationships. School leaders and those they lead play integral parts in effective leadership relationships (Marks & Printy, 2003). An individual’s character is always communicating to others, and it causes others to trust or distrust (Covey, 1989). In *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Fullan (2001) indicated, “...schools and school districts can get tough about student learning, can use their minds to identify new and better ideas, and can establish strategies and mechanics of development. But successful strategies always involve relationships, relationships, relationships” (p. 70). Study participants utilized the art of effective communication to build positive relationships with faculty and staff, students and parents, and other school leaders as well. The overall purpose was to build a strong team or unit within the school community to make an impact on the surrounding community.

Celeste utilized *The 7 Habits* to help build school community. She encouraged her faculty and staff to take care of home first in order to perform their daily duties. Celeste called her school a family and worked to ensure that each person remembered that.

This year I did *Seven Habits: Building a Leader*. And, I talked about this to our teachers that they have to start with the end in mind. They got to keep first things first. And, I told them that home is first. Take care of home. I talk to my classified workers, and I do the same thing with them on the same scale because they’re just as important. So, I built that sense of community when I first came to keep growing every year on understanding that we’re a family. Regardless of where we come from, we’re all gonna be a family here. So, I do use it and it helps tremendously.

In her school, Celeste felt the need to share what she learned in her class to build more of a community within her school. She encouraged faculty and staff members to take care of home first and to keep first things first. Because of her initiative, she saw a positive difference in the lives of those she led which impacted the school.

To help with morale and improve working relationships, Diane encouraged faculty and staff to recognize each other for a job well done.

You know, something I started since I became principal, I don't vote, but I want teachers to know that there's lots of leaders here. We have a teacher of the year over here and we have a secondary teacher of the year. But, there are so many other people that do great things. So, I have our teachers to vote on people of the month. We do certified and classified. And, my assistant and I take our personal money, and we go and buy five \$10 gift cards to Applebee's or to Starbucks. And, we make a big deal out of it. We announce over the intercom. They love it because their peers have voted for them, and that was because in one of my surveys, the morale here was low... And, so I wanted to increase the morale.

Focusing on meeting the needs of others was what Diane needed to do in order to increase morale in her school. It was all about recognizing and celebrating others for a job well done. Receiving special recognition from colleagues served as a means of building positive working relationships.

Elise delineated herself as a servant leader. For her, leadership was about meeting the needs of others. Elise's role was working for others so that they could do their jobs. Her philosophy regarding leadership was that becoming a leader meant becoming a servant.

I'm a servant leader. I've got to work and I got to do for you so you can do your job. And, everyone is not a servant leader—urban or suburban. And, I think that servant part trips up African Americans, um, urban or suburban—that servant part. You know, uh, I'm not doing anything for anybody, you know. That kinda thing. I think that part trips some people up. But, I'm a servant leader. And, I think everyone should be that way. You don't rise to the top to be at the top.

Being a servant leader required a great deal of humility. Elise had no problem with serving her faculty and staff with humility. Whenever there was a need, she felt that she was responsible for meeting it so that others could do their jobs. Her belief was that being at the top was not about being at the top. Rather, it was about being a servant to others.

Henrietta emphasized the value of building relationships with others. In her opinion, building relationships decreased the need for discipline or correction.

You know, I think one other thing and that is that I think I have I am experiencing a fair amount of success in my current position. And, I think I experienced a fair amount of success in my prior position. And, I really do attribute that to the importance of building bonds with people that cross your path. I express to teachers on a daily basis you have got to take the time to build relationships.

An organization is only as strong as its relationships. Henrietta made it her mission to take the time to build relationships with parents, teachers, and students, and she attributed her success to the relationships she had built over the years. Henrietta encouraged her teachers to do likewise with their students. In the end, those relationships would serve as a great help.

Effective communication was the key to positive working relationships with study participants just as it was with urban school leaders (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2011). Quality school leaders are made possible through positive human relations by way of effective communication (Halawah, 2005). Study participants communicated expectations, goals, and visions to those under their leadership (Reitzug & Patterson, 1998) followed by support, guidance, and resources to teachers, parents, and students in order for them to be successful (Benham, 1997; Wood, 2005). By building a rapport with those they led, school leaders “demonstrate their respect for the school culture as well as a desire to be a

part of the community” (Ashton & Duncan, 2012, p. 24). Because study participants offered their support, they earned the respect and trust of others. Schools were viewed as communities of family.

### **Child Advocacy and Community Partnerships**

The seventh and final theme which emerged from this research study was child advocacy and community partnerships. In a study conducted by Witherspoon and Arnold (2010), study participants “expressed belief that they were an extension of God’s care for their students” (p. 226). Being an advocate was viewed as a spiritual and moral obligation to students. School leaders wore many hats and took on many responsibilities. One aspect of child advocacy is the involvement of students in service-learning projects. Although there is much on the agenda for public education, service-learning is a wonderful tool for schools to utilize with their students (Kielsmeier, Scales, & Roehlkeportain, 2004).

Study participants demonstrated child advocacy in a plethora of ways within the school and surrounding community. Part of their responsibility as school leaders was to do what was best for their students who had been entrusted to their charge. Elise described how she encouraged community service in her school and made it mandatory for her students.

I involve my academic teams. I can’t do everything from as one person from this office. So, one of the things that I emphasize with the team of teachers, ‘cause it’s a middle school, is community service. In order to be of service, you have to serve. I challenge each team every year to have their own community service project for their 100 kids that they have. And, they’ve embraced that. And, they go out into the community and they do something for the community.

Through community service projects, Elise taught her students the value of giving back. She challenged the teams in her school to take the time to make a positive

contribution and not just with a monetary donation. Teachers and students accepted and embraced the challenge. As a result, they were actively involved in their community.

Gabrielle proclaimed that she loved her students and held teachers to a high standard. She was adamant about the fact that students came to school to learn. Her number one mission was to ensure that students received the best classroom instruction.

So, the first thing is that I love the children. And, I love them enough to hold our teachers to a high standard and hold them accountable for what they do for those children. And, I think some people aren't interested in serving that way.

With her commitment to children, Gabrielle held high expectations for her teachers. She wanted teachers to provide the best classroom instruction possible. Her responsibility was to ensure that teachers were prepared to teach and students were prepared to learn.

In addition to being advocates of children, school leaders had the daunting task of forming community partnerships. It was vitally important to not only receive from the surrounding community but to give back as well. With strong community partnerships, schools were able to achieve high levels of success. In thinking about the power of community partnerships and the reasons for their presence in today's schools, Epstein (2010) documented:

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. They can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. (pp. 81-82)

The main reason for these partnerships is to help students to be successful in school and in life (Epstein, 2010). Henrietta attested to the fact that all parents—

regardless of education and socioeconomic status—brought something of value to her school.

We have very financially capable parents, and we have parents who are much less capable—financially speaking. We have parents who are extremely well-educated. We have parents who may not have completed high school. And because my parents were not literate—formally literate—people, it helps to have someone in place who can reach out to parents and pull them in and to say to them, “You have something to offer as well”.

Parents were welcomed and encouraged to be actively involved in their child's school. Henrietta recognized the diversity among her parents and made a special effort to connect with them. In her strongest opinion, every parent had value and brought something of importance to the school.

Jacqueline learned early as a school leader the importance of connecting with the community. Various organizations were willing to take an active role in working with the school. Whenever there was a need, Jacqueline could always depend on the support of the community.

But, anything that we did at the school was really kinda treated as a community event. So, I learned to get kinda connected with what the...I guess celebrated and distinguished kinds of clubs were in the community. So, I got connected with the Kiwanis Club. They had a real strong voice in the community. There was a Chamber of Commerce. I got on their Board. And, it was nice because I could pull them in when we needed to do certain things.

Participants invited the community to be a part of what was happening in the school. Jacqueline connected with community organizations which served as a help to the school. Whenever there was a need, she could depend on the community to show up with a helping hand.

Study participants were advocates for their students receiving a quality education just as urban school leaders were for their students (Randolph, 2012). Servant leadership

was a term utilized by study participants as they made a special effort to serve teachers and students by ensuring they had what was needed in order to be successful in the classroom. Study participants not only worked within the school community to build positive working relationships with those under their leadership, they also worked to build community partnerships outside of the school (Morris, 2004; Sperandio & Kagoda, 2011). Alliances were formed with parents, businesses, and civic organizations (Freiberg, 1993; Katz, 2012; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Students reciprocated by being actively engaged in community service projects. The partnership between school and community was a win-win situation for all.

Being an advocate for children and building community partnerships were two crucial aspects of school leadership (Clayton & Slaughter-Defoe, 2012; Johnson, 2006). Study participants knew they had to make decisions that were best for their students. Simultaneously, they needed community input to help achieve the goal of student success in all areas. So, school-community partnerships “can be defined as the connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (Sanders, 2001, p. 20). School leaders had to focus their attention on co-creating “a learning environment which emphasizes authentic self-expression, the development of relationships and the development of the whole person within a community” (Beattie, 2002, p. 201).

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 provided a detailed summary of the lived personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in four suburban

school districts. These experiences were distinctively similar to minority female school leaders in urban school districts. From study participant interviews, seven major themes emerged, including: (a) race and gender in school leadership, (b) taking care of family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality, (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking, (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships.

Study participants had a multiplicity of challenging experiences as African American female school leaders. Despite racism and sexism, they were resilient and spiritually-grounded to rise above and answer the call to leadership. Effective communication was instrumental in forming positive working relationships with other school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and surrounding communities. Formal and informal mentoring and networking were beneficial by allowing participants to empower, encourage, and assist those under their leadership. As school leaders, study participants exemplified servant leadership as being advocates for their students by working with teachers yet holding them to a high standard of excellence in academic instruction. Participants encouraged and made it possible for students to be actively engaged in service-learning projects as a means of giving back to their communities. With regard to work, family, civic, and other obligations, study participants utilized a network of family and friends, set boundaries, and made sacrifices by cutting back in order to possess a sense of balance to fulfill their duties as school leaders. Study participants conveyed their passion and commitment to their schools and surrounding communities through diligence and determination as they served as suburban school leaders.



By employing rich, thick descriptions with direct quotes from study participants, I was able to describe the actual experiences of each study participant in their respective roles as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. In Chapter 5, a summary and discussion of these findings and implications for future studies of African American female schools leaders in suburban school districts is presented.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Summary and Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

As more women of color, whether African, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian, enter educational leadership, their lived experiences need to be an integral part of the conversations in empirical research. According to Clark (2011), "...an examination of how women lead can result in a deeper understanding of an educational leadership concept that reflects diverse perspectives and that involves a community as opposed to a single leader" (p. 91). There is a great need for more feminist research which focuses on the lived experiences of women, especially women of color (Sherman, 2005). Notably, Clark (2011) asserted, "The increasing number of American women in educational leadership positions has offered up a rich opportunity for the exploration of the ways in which women lead" (p. 91). The leadership styles and abilities of female school leaders, especially African Americans and other minority women, are worth exploring in-depth to gain a greater understanding of them as school leaders and gain more knowledge regarding their contributions to educational leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts.

Qualitative methods were utilized to conduct this phenomenological study. This allowed me to investigate and gain an in-depth understanding of study participants'

experiences through thick, rich descriptions (Gamson, 2000) as these school leaders served as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. I employed criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) because participants represented individuals who had firsthand knowledge of being African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Recruitment letters were sent via email. Although a follow-up telephone script was designed, I did not utilize the script because study participants responded within the designated two-week timeframe.

Study participants were comprised of one elementary assistant principal, one high school assistant principal, four elementary school principals, one middle school principal, and three central office administrators (Director of Student Services, Administrative Manager, and Coordinator of Curriculum and Technology). School leaders were employed in four suburban school districts in southeastern United States. At the time of this study, participants were in their respective positions. From data analysis, seven themes emerged. A summary of the codes and themes can be found in Table 2.

Within the K-12 school setting, demographically-changing suburban schools are more prevalent than they previous years ago. Hence, more diversity needs to be seen in the leaders and models of leadership with regard to race and gender (Brown, 2005). Despite challenges, setbacks, and disappointments, African American women in this study and others have exhibited resilience and achieved goals of becoming school leaders (Gregory, 2001). By discussing the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of these 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts, their voices addressed the gap in literature with regard to minority female school leaders. Participants' lived experiences depicted the challenges, setbacks, and disappointments

which came with being a minority female school leader. However, triumphs over racism and sex discrimination were also evident based on participants' roles as school leaders in suburban school districts.

This final chapter of the study presents (a) a summary of the major findings, (b) research questions answered, (c) summary of research questions answered, (d) limitations of the study, (e) implications of the study, (f) recommendations for future research, and (g) conclusions.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

This phenomenological research study yielded seven major themes related to the personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of 10 African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. Open-ended, face-to-face, 60 minute interviews (Creswell, 2007) provided information regarding how study participants perceived their roles as school leaders. Data suggested the role of race and gender in school leadership, caring for family and self, resilience and spirituality, education and upward mobility, mentoring and networking, effective communication and positive working relationships, and child advocacy and community partnerships were indicative of the personal, professional and sociocultural experiences of study participants as suburban school leaders.

For study participants, race and gender in school leadership was a challenge with regard to experiencing racism and sexism as they pursued leadership positions. Although Diane made history by becoming the first African American principal—male or female—in her school's history, she was unable to celebrate this historical accomplishment because of the uncertainty of others' reactions to her being selected as the school's

leader. Fortunately, Diane was well-received by parents, and students of color looked to her as a role model. With regard to gender, Ingrid faced repeated disappointments as she was overlooked for a promotion to school principal which subsequently went to male colleagues with less experience and less education. Ingrid also expressed humiliation and disrespect as the hands of a former principal. At one point in her career, she began to question her purpose and her value as a school leader. The words of Ingrid's youngest daughter instructing her to remember her purpose was just what Ingrid needed in order to regain focus and succeed.

In addition, caring for family and self was a major responsibility for study participants because they were wives, mothers, volunteers, and caregivers. Having a healthy balance between work and home was vital to participants' success as school leaders. Gabrielle noted that it was a challenge to balance work and family, but she relied heavily upon "her village" and the art of compartmentalizing. She was able to employ the help of family and friends as well as organize her life as a wife, mother, and school leader. For Beverly, she had to learn the power of saying, "No", and she had to deal with the challenge of living with MS. Beverly admitted that her physical health took precedence over everything else, and as a result of saying "no" and taking care of her health, she was able to fulfill her role as a school leader.

On the other hand, resilience and spirituality provided the strength and direction needed for being a school leader. Study participants had an unyielding faith and sense of spirituality that enabled them to always strive toward excellence (Alston, 2005). For Faith, being resilient and spiritually-grounded was essential for her as she began her first-year as principal only one month before the death of her mother. After her mother's

passing, Faith admitted that there was no time for her to grieve or have a pity party because others were looking to her for guidance and strength as they faced challenges in their own lives. Despite being turned down for an assistant principal position seven times, Celeste exemplified resilience and maintained a positive attitude in the midst of rejection. She held the strong belief that persistence would work in her favor as she pursued a school leadership position.

Education was considered the catalyst for upward mobility and the answer to a better quality of life. Even though earlier generations did not possess the same opportunities, parents instilled in study participants the value of attaining an education. Parents possessed wisdom or mother wit with regard to seeing the future benefits of being educated in today's society. Angela's parents were not college graduates, but they worked diligently to provide for their children. Despite their limited educational background, they conveyed the important message of education to Angela and her 12 siblings. Similarly, Henrietta's parents were not highly educated, but they stressed the importance of education and respecting others. As a Doctoral student, Henrietta knew that knowledge was powerful and vital to the success of African American females who aspire to become school leaders. In her opinion, education coupled with a spirit of excellence was the key ingredient to being a successful school leader. Both Angela and Henrietta were living testaments to the impact of education in their lives as school leaders. Ironically, Ingrid was highly educated and experienced but was overlooked for a leadership position in her school district. Although Ingrid was taught that education was the answer to a better quality of life, she experienced rejection despite her academic credentials.

The role of mentoring and networking was beneficial to study participants as well. Mentoring and networking provided the support needed for successful leadership. Although not every school district had a formal mentoring program, study participants were not deterred in their efforts of being mentored and networking with others, which resulted in study participants mentoring aspiring school leaders themselves. As a first-year principal, Gabrielle's district did not have a formal mentoring program. However, she connected with a fellow colleague who assisted her in making a successful transition from assistant principal to principal. In Elise's case, she felt the need to stay one step ahead; therefore, she remained in constant communication with the other two middle school principals in the district. Her philosophy was not to get caught “out on a limb” while everyone else was “still in the tree”. She also employed the help of other school leaders outside of the district who kept her informed of pertinent information.

With regard to “paying it forward”, Jacqueline delineated herself as a colleague of teachers and enjoyed mentoring them. She made a special effort to connect with individuals who were different and not easily embraced by the majority. She had grown accustomed to being the only minority based on race or gender. Therefore, she related well with others who were in the same situation. Jacqueline provided teachers and school leaders with opportunities to be themselves and not to allow anyone to fit them into a certain mold. Jacqueline admitted that mentoring teachers and school leaders allowed her the opportunity to become better acquainted with who she was as a person.

Another key factor in study participants' success as school leaders was effective communication leading to positive working relationships. Participants utilized relational collaboration to build morale (Alston, 2005). For Celeste, she used the strategies from a

class to build school community. She explained how the class changed her personal and professional life and resulted in her decision to empower others by teaching and demonstrating the need for positive working relationships. Upon learning that school morale was low, Diane took the initiative of improving school morale by administering a survey to her faculty and staff. She was able to get a true picture of the school's culture. Because of the survey's results, Diane went into action by building up morale. She encouraged those under her leadership to recognize others within the school for doing great work. Further, she and her assistant principal presented gift cards to those who were selected during the month. Morale was improved and positive working relationships were formed.

Finally, being a child advocate and forming community partnerships were two responsibilities identified by study participants. According to Alston (2005), African American female school leaders choose service while leading and leave a legacy of service to others. The servant leader is a servant first and one who genuinely desires to serve others (Greenleaf, 1973). Hence, participants referred to themselves as servant leaders. Gabrielle acknowledged that she was committed to the well-being of her students and held teachers to a high standard of academic instruction. She provided teachers with professional development opportunities to aid them in growing as classroom teachers in order to better serve their students. As a principal, she stated that it was her job to hire good teachers. As stated by Gabrielle, her number one priority was to ensure that her students received quality classroom instruction.

In addition to classroom instruction, students needed to know the value of giving back to their communities. Therefore, Elise challenged her teachers and students to



participate in service-learning projects within the community. Contributing to the well-being of the surrounding community resulted in positive results within the school community (Jones-Burbridge, 2012). Like Gabrielle, Elise firmly believed in providing teachers and students with the resources needed to be successful in their classroom. Her philosophy regarding leadership was that becoming a leader meant becoming a servant. As self-proclaimed servant leaders, Gabrielle and Elise worked diligently to meet the needs of those under their leadership by challenging and supporting them.

Although study participants expressed that being a school leader was hard work and challenging at times, there was consensus that participants loved and enjoyed being a school leader. Study participants' spirit of excellence was conveyed through their passion and commitment to their schools and surrounding communities through diligence and determination as they served as suburban school leaders.

### **Research Questions**

Data were collected in this study to answer research questions. Ten “in-depth, open-ended” (Creswell, 2007) face-to-face interviews (see Appendix E) were conducted in order to collect detailed data from African American female suburban school leaders to address the research questions. These school leaders revealed explicit information pertaining to their lived personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences.

The research questions for this study included the following:

- What challenges have participants encountered as an African American female school leader in a suburban school district?
- How do participants deal with these challenges?

- What positive experiences have occurred as a result of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district?
- How do participants acknowledge these positive experiences?
- How do participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position?

## **Research Questions Answered**

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked what challenges school leaders encountered as an African American female. With low numbers of women, women of color, and minorities in educational leadership positions, it seems apparent that "...gender, race, and ethnicity affect views and approaches to leadership" (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006, p. 159). Study participants provided a multiplicity of responses with regard to race and gender in school leadership. Participants acknowledged that having a career as an educational leader can be rewarding for African American women in spite of the challenges of racism and sexism (Tillman, 2012). Study participants further communicated that despite the challenges associated with being an African American female school leader, they enjoyed being in leadership positions. As noted by Simon, Perry, and Roff (2008), race and gender serve as categories for the purpose of gaining information about individuals and their lived experiences. Study participants were able to voice their experiences based on race and gender as African American females in suburban school districts.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked how participants deal with these challenges. Study participants were resilient and spiritually-grounded in the face of the challenges that came with being an African American female school leader. School leaders must learn to be more resilient in the face of adversity by bouncing back and moving forward (Allison, 2011/2012). Individuals are delineated as resilient when they make the choice to just get by, get back to the status quo after adversity, or get ahead with consistent improvement or high performance (Patterson, J. L., Patterson, J. H., & Collins, 2002). With regard to spirituality in the professional lives of African American women, Matthis (2002) stated:

The clarifying and analytic functions of religiosity/spirituality should inspire researchers and practitioners to explore more fully the ways in which Black women use religious and spiritual ideologies to formulate or challenge particular ideas about their experiences and the worlds in which they live. (p. 317)

Because of their resilience and spirituality, study participants were able to connect, build relationships with others, and fulfill their responsibilities as school leaders (Dantley, 2010).

## **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked what positive experiences have occurred as a result of being an African American female school leader in a suburban school district. Study participants revealed that positive working relationships with others were critical to the success of their schools. These relationships came in the form of mentoring and networking and community partnerships through effective communication. Collaboration and honest communication were vital to school success (Halawah, 2005).

In order to bridge the gap between women in educational leadership, Sherman (2005) suggested, “Formal mentoring or leadership development is one way to promote and unite women in educational administration, to offer them the chance to engage in mentoring relationships, and to network with others, both men and women, practicing leaders, and aspirants” (p. 712). The strength of a network structure is the relationships built between the networking members (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). Mentoring and networking were beneficial to the success of study participants as school leaders.

#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth question asked how participants acknowledge these positive experiences. As school leaders, study participants served as mentors and role models to administrators, teachers, and students. With regard to educational contributions, Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) indicated, “Women have much to contribute to the leadership of educational institutions; their talents and abilities should be utilized to the fullest. Women need mentors to show them the way and to help them succeed as leaders” (p. 22). Also, it is vitally important for school leaders to model certain “behaviors, skills, and attitudes that emanate from an understanding of living and learning...” (Beattie, 2002, p. 208). Study participants shared their knowledge and expertise with individuals who aspired to become school leaders. As advocates of children, they were responsible for ensuring that students participated in service-learning projects within their communities; these activities communicated the need and value of students giving back.

#### **Research Question 5**

The fifth and final research question asked how study participants balance work, family, civic, and other obligations in their current position. As school leaders, study

participants were wives, mothers, and volunteers in community efforts. With regard to the responsibilities of female school leaders, Brinia (2011) asserted:

Female school leaders are also responsible for their household, thus taking on an additional role. Their family and household responsibilities are barriers as they take up a lot of energy and time from women in general, so many women do find it difficult to manage both work and household tasks simultaneously. (p. 47)

Study participants admitted that having the responsibilities of work and family were challenging at times. However, for those with school-age children, they valued the support of family and friends in lending helping hands when needed. Other participants made the choice “to cut back on some things” and communicated the need to set boundaries.

### **Summary of Research Questions Answered**

Sherman (2005) confirmed, “Feminist research is needed that focuses on women's lives and experiences” (p. 73). This qualitative study provided information pertaining to the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female suburban school leaders. Study participants had a multiplicity of positive and challenging experiences as African American female school leaders. Despite their challenges, study participants were resilient and spiritually-grounded to successfully rise above and answer the call to leadership. As reflected in the literature, participants were able to bounce back and move forward (Allison, 2011/2012). With regard to work, family, civic, and other obligations, study participants utilized a network of family and friends, set boundaries, and made sacrifices by cutting back in order to possess a sense of balance to fulfill their duties as school leaders (Milkie & Petola, 1999). Effective communication was instrumental in forming positive working relationships with other school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and surrounding communities.

Formal and informal mentoring and networking allowed participants to empower, encourage, and assist those under their leadership. Participants exemplified servant leadership as they provided what was needed for teachers and students to be successful in the classroom as well as the surrounding community (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). As school leaders, study participants were advocates for their students by working with teachers yet holding them to a high standard of excellence in academic instruction. Participants encouraged and enabled students to be actively engaged in service-learning projects as a means of giving back to their communities. Not only were students giving to the community, the community built alliances with the schools to aid in achieving academic and lifelong goals. Study participants possessed a spirit of excellence as they conveyed their passion and commitment to their schools and surrounding communities through diligence and determination as they served as suburban school leaders.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This phenomenological study focused on the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female suburban school leaders. The study was conducted with only African American female suburban school leader thus addressing the gaps in the literature, given that the majority of the limited research on African American female school leaders has been conducted in high-poverty, low-performing, urban school districts.

The geographical location of the study was in the southeastern United States; it did not take into account other regions of the country. There were only 10 study participants from four suburban school districts which decreased the number of perspectives of other African American female school leaders in suburban districts within

the same region. This study did not include the lived experiences of other minority women within the same school districts. The only data collected were study participant interviews. Participants were not observed in their daily routines as assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators. Teacher perspectives of participants' leadership style and ability were not accounted for in this study.

In qualitative research, researcher bias is a crucial component of methodology and cannot be completely omitted. However, I utilized member checking, reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2008). Although these strategies were advantageous in decreasing research bias, qualitative research, by design, accounts for the researcher's experiences. As a result, conclusions drawn in this study may be subject to other interpretations and analyses.

### **Implications of the Study**

According to Tillman and Cochran (2000), "More research is needed in the areas of racial and gender equity in all aspects of educational administration" (p. 55). It is imperative for educational organizations to recruit and retain minority school leaders (Jones, 2002). In order for this to occur, African American females and other minority females must be identified early in their careers "as having the potential for success in educational administration" so that they are selected as school leaders (Tillman & Cochran, 2000, p. 50). More attention needs to focus on the integration of the aforementioned groups into educational leadership positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

As suggested in Chapter 1, the challenge within the leadership arena is to increase the number of women—as well as the number of women of color—in leadership positions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). My educational experiences are only in urban

school settings. I am aware of the challenges faced by urban school leaders but was unaware of the lived experiences of African American female suburban school leaders. Furthermore, I am an African American female with aspirations of becoming a school leader. I wanted to learn firsthand what study participants face on a daily basis with regard to personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences as they lead in their respective suburban school districts. The major findings of this phenomenological study were related to the following seven themes: (a) gender and race in school leadership, (b) caring for family and self, (c) resilience and spirituality, (d) education and upward mobility, (e) mentoring and networking, (f) effective communication and positive working relationships, and (g) child advocacy and community partnerships.

### **Race and Gender in School Leadership**

Because of the diversity within schools, it is critical for African American females to be in leadership positions. As stated in Chapter 1, Brown (2005) identified, “A critical aspect of diversification of American schooling is the preparation and placement of African American school leaders” (p. 585). By being in leadership positions, African American females are able to speak from their individual experiences as school leaders. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), “...we must be careful not to speak too generally of women's experiences of leadership. Just as men and women in educational leadership do not share a common set of experiences, neither do white women and women of color” (p. 130).

Study participants discussed the issues of being African American and female as a school leader in a suburban school district. Although participants experienced upward mobility within their respective school districts, they still encountered racism and sexism



from individuals within the district as well as the surrounding community. A few of the study participants were history makers as the first African American—female or male—to hold their current positions. Of the 10 participants, seven transitioned from classroom teacher to administrator within their current school district. I learned that participants had earned a reputation as a leader before actually becoming a school leader. Regardless of the small percentage of women in school leadership, participants enumerated the progress being made in their school districts to promote women to leadership positions.

Participants indicated that more women had been promoted to leadership positions in recent years. Aspiring school leaders need mentors who serve in the capacity of school leaders in suburban school districts. Since women comprise the largest percentage of graduate students enrolled in educational leadership programs, suburban school districts need to work more closely with educational leadership programs to identify, encourage, and support African American females to pursue leadership positions.

### **Caring for Family and Self**

Women's contributions in the home are vital to the success of the family (Grogan, 2005). In addition to working in the home, more women have now joined the workforce outside of the home. Despite this shift in workforce dynamics, women still have the daunting task of taking care of family. With regard to balancing work and family, Milkie and Peltola (1999) noted:

Although the numbers and kinds of demands from work and family likely relate to how successful one is in balancing these arenas, feeling balanced also may have to do with a sense that there is harmony among the various roles in these two spheres. (p. 477)

Although study participants were school leaders, their roles and responsibilities did not lessen because they were wives and mothers. Participants communicated that it

was a challenge to balance work and family, but they relied heavily on the support of family and friends. Also, they had to learn the importance of establishing boundaries and cutting back on things they were able to handle before taking on their leadership roles. Participants expressed a renewed focus on the family for those who had put their work first. Participants had to go back and regroup in order to achieve this harmony by learning the valuable lesson of taking care of themselves in order to care for others, whether it was spouse, child, or employee. School districts need to offer more support for female school leaders who may feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities of work and family. Suggestions may include periodic mini-vacations, spa packages, massages, gym memberships, and lunches away from the school. Also, a district-wide network for African American female school leaders needs to be established for individuals to communicate, encourage, and support one another.

### **Resilience and Spirituality**

African American women have been known to possess great strength for survival and perseverance (Hudson, Wesson, & Marciano, 1998). This strength, coupled with resilience and spirituality, has a significant impact on their leadership abilities (Funk, 1998). Grotberg (1999) defined resilience as “the human capacity to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity” (p. 3). A resilient leader not only bounces back but makes the conscious decision to bounce forward (Allison, 2011/2012). Spirituality is identified as a source of strength which aids African American females in education and educational leadership (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011/2012). A leader's ability to lead effectively operates from the leader's spiritual core (Dantley, 2010).

Despite challenges associated with being school leaders, study participants displayed resilience and emphasized the significance of spirituality in their lives. In fact, participants were able to be resilient because of their spirituality. Spirituality was the central core to their work, relationships, and decision-making. Participants were able to endure and function as well as they did because of being spiritually rooted and grounded. As a result, they were able to provide emotional and spiritual support to those they led. Being spiritually connected to God was the key to participants' success as school leaders. School districts need to provide professional development opportunities which focus on the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of African American female school leaders. Also, suburban school district leaders may consider conducting surveys to discover the morale among African American female school leaders. The results of the surveys could serve as a catalyst for efforts to be made in improving overall morale.

### **Education and Upward Mobility**

Education is highly valued both morally and socially in the African American community and is recommended as the path that an individual takes in order to have a better quality of life (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Practitioners are encouraged to participate in professional learning opportunities in order to gain new knowledge and skills which may prove to be beneficial in educational leadership (Spillane, Healey, & Parise, 2009). However, the unfortunate reality is that women and people of color are frequently overlooked for leadership positions even when they possess a plethora of knowledge and skills (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). As a result of this type of discriminatory practice, the unique perspectives of the aforementioned groups remain elusive in the area of educational leadership (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009).

Study participants conveyed how education was extremely important in their lives. They had parents and older siblings who encouraged them to do and to be their best. Education was viewed as the catalyst to a better life. Being the first to go to college was indeed an honor and a great responsibility. While engaged in various leadership capacities within the school, study participants were encouraged by former principals, mentors, colleagues, and family members to pursue graduate school for educational leadership. Even though there were setbacks and disappointments with regard to being highly educated and not being hired, participants did not abandon their hopes of becoming school leaders. School districts need to provide incentives for employees who are enrolled in graduate level leadership programs. These incentives may be in the form of tuition assistance, book scholarships, gas vouchers for travel to and from school, or total or partial reimbursement of funds spent by the individual. By providing financial support to aspiring and current African American female school leaders, suburban school districts can make investments to ensure that they have the best people in leadership positions for years to come.

### **Mentoring and Networking**

Mentoring aids in the development of people within in an organization and continues to make an impact upon the mentor and protégé even after the mentoring relationship has ended (Grady et al., 1998). With regard to females and minorities and career advancement, Grady et al. (1998) indicated, “Mentoring is very important for females and minorities because of the obstacles they often face in career advancement...” (p. 91). In building networks, school leaders determine whose help they need and then develop relationships with those people (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As a result, educational

leaders receive efficient and reliable information from other professionals or group members (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). In addition, educational leaders offer their support through networking with others—whether teachers, students, or other leaders—when needed (Allison, 2011/2012). Networking provides “resource pooling, mutual exploration, and knowledge creation” (Agranoff, 2006, p. 57).

Study participants asserted that having informal and formal mentoring and networking relationships with other school leaders was beneficial to them as they led their schools. Participants recognized that these circles of support gave them the strength needed to face and conquer the challenges which surface with school leaders. Having mentors and networks actually empowered participants to reach out to those they led through mentoring and networking with them. Participants were able to impart words of wisdom and their expertise in order to build leadership capacity within others. Having these relationships removed a huge burden from participants because they knew they were not alone. Participants could call, email, or visit their mentors or network connections to get answers when needed. All suburban school districts need to implement a district-wide mentoring and networking program for all school leaders, especially those new to school leadership. Also, there needs to be a scheduled time for mentors and protégés to meet on a consistent basis throughout the school year.

### **Effective Communication and Positive Working Relationships**

Communication is the most important and most utilized skill in the lives of people (Covey, 1989). In order for leaders to be effective in “interpersonal communication”, they have to be empathetic listeners and possess the character which allows for openness and trust (Covey, 1989). Effective communication is the essential theme of collaborating

and consulting with others (Safran, 1991). School leaders are able to establish key relationships by building a positive rapport through trust, empathy, and respect for those under their leadership (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Acknowledging the value of effective communication and positive working relationships, Beattie (2002) asserted:

In a holistic view of educational leadership, the processes and procedures of leading and teaching grow out of consciousness that respects and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all aspects of human beings, and is based on authentic relations, connectedness, collaboration, and commitment to self, others, and community. In today's schools, we need holistic leaders whose purpose it is to create these structures and frameworks for collaborative meaning-making and shared vision-building. (p. 219)

School leaders with the capacity to build relational trust with others are important in creating a positive school climate hence making schools better (Price, 2012).

Study participants suggested that building positive working relationships with those under their leadership was paramount. Participants utilized words such as community, team, and family to delineate their schools. Listening was vitally important to building positive relationships, and they did not consider themselves to be the only leader in the school. Participants welcomed input from others even though they knew they had the final decision and the responsibility for that decision. They supported teachers, parents, and students by providing spiritual, emotional, and material support. Participants worked well with the aforementioned groups and described themselves as servant leaders as they provided for the needs of those under their leadership. Suburban school districts need to provide professional development for school leaders about the art of effective communication and building positive working relationships with others. Also, school leaders need to administer evaluations or surveys of their leadership style to faculty and staff for feedback on ways to improve working relationships.

## **Child Advocacy and Community Partnerships**

School leaders play several key roles and have several responsibilities. One key responsibility is being an advocate for the children in their care. Being an advocate for children is viewed as a spiritual and moral obligation. In a study conducted by Witherspoon and Arnold (2010), study participants “expressed belief that they were an extension of God's care for their students” (p. 226). Rodriguez and Murakami-Ramalho (2009) affirmed:

It is only through inclusive leadership strategies such as advocacy for students that moral obligations to meet student needs will be accomplished. These are leaders who value their students, their backgrounds and experiences, and the strengths that they bring to school. (p. 9)

School leaders epitomize child advocacy by encouraging and allowing their students to engage in community service-learning projects. In U.S. schools, community service is becoming a common practice and expectation with a strong commitment from schools and educators leading to positive results for students, schools, and communities (Kielsmeier et al., 2004).

Having students participate in service-learning projects is one way to bridge the gap between school and community. Authentic community partnerships place an emphasis on building relationships and only help to strengthen the school and improve academic achievement thus fulfilling the school's mission (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Suburban schools have a diverse student population therefore authentic community partnerships welcome all families, embrace their differences, and involve them in a variety of ways throughout the school (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

Study participants expressed the strong conviction that students were their first priority. They held teachers to a high standard of excellence with regard to teaching their students. Hence, they ensured that teachers and students had whatever they needed for classroom instruction. Frequently, study participants would personally retrieve the additional supplementary materials for classrooms. Study participants valued the ideal of serving others rather than serving themselves (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011) and conveyed a sense of duty in order for students to be successful. Study participants worked diligently to build community partnerships which benefited their schools. Parents were welcomed and their input was encouraged as a means of being actively involved with their child's school. Study participants encouraged students to contribute to society through service-learning projects in their communities which communicated that learning was not limited to academics. Students learned the value of making positive contributions to their world. Suburban school districts need to work with school leaders to promote initiatives that prepare students and provide opportunities to give back to their communities. Also, service-learning projects should be included in the curriculum and required for all students in grades K-12.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This phenomenological study was limited to 10 African American female suburban school leaders in southeastern United States. Future researchers are encouraged to investigate the lived experiences of other minority women suburban school leaders. Future researchers may study African American female or other minority women suburban school leaders in other regions of the country. Although marriage and children were not determining factors for study participation, nine of the 10 participants were



married with children. Future researchers may wish to study the lives of female school leaders who are not married and have no children or who are single mothers. Future researchers are challenged to explore the perceptions of faculty and staff members of African American female or other minority female school leaders. Study participants discussed how they worked with their faculty and staff by providing them support through professional development, team teaching, and supplementary materials for instruction. Suburban schools generally have the reputation of being academically strong. Study participants formed building-level leadership teams, held academic and extracurricular team meetings, and visited other schools in neighboring districts recognized for academic achievement. Future researchers may examine the levels of student achievement of schools or school districts led by African American or other minority women.

### **Conclusion**

Women are still the minority as school leaders with African American women comprising even smaller numbers in educational leadership (Alston, 2012). Mainstream educational research has not addressed the impact of race and gender on educational policies and practices (Phendla, 2008). Despite the challenges of race and gender, African American females are encouraged to navigate through the discriminatory practices of society and pursue leadership positions (Phendla, 2008). African American female suburban school leaders must utilize their voices to share their lived experiences. Acknowledging the need to express diverse experiences among African American females, Davis, Reynolds, and Jones (2011) posited:

While there are shared understandings, a diversity of life experiences also exists, impacting how each woman interpreted and experienced those common themes.

The act of sharing one's story and drawing a connection to other Black women who have similar experiences is powerful and can aid the understanding of the challenges Black women face.... (p. 30)

Inequities still exist and small gains by women to attain leadership positions are not truly sustainable (Young, 2005). Therefore, attention needs to be given to the lived experiences of women, especially minority women, as school leaders. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the personal, professional, and sociocultural lived experiences of 10 African American female suburban school leaders in southeastern United States. African American female suburban school leaders must utilize their voices to share their lived experiences.

Study participants shared similarities in their lived experiences with their minority female urban school leader counterparts. Race and gender in school leadership was a challenge with regard to racism and sexism as participants pursued leadership positions. These African American female suburban school leaders rose above race and gender issues by being resilient and spiritually-grounded. Resilience and spirituality provided the strength and direction needed to fulfill their roles as school leaders. Although they had the monumental task of leading their schools, study participants also had the responsibility of caring for family and self. Having a healthy balance between work and home was vital to participants' success as school leaders. This healthy balance came as a result of setting boundaries, learning to say "no", and accepting help from family and friends.

Two major contributors of their upward mobility were encouragement from family, former principals, and colleagues to pursue educational leadership and advanced levels of leadership preparation for their current positions. In the African American

community, education was considered to be the catalyst of upward mobility and viewed as the answer to a better quality of life. However, being highly educated did not guarantee a promotion in leadership status. Also, mentoring and networking with other school leaders benefited participants in learning how to better lead their schools. Mentoring and networking provided the support necessary for successful school leadership. Even without a formal mentoring program within their school districts, study participants made the special effort to seek out and recruit mentors and to network with school leaders within and outside of their school districts.

A key factor in study participants' success as school leaders was effective communication leading to positive working relationships. Relational collaboration was utilized to build school morale which impacted job performance (Alston, 2005). True servant leaders are encouraged to lead for a purpose higher than themselves (Jones-Burbridge, 2011). Study participants were strong advocates for their students with an emphasis on academic instruction and service-learning projects which served as a means of contributing to their surrounding communities.

With regard to their minority female urban school leader counterparts, study participants' experiences differed in that they were selected to lead schools or school districts which were noted for being academically strong. While there are urban schools that are academically strong as well, it is important to note that when a minority female advances to a school leadership position, she is typically assigned to a poor, underperforming school (Bridges, 2010; Loder, 2002). These urban school leaders are often seen as change agents and called upon to improve either a failing school or school district. Also, study participants were still the minority in leadership positions whereas

more minority females were in leadership positions in urban school districts. Because African American school leaders have historically been viewed as a staple in the African American community, they often serve as role models to those who reside in nearby neighborhoods (Tillman, 2004a).

These findings may influence educational leadership programs and suburban school districts to recruit and retain more African American female suburban school leaders. Additionally, the findings of this research may provide recommendations for future study of African American and minority women school leaders in suburban school districts. The results of this study are intended to aid educational researchers and educational practitioners in gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American female suburban school leaders.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM



*Institutional Review Board for Human Use*

Form 4: IRB Approval Form  
Identification and Certification of Research  
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator: ROBINSON, ARMENTRESS D

Co-Investigator(s):

Protocol Number: **X121026006**

Protocol Title: *The Lived Experiences of African American Female School Leaders in Suburban School Districts*

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on 11-13-12. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received EXPEDITED review.

IRB Approval Date: 11-13-12

Date IRB Approval Issued: 11-13-12

Marilyn Doss, M.A.  
Vice Chair of the Institutional Review  
Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

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APPENDIX B  
RECRUITMENT LETTER



## Recruitment Letter

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Armentress D. Robinson, and I am a graduate student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham pursuing the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. I am extending an invitation to you to voluntarily participate in my doctoral research study. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of African American female school leaders in suburban school districts. I define school leader as any person serving in the capacity of principal, assistant principal, or central office staff member. The time frame for this research study will be January 2013 through August 2013.

You are invited to participate in an open-ended, face-to-face, one hour interview. Prior to the interview, you will receive a printout of the questions that you will be asked to answer. As we progress through the interview, I may ask some follow-up questions in order to garner more details with regard to your experiences. Also, I may conduct a follow-up interview with you for no longer than an hour. Your interview(s) will be audiotaped and transcribed in which you will have the opportunity to review and check for accuracy.

To protect your identity, I will not utilize your name but will assign a pseudonym in its place. Your participation in this doctoral research study is entirely voluntary. I will greatly appreciate it if you decide to participate in this research study. If you decide not to participate, you have the option to do so with no negative consequences. Additionally, you may choose to discontinue from the research study at any time. Again, no negative consequences will occur if you choose to discontinue your participation. The data from this research will be used in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree and will be published in my dissertation. All data will be secured and locked in a combination safe which will be kept in my home.

If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at (205) 568-1983 or email me at [mentrob@uab.edu](mailto:mentrob@uab.edu). If you agree to participate, you may call or email me at the aforementioned contact information two weeks from the date of this letter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Armentress D. Robinson, Ed.S.  
Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C

FOLLOW-UP TELEPHONE SCRIPT

## Follow-up Telephone Script

Hello,

This is Armentress D. Robinson, the doctoral candidate, from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I was calling in reference to the recruitment letter that I sent to you two weeks ago. I wanted you to have enough time to think about being a participant in my research study. Again, I am interested in exploring the lived experiences of African American female school leaders in suburban school districts.

As stated in the recruitment letter, you are invited to participate in an open-ended, face-to-face, one hour interview. Also, I may conduct a follow-up interview subsequent to the initial interview which will last no longer than an hour. Prior to the interview, you will receive a printout of the questions that you will be asked to answer.

To protect your identity, I will not utilize your name but will assign a pseudonym in its place. Your participation in this doctoral research study is entirely voluntary. I will greatly appreciate it if you decide to participate in this research study. However, if you decide not to participate, you have the option to do so with no negative consequences. Additionally, you may choose to discontinue from the research study at any time. Again, no negative consequences will occur if you choose to discontinue your participation. The data from this research will be used in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree and will be published in my dissertation. All data will be secured and locked in a combination safe which will be kept in my home.

After giving thought to making a decision, are you willing to be a research study participant?

If the answer is no, thank you for your time. Have a great day. Good-bye.

If the answer is yes, thank you so much for agreeing to be a participant in my research study. Now, that you have agreed, what would be a good place, date, and time to meet face-to-face to discuss the study in more detail?

Again, thank you. I look forward to our initial meeting. Have a great day. Good-bye.

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

## Informed Consent Document

### Title of Research

The Lived Experiences of African American Female School Leaders in Suburban School Districts

### IRB Protocol

X121026006

### Principal Investigator

Armentress D. Robinson, Ed.S.

### Sponsor

University of Alabama at Birmingham, School of Education

### Explanation of Procedures

I am asking you to take part in a research study. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of a small number of African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts located in the southeastern United States.

Ten individuals identified as African American females who serve as principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators with at least three years of service in suburban school districts will be selected for this study. Through this study, I will describe the individual personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences of African American females as school leaders in suburban school districts. The time frame for this research study will be January 2013 through August 2013.

You are being invited to participate in an open-ended, face-to-face, one hour interview. As we progress through the interview, I may ask some follow-up questions in order to garner more details with regard to your experiences. Also, I may conduct a follow-up interview which will not last longer than an hour. Your interview will be audiotaped and transcribed in which you will have the opportunity to review and check for accuracy. As a study participant, you will receive a copy of the transcribed interview.

### Risks and Discomforts

There are minimal risks which can be currently identified. There is always the potential for loss of confidentiality. However, data and information will not be identifiable and will be secured on an encrypted flash drive which will be locked in a combination safe in my home.

Page 1 of 3  
Version Date: 11/12/12

Participant's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

UAB IRB

Date of Approval 11-13-12

Not Valid On 11-13-13

**Benefits**

Because there is a small percentage of African American females in school leadership positions this study is significant in that it will provide insight into the lived experiences of this minority group. This research will allow the principal investigator to give voice to individuals who are willing to share their personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences as African American female school leaders. You may not benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, as participant, you can help navigate new and aspiring minority women school leaders through the lived experiences of educational leadership.

**Alternatives**

Your alternative is not to participate in this research study.

**Confidentiality**

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. However, research information that identifies you may be shared with the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, School of Education and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The results of this study may be published for scientific purposes. However, your identity will not be given out.

**Refusal or Withdrawal without Penalty**

Whether or not you take part in this study is your choice. There will be no penalty if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide not to be in the study, you will not lose any benefits you are otherwise owed. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with this institution.

**Cost of Participation**

There will be no cost to you for taking part in this study.

**Payment for Participation in Research**

You will receive no payment for taking part in this study.

**Questions**

If there are any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please Armentress D. Robinson, at (205) 568-1983 or email me at [mentrob@uab.edu](mailto:mentrob@uab.edu). I will be glad to answer any of your questions. Also, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or 1-800-822-8816. If calling the toll-free number, press the option for an operator/attendant and ask for extension 4-3789. Regular hours for the OIRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday. You may also call this number in the event the research staff cannot be reached or you wish to talk with someone else.

**Legal Rights**

You are not waiving any of your legal rights by signing this informed consent document.

**Signatures**

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in this study. You will receive a copy of this signed document.

Participant Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL



## Interview Protocol

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Location:**

**Introduction:** I want to thank you again for taking time out of your schedule to interview with me today. I truly appreciate you being a participant in my research study. Please feel free to be open and honest. Also, know that if there is anything which you do not desire to disclose, you are under no obligation to share.

I will audiotape your responses to my questions so that I can record them verbatim during transcription. After I transcribe the interview, I will provide a copy for you to read in order to ensure that I have captured the true essence of your experiences as a school leader. I do not want to misconstrue anything that you wish to verbally express during the interview.

I am interested in exploring your personal, professional, and sociocultural experiences as an African American female school leader. You have had the opportunity to review the interview questions and pose any questions or concerns prior to this interview. As we progress through the interview, I may ask some follow-up questions in order to garner more details with regard to your experiences. Also, I may conduct a follow-up interview subsequent to this interview which last no longer than an hour.

Do you give consent for me to audiotape this interview?

Are you ready to begin?

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself (where did you grow up, family, educational background, interests, etc.)
2. How long have you been in the education profession (positions, length of time, responsibilities)?
3. How long have you been in your current position? What are your responsibilities?
4. What led you to the decision to become a school leader?

5. Are there unique qualities or perspectives you feel you bring to your role because of your race?
6. Are there unique qualities or perspectives you feel you bring to your role because of your gender?
7. Do you believe you have encountered unique challenges (e.g. racism, sexism, discrimination, prejudice) because of your race?
8. Do you believe you have encountered unique challenges (e.g. racism, sexism, discrimination, prejudice) because of your gender?
9. How do you acknowledge your accomplishments as a school leader?
10. How do you cope or deal with the challenges that come with being a school leader (how do you stay motivated)?
11. What role has mentoring played in your role as a school leader (being a mentor as well as being mentored)?
12. What efforts do you make to bridge the relationship between the school and the community?
13. How do you manage to balance the responsibilities of work, family, civic, and other obligations?
14. What has been the most helpful piece of advice to you as a school leader?
15. What advice would you give to African American females who aspire to become school leaders?