

SUCCESSFUL BLACK WOMEN LEADERS: IMPROVING AND SUSTAINING
INCREASES IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

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(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation explored, described, and interpreted the perceptions and practices of five Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround effort. This research explored Black women's understandings and experiences leading and sustaining improvements in formerly lower-performing schools. Specifically, this study aimed to explore, describe, and interpret successful Black women leaders' perceptions and practices for improving, turning around, and continuing increases in student achievement. This study focused on how principals made sense of their leadership and leadership practices during the improvement initiative and the process of continuing improvement. The research questions pertaining to this study included: 1) How do successful Black women principals who have led a school turnaround initiative understand and describe how their leadership has changed over time? 2) What leadership characteristics, actions, and strategies do Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround initiative believe are the critical components for leadership for sustained school improvement?

Using a multiple case study qualitative approach, the findings from this study bring forth the perceptions of a sample of Black women educational leaders who led a successful school

turnaround approach. Five principals from two southern states whose schools experienced a consistent decline in student achievement before their appointment were purposefully sampled for this study. The principals in this study had achieved a successful turnaround and now were in the process of sustaining improvements in their student achievement. Their interview responses were analyzed using Black women's standpoint theory. The findings consist of seven broad themes: (a) Stepping Backwards to Move Forward: Addressing the School Context and Learning Environment, (b) Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process, (c) Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges, (d) Approaching with a Learning Posture, (e) Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations, (f) Doing Whatever it Takes: Advocate for Your School's Needs and Believe in Midcourse Corrections, (g) Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support. This study pertains to school turnaround and may be of interest to leadership instructors, state and district officials, and principals in chronically underperforming context.

INDEX WORDS: School Improvement, Leadership for School Turnaround, African American Women Principals, Black Women Principals, School Climate, Leadership for Sustained Improvement, Turnaround Schools

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving, supporting, and praying mother, Leona Mae Lightburn. Her selfless support, encouragement, and prayers have kept me lifted throughout this process. Words are not adequate to express my gratefulness to you. Mom, you have remained my rock, my confidant, and my guide. I am forever in gratitude for your countless sacrifices and unfaltering love. Thank you for your effortless grace, elegance, nurturance, and love. Thank you for always having my back Jack! I love you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Federal school improvement legislation has altered the scope of education in the United States (Klein, 2015). No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTT), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has defined and continues to shape the landscape of school improvement and turnaround. NCLB articulated new federal policies that addressed student underachievement across schools and particular demographic subgroups (Klein, 2015). NCLB mandated that schools meet their “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) towards the goal of student proficiency by 2014 (United States Department of Education, 2001). Schools that failed to meet AYP were considered schools to be in need of improvement. The ‘turnaround school’ classification emerged as federal legislation in response to persistent underachievement in schools. School turnaround grants provided state education agencies (SEAs) funding to help failing districts to implement one of the four turnaround models in their schools. RTT, a competitive federal education grant used federal education funding to target the nation's lowest-performing schools (United States Department of Education, 2010) and the newest education legislation, ESSA, significantly reduced the federal government’s role in education (National Education Association, 2016).

Since the federal government’s shift in focus to chronically low-performing schools, many articles and books sought to understand the phenomena of school improvement and school turnaround. School improvement is the process through which schools implement strategies and changes in order to improve student outcomes through a quality improvement (Park, Hironaka,

Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013). Turnaround is a substantial and exhaustive intervention in a persistently underperforming school that yields significant increases within three school years (Herman et al., 2008) and equips the school for a longer transformation process that will produce high-academic performance (Wallace Foundation, 2010).

Turnaround success is often short-lived after initial success (Dragoset et al., 2017). The outcomes produced in turnaround contexts are often associated with and attributed to the school principal. Federal legislations NCLB, RTT, and ESSA and educational research (Hitt & Meyers, 2017, Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010) suggests that school leadership is a critical component of school turnaround. Leaders recruited to lead turnaround strategies have received much attention in educational leadership research (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Still, Black women school leaders whose numbers are increasing and are disproportionately heavily present in urban schools, remain under-researched in the school improvement and turnaround leadership literature (Grant, 2014). This study sought to address our understandings of leadership for school turnaround through the perspectives of successful Black women leaders whose urban elementary schools have experienced significant gains under their direction. The remainder of this chapter consists of an overview of the problem of persistently underperforming schools, a historical synopsis of school turnaround policy and presents an argument for the significance of this study in terms of successful Black women leaders.

Statement of the Problem

The ‘achievement gap’ is an educational term that refers to the performance gap between Caucasian students and their non-White peers (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). The ‘opportunity gap,’ refers to the inequitable opportunities and resources students receive (Milner, 2012). Across the nation, Black and Brown students still perform lower than their White peers, despite

the narrowing of the gap in some subject areas (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This gap is clearly present in urban settings. In 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015) found a 39 percentage-point achievement gap between schools with 48% Black student density and schools that had 9% Black student density. They additionally found that the Black-White achievement gap was more substantial in the high-Black density schools.

Urban schools are often stereotyped as being low performing, having students from economically vulnerable backgrounds, having high numbers of students of color, and being highly-problematic schools (Albright et al., 2017; McWilliams, 2017). The fact that many Americans believe that most of the underperforming schools in the United States' are in urban districts (Lippman et al., 1996) further supports this characterization. In the 2010-11 school year, only 18 % of Tier I and Tier II eligible schools, that is schools within states' bottom 5% or states' lowest-performing Title I schools respectively, were located in rural districts (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, Rosenthal, 2014). By far the largest number of schools identified as Tier I and Tier II schools were urban schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). According to the Nations Report Card (2015), students who attended schools that were located in urban areas performed the lowest across the school location classifications. Moreover, schools with higher percentages of students who were eligible for the National School Lunch program performed lower than their affluent counterparts.

Since *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report that warned of an impending societal calamity as a result of America's failing education system, each new education reform has considerably impacted how we approach educating children in the United States. Subsequently, these reforms have markedly transformed the role of school principals. The most recent education policy reform, ESSA, made states more accountable in terms of defining and implementing school

improvement and school turnaround measures, and therefore, student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education implemented ESSA in the 2018-2019 school year and shifted the school turnaround lexicon. What were previously known as focus and priority schools under the School Improvement Grants in NCLB will now be classified as ‘targeted’ and ‘comprehensive’ support schools under ESSA.

NCLB (Department of Education, 2018) defined a priority school in this way:

A school among the lowest five percent of Title I schools in the State based on the achievement of the "all students" group in terms of proficiency on the statewide assessments; A Title I-participating or Title I-eligible high school with a graduation rate less than 60 percent over a number of years; or A Tier I or Tier II school under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program that is using SIG funds to implement a school intervention model. (p.3).

NCLB (Department of Education, 2018) defined focus schools as follows:

A Title I school that has the largest within-school gaps between the highest-achieving subgroup or subgroups and the lowest-achieving subgroup or subgroups or, at the high school level, has the largest within-school gaps in graduation rates ("within-school-gaps" focus school); or A Title I school that has a subgroup or subgroups with low achievement or, at the high school level, low graduation rates ("low-achieving subgroup" focus school). (p. 4).

Now under ESSA, Targeted Schools fall within the following description (Department of Education, 2016):

Any school with one or more consistently underperforming subgroups. Any school in which one or more subgroups of students are performing at or below the performance of all students in the lowest-performing schools. (p.1)

Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools are identified in the following way

(Department of Education, 2016):

Lowest-performing five percent of schools in the State participating in Title I. Any public high school in the State with a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate at or below 67 percent, or below a higher percentage selected by the State, over no more than three years. Any school participating in Title I that was identified for targeted support and improvement because it had a subgroup of students performing at or below the performance of all students in the lowest-performing schools and did not improve after implementing a targeted support and improvement plan over a State-determined number of years. (p. 1).

The new definitions signify a shift from the old classifications that were defined in NCLB to the new ESSA classifications. The definitions of the classifications of schools indirectly indicate the importance of school principals as they supervise students' learning within schools.

Principals supervise and are ultimately accountable for the instructional learning environment (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Their roles as instructional leaders and change agents position them as key figures in school improvement and turnaround. Factors outside the educational institution, such as socioeconomic status contribute to students' academic success and predict students' educational achievement (Huang, 2015). Educational leadership falls within the scope of factors that directly influence educational performance (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Most of the

attributes of student performance occur under the authority of school leadership; therefore, the reformation of schools highlights the importance of school leaders (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Thus, principals can greatly impact the success of a turnaround effort focused on increasing student achievement and, furthermore, sustaining the improvement trajectory of student academic progress.

Black women, a growing segment of the school leader population, are finding themselves disproportionately assigned to lead schools that are afflicted by poverty, low resources, and persistent achievement gaps (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012; Tillman, 2007). Black women often lead in schools where traditional educational leadership practices have failed (Pollard, 1997). Black women have been found to be adept at improving the instructional environment of schools (Johnson, 2007; Peters, 2012) and often work as activists within their schools and local communities (Pollard, 1997); however, little empirical research of their success in turning around and sustaining improvements in schools exists in the leadership for turnaround literature (Grant, 2014). For these reasons, the researcher conducted a study that examined successful Black women principals' perceptions and practices in regard to turning around and sustaining improvements in students' educational performance. By conducting this study, the researcher aspired to contribute to the literature on Black women principals and contribute to a gap in the leadership for school improvement and school turnaround literature in which Black women's experiences and perspectives of leading under the scrutiny and pressure of school improvement and turnaround are scant, particularly with regard to how they implemented leadership for success in their schools. For the purposes of this study, success was defined as a school that has experienced at least a 10% increase in the number of students who performed at reading grade level on state assessment exams, and/or

removal from state focus or priority school lists. The schools' student achievement scores from 2014- 2018 were used to assess the increases in student reading performance.

Brief History of School Improvement and Turnaround Legislation

The former Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, commissioned *A Nation at Risk*. In 1983, its findings indicated that the United States' inferior education system was "threaten[ing] our very future as a Nation and a people" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). The report urged for systemic education reforms that would alter and improve the American public education system. *A Nation at Risk* alerted the education community and the nation of its "mediocre educational performance" (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1) and provided recommendations for improvement. The report recommended extending instruction time, examining content, raising teacher quality, and enhancing student assessment methods as a means of improving education. *A Nation at Risk* likely influenced the federal government's efforts to reform education through legislation; more recent legislative acts include: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Race to the Top Program in 2009, and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 increased the federal government's role in education by mandating that districts and schools become accountable for student performance. Its purpose was to increase America's competitiveness globally and to close the racial and economic achievement gaps between whites and their non-white peers and the economically resilient and vulnerable. The legislation increased the student assessment requirements, mandated a student proficiency level, and prescribed punitive consequences for schools that

persistently failed to meet required progress (NCLB, 2001). In addition, NCLB provided four school reform models for critically failing schools: restart, school closure, transformations, and turnaround.

In the *restart model*, a school closed and reopened under the supervision of another school operator. Under this model, districts could convert schools into charters by reopening schools under a charter management entity, charter operator, or management organization. In the *school closure model*, NCLB required that the school closed and that the students would enroll in a higher-performing school. If a higher performing school was not accessible, the students were eligible for a school voucher (NCLB, 2001). Schools under these models were permitted to either separate from the district giving schools the opportunity to receive resources from charter management organizations or formally close and permitted students to transfer to schools under another leader's direction.

Under the *transformation model*, the school received a new principal, continuous state and district support, and more operational autonomy. This model additionally required the utilization of an evaluation system that incorporated a more significant percentage of student growth as a measure of educator effectiveness. In the *turnaround model*, the board removed the principal; no more than 50% of the school's staff could remain at the school; and a new administrative structure was employed. The turnaround model also required the implementation of a new instructional program, increased time for learning, and continued use of data for better instruction (NCLB, 2001).

Race to The Top

Race to The Top was a voluntary competitive federal grant program that was enacted in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and provided a monetary incentive for

reforming state education systems. While No Child Left Behind mandated educational change and tied that change to federal funding, Race to the Top provided additional financial incentives for change. RTT provided \$4.35 billion to states for reforming their education systems in four targeted areas. States had to 1) adopt internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepared pupils for college and career readiness; 2) recruit, develop, retain, and reward effective principals and teachers; 3) build a comprehensive data system that measured student growth and informed principals and teachers about their professional growth and development; and 4) turn around their lowest-achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

In order to receive the funding, states had to adopt the Common Core K-12 standards and use the funding to implement their improvement plans and programs that were detailed in their applications. States that linked their teacher evaluations to student performance also received higher scores (Lohman, 2010). The law, furthermore, required that states equitably distribute highly effective principals and teachers across high-minority and poverty districts and schools. States that demonstrated a plan to improve principal and teacher effectiveness also received additional points on their application.

RTT and NCLB required states to improve their low-performing districts and schools. However, RTT specifically targeted the most persistent and lowest-performing schools. RTT defined persistently low-performing schools as the lowest performing 5% of schools or high schools with graduations rates lower than 60% for several years (Lohman, 2010). RTT specified that school districts with nine or more persistently low-achieving schools could not implement the transformation model in more than half of their identified schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Every Student Succeeds Act

As the 2013-2014 school year approached, it became apparent that many schools were not going to meet the requirements of NCLB, so the Department of Education allowed states to apply for waivers (Wrabel et al., 2018). In 2012, the Obama administration started granting states flexibility waivers. In 2013, the Department of Education released a press release stating that 45 states, including the Bureau of Indian Education and Puerto Rico had applied for the NCLB waiver, and 37 states and the District of Columbia received the waivers (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The department of education issued the waivers in exchange for state plans that outlined how each state was addressing college and career readiness for all students, closing the achievement gaps, improving instruction quality, and increasing equity and student outcomes. States that received the waivers included “Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In 2015, ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind. The waivers became null on August 1, 2016.

ESSA was a response to the inadequacies of NCLB (Ladd, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). The ESSA narrowed much of the federal government’s role in K-12 education by shifting federal accountability means to the states. Under this new policy, state educational agencies have greater responsibility and flexibility: a) states establish their educational goals; however, they must address the closing of achievement gaps and graduation rates and improving student achievement, including English-language learners’ growth, b) states must also determine and outline their accountability systems, c) states must identify and

intercede in the lowest-performing 5% of schools and in high schools with graduation rates at or below 67%, and d) states must identify schools with consistently underperforming subgroups, including the economically vulnerable, racial groups, and English language learners.

Furthermore, states now determine the interventions for underperforming schools and the support that they will provide for their lowest-performing schools (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (2015)).

Instead of the four models delineated in NCLB, states under ESSA submit evidence-based improvement plans to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. The Department of Education requires that school improvement plans be inclusive of long-term goals informed by student performance, evidence-based interventions, school resource inequalities, and school needs evaluations (National Education Association, 2016). Each plan required approval at the school, district, and state levels. Under section 1003, state educational agencies that apply for subgrants must adhere to the following: a) structure comprehensive improvement and support plans, b) support schools' improvement and support plans; c) monitor each school's improvement and support plans, d) complete a rigorous review of each external partner, e) align local, state, and federal resources to support schools' plans, and f) continually modify policies and practices as needed to support schools' plans for improvement (Lennections Learning Connections, 2015).

States prescribe their educational goals and qualifying evidence under ESSA. Districts and schools that require interventions work with state educational agencies to develop targeted turnaround plans that are aligned to meet individual school's needs. States are required to supervise turnaround efforts and determine the allotted time in which schools have to improve. Schools that persistently underperform for more than four consecutive years face a state

takeover, principal replacement, conversion into a charter model, or redesigning and restructuring. ESSA consolidated the school improvement grants into the larger Title 1 funds, allowing for up to seven percent of a schools' Title 1 funds to be allocated to school improvement, which is an increase from four percent in NCLB. States must allocate 95% of the Title 1 funding to district turnaround initiatives (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

ESSA's turnaround language is ill-defined and less prescriptive as it shifts responsibility to state educational agencies. The absence of designated or defined turnaround requirements contributes to the uncertainty of future turnaround efforts. It remains uncertain how states, districts, and principals will address their lowest-performing schools in the coming years.

School Turnaround Leaders

Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) suggested that principal leadership is the second most significant factor in student performance. School leadership creates a ripple effect that indirectly impacts achievement (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Leadership in lower-performing schools is of greater importance as those schools may suffer from insufficient instructional and managerial leadership and vision, as well as poor school climate and culture (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) that contributes to consistent underperformance.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2013) effective principals perform five critical practices well, including shaping a school vision of academic achievement for all pupils, creating a hospitable culture for learning, improving instruction, cultivating leaders, and managing processes, people, and data in order to advance school improvement. Effective leadership and turnaround leadership share similarities; however, they have distinct differences (Harris et al., 2006). Hitt and Meyers (2017; 2018) reasoned that the discernible differences between effective

leadership and turnaround leadership demonstrate that turnaround leadership is more than a compounded form of effective leadership.

Turnaround leadership aims to cease organization decline and to initiate an increase in student performance (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Turnaround principals tend to hold more central authority in schools. These principals must establish a vision that inspires others and suggests what the school can become. Moreover, they must use teacher development in order to impact the instructional program (Hitt & Meyers, 2018), and must address a myriad of school safety issues that often include facility maintenance and improvement (Herman et al., 2008).

Successful turnarounds require competent and skilled principals who are adept with problem-solving and motivating others to participate and contribute their skills to the change initiative (Grant, 2014). Turnaround principals must increase capacity across schools and their stakeholders. The unique and immediate need for improved student performance and organizational capacity distinguishes the need for either effective leadership or turnaround leadership (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Thus, schools in need of quick and immediate improvements require turnaround leadership.

Hitt and Meyers (2018) suggested that research is needed in order to understand how successful turnaround leaders use their influence to produce turnaround improvements and foster persistent growth in student achievement and teacher capacity. The literature on successful turnaround leadership is scant (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Moreover, only limited research on the attributable effects of school leadership in urban areas exist. However, from the extant limited literature on successful school leadership in urban areas come the accounts of Black women principals who have faced the challenges of leading underperforming schools and became “beacons of light within the darkness of their communities” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 347).

Black Women School Leaders

Research on Black women school leaders is growing, including that of Cynthia Dillard, Judy Alston, Linda Tillman, Tondra Loder-Jackson, Noelle Witherspoon, and April Peters-Hawkins. Their research indicated that the majority of African American women ascend to leadership in urban schools that have predominantly Black and Brown students from economically vulnerable communities (Doughty, 1980; Jean-Marie, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012). These schools are often under-resourced and underperforming when they take the helm. This phenomenon of districts sending African American women leaders into troubled schools has led to what some Black women scholars have coined the term ‘clean-up women’ (Pigford & Tonnsen 1993; Peters, 2012, Tillman, 2004a). As African American women have self-defined their experiences as the ‘clean-up women’ of education, researchers have qualitatively investigated their experiences in educational leadership (Doughty, 1980; Jean-Marie, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2011; Peters, 2012).

African American women principals have not been the focus of much of the literature on urban schools (Tillman, 2007). From the extant literature, we know that women of color are expected to initiate and implement educational agendas notwithstanding the schools’ and communities’ overwhelming challenges (Grant, 2014; Pigford & Tonnsen 1993; Peters, 2012; Tillman 2004a). The women who accept these challenges take on the role of savior and may eventually become the scapegoat (Yeakey, Johnston, & Adkinson, 1986). Often, this

opportunity is the only occasion in which Black women may become school leaders (Grant, 2014).

Black women leaders have become adept at engaging and unifying school stakeholders in marginalized settings (Johnson, 2007; Peters, 2012). Dillard (2005) contended that Black women principals lead differently than their White colleagues. She posited that Black women principals in marginalized communities considered the community and cultural contexts that extend beyond the school. Documenting the narratives, experiences, and perceptions of Black women school leaders is paramount in acknowledging and broadening the current theoretical and practitioner perspectives and also contributes the perspectives of an often-under-researched population to the discourse in educational leadership.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

Black principals are disproportionately heavily present in urban schools (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012; Tillman, 2007). In 2015-2016, 10.2% of U.S. principals were African American ((National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2017)). In the same year, of the 24,800 city principals, 19.6% were African American, which means that the highest percentage of African American principals were located in urban schools. Furthermore, 19.2% of principals in schools with 75 percent or more of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch were African American. The percentages of White principals were lowest in city schools and schools with 75 percent or more of K-12 students who qualified for free or reduced lunches (Taie & Goldring, 2017). Thus, the data indicated that, on average, higher percentages of African American principals were located in high-poverty and urban schools.

ESSA has increased the state, district, and school-level accountability. In 2012, “38 states (76 %) reported significant gaps in expertise for supporting school turnaround in 2012, and that number increased to 40 (80 percent) in 2013 (NCES, 2015a, p. 1). With thousands of schools identified for school turnaround, 5,000 in 2010 (The Wallace Foundation, 2010), and the fact that 80 percent reporting significant gaps in supporting school turnaround, ESSA has heightened the need to understand and effectuate successful school turnaround initiatives. Moreover, the growing number of Black women principals has produced a need for research into Black women's school leadership for improvement and turnaround. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore, describe, and interpret the perspectives and practices of Black women principals, assessing how they explicate school turnaround and how they have led or are leading successful school turnaround and improvement initiatives.

Expanding our knowledge and discourse about Black women's leadership perspectives contributes to the literature by contributing to the gap in the research, particularly on school leadership for turnaround and sustained improvement. This study added to the scant literature that exists on Black women's school leadership. Furthermore, the findings of this study shed light on the preparation of future school leaders who are appointed for school improvement and turnaround and provides all leaders with examples of approaches to successful leadership for school turnaround and improvement.

Throughout this research, the terms Black and African American were interchangeable. By using both terms, this study recognized persons largely of African descent who have been reared in the United States and self-identify themselves as Black or African American. The researcher used the terms interchangeably to recognize and acknowledge Black cultural knowledge and the experiences of African Americans in the United States. The researcher’s

identity as a woman of color, a Black woman of color, impacted the decision to research Black women leaders. This study was conducted with the intent and hope that this research deepens our awareness and appreciation for Black women's contributions to educating and caring for children in the United States.

Methods Overview

This multiple case-study research seeks to explore, describe, and interpret successful Black women principals' perceptions and practices that they relate to turnaround leadership and leadership for sustaining improvement. Because current school improvement and turnaround definitions are in flux, turnaround schools were identified as schools that were once on the priority and focus schools' lists and those schools that were not on the lists but performed in their districts' bottom 5% of schools when the board appointed the leader. Success was defined as a 10% increase in the number of students reading on grade level from 2014-2018 and/or removal from the priority or focus lists within three years.

Participants for this study were five Black women urban elementary principals each of whom led a successful school improvement initiative. The principals had led a successful turnaround and now they were transitioning to sustaining improvements in their student achievement. Participants were purposefully sampled for participation in this research study. Each participant participated in two 60-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews. Documents were secondary data and included the schools' student assessment scores and school improvement plans from 2014-2018. Through thematic analysis, the principals' responses and document data were analyzed to explore and describe the leaders' perspectives and practices.

The research questions below detail the focus of this study. Also, they provided the basis for the literature that was examined in Chapter 2. The research questions dictated the methods

and methodology for this study. The research questions aimed to explore, describe, and interpret successful Black women leaders' perceptions and practices for turning around and sustaining improvements in student achievement. Research questions one and two seek to determine how Black women leaders understand, identify, define, and relate their leadership practices and strategies for sustaining school improvement in previously lower-performing schools. The principals' perspectives add contextual data as well as a diverse perspective that is related to leadership for school turnaround and sustained success in urban settings.

Research Questions

1. How do successful Black women principals who have led a school turnaround initiative understand and describe how their leadership has changed over time?
2. What leadership characteristics, actions, and strategies do Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround initiative believe are the critical components for leadership for sustained school improvement?

Overview of the Conceptual Framework

Black Women's Standpoint Theory

Black feminist scholar Hill Collins' (1990) work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* delineated an interpretive framework for understanding and exploring the intellectual talents of Black women scholars, thinkers, activists, and others. In this work, Hill Collins contributed an argument for self-articulated knowledge. The self-actualizing and defining power derived from articulating one's experiences is critical for Black women given the hetero-normative, sexist, and White dominated power structure of American society.

Black women's standpoint theory was one framework that guided this research. Black women's standpoint theory is essential to understanding the experiences and perspectives of African American women. Standpoint theory assumes that individuals who share a social location or social status have shared experiences which can create a shared knowledge about the world around them. Black women's standpoint theory infers that Black women's social location creates shared knowledge and experiences that construct a unique perspective of the self, one's community, society, and consciousness (Hill Collins, 1990; Harnois, 2010; Hill-Collins, 2000; Valadez, 2001).

Standpoint scholars have contended with the issue of social location and social perspectives. Some scholars argued that subordinate locations produced a privileged social perspective (Gonzalez, 1987). They claimed that subordinate locations produced privileged perspectives related to those in advantaged positions (Harnois, 2010). Others contend that the scholars' perspectives were partial (Hill-Collins, 2000). Standpoint theorists differ on the significance of axes of inequality. Early standpoint scholars privileged class in their work and recent scholars have emphasized the prominence of gender and race (Harnois, 2010).

The history of slavery in the United States and African American women's quest for social, political, economic, racial, and gender equality has created commonalities among Black women (Hill Collins, 2000). The commonalities that they share produced shared meaning experiences that precipitate shared knowledge. Black women have articulated experiences of the triple oppression of race, class, and gender that underlie their experiences of multiplicative oppression. These shared experiences of multi-axes oppression produce a shared standpoint and epistemology (Hill Collins, 2000). Black women's standpoint theory was therefore necessary for exploring and describing Black women turnaround principals' leadership perspectives as this

frame provided a lens to understand how these leaders comprehended, approached, and implemented their leadership.

Leadership for Sustained Improvement

Hitt and Meyers' (2018) conceptualization of leadership for sustained school turnaround is the second part of the framework that guided this research. In their leadership framework, they contended that sustained improvement encompasses two phases. The first phase is turnaround; the second is sustainability. The first phase entails substantial rehabilitation, which is spearheaded by the school leader in efforts to overhaul the current instructional program, cease decline, and initiate recovery. The second phase is the perpetuation of success and sustained growth. Within this framework, they established a noted difference between turnaround leadership and leadership for sustained improvement. They assumed that the second phase involved the continued use of turnaround practices and the gradual integration of effective leadership skills and practices.

Assumptions of the leadership for sustained improvement framework include that once the student achievement stabilizes, and a positive trajectory has commenced, turnaround leadership may not yield persistent growth. Leadership for sustained improvement incorporates a transitional period that requires the incorporation of effective leadership practices. Hitt and Meyer's derived their framework in part from Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss' (2010) study on turnaround principals and draws from the literature on effective leadership practices, Murphy and Meyers' (2008) work in organizational turnaround, and the literature on sustainability beyond the field of education. Hitts and Meyers' (2018) framework was useful for understanding and analyzing the practices of turnaround principals. The framework provided an empirical

research-based framework that distinguished turnaround and effective leadership practices and detailed the domains that outlined the transition from turnaround leadership to leadership for sustained improvement.

Significance and Implications

An understanding of how successful turnaround leaders understand and regard leadership for turnaround and sustained improvement is instrumental in turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Currently, school improvement and turnaround are in a period of uncertainty. ESSA has effectively shifted the accountability powers back to the states. School districts must now identify, assess, plan, support, monitor, and evaluate school improvement initiatives. State education agencies determine schools' goals, improvement plans, and the punitive consequences. NCLB outlined the goals, turnaround models, and consequences of turnaround failure. Because the 51 education agencies (not including the District of Columbia), the Bureau of Indian Education, and Puerto Rico will define and assess their school improvement approaches and consequences, research into effective turnaround leadership is vital.

American society undervalues and neglects the perspectives and wisdom of Black women leaders (Hill Collins, 1990), which is a population that is disproportionately high in urban schools. This phenomenon is evident in the lack of empirical research focused on Black women leaders. This study examined successful Black women principals' leadership perspectives and practices related to school turnaround and sustained improvement. The results of this study provide first-hand accounts of successful leadership for school turnaround. This information may be used to develop or advance a framework for turnaround leaders and sustained improvement.

In addition, this study may provide states, districts, and school leaders information that could assist leaders in the creation of school turnaround plans, including identification of the

current patterns of behavior, assessment of achievement gaps, development of school-specific goals and strategies, and improvement and evaluation of classroom instruction, school culture, student achievement, and teacher performance. The findings of this study may inform state, district, and school turnaround and improvement policies and practices. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help or inspire other Black women educators who are pursuing educational leadership occupations and will assist the preparation of all leaders to serve students in lower-performing schools. To provide an understanding of the terms frequently used in the study the next session is the definition of terms.

Definition of Terms

African American: African American or Black refers to persons of African descent that originate from any Black racial group (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel & Drewery, 2011).

School Improvement: the process through which schools implement strategies and changes in order to improve student outcomes through a quality improvement (Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013).

School Turnaround: a dramatic intervention in a chronically low-performing school that demonstrates significant improvements in student outcomes in one to three school years (Herman et al., 2008).

Sustained Improvement: the process through which school who have experienced significant improvements in student outcomes within one to three academic years maintain and further produce gains in student achievement (Hitt & Meyers, 2018).

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that five participants can provide an appropriate understanding of how Black women principals plan, implement, support, and assess school improvement and

turnaround. The researcher also assumed that the participants who engage in this study will self-identify as female and Black and or African American.

Limitations

The researcher collected data during a transition period in education policy. Data collected for this study was restricted to African American women principals in the context of turnaround. The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the absence of other stakeholders' contributions, including that of teachers, staff, and students. The small sample size is a result of the participant criteria that included race, gender, and success as a turnaround leader. Another limitation could be the length of time since the leader held a position in school leadership.

Additionally, not all Black women may subscribe to shared ideas and experiences. This study does not attempt to generalize all components of the findings to all populations or schools. Nonetheless, the findings of this study may assist principals, in particular, Black women principals, and others who are leading schools in need of turnaround or improvement.

Organization of the Dissertation

The organization of this dissertation adheres to the traditional six-chapter dissertation. In the next chapter, a review of the related literature is presented to provide support for this study and to locate a gap in the literature. Chapter three outlines in detail the design of the study and methods. Chapter four includes the participants' profiles. Chapter five includes the presentation of findings. Chapter six consists of a discussion of the findings, including implications for practice and research. The additional appendices include interview protocols and other documents related to this study.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION TO THE RELATED LITERATURE

The review of the literature spans the six topics related to this dissertation: (a) role of the school leader in reform; (b) turnaround policy; (c) turnaround leadership, (d) African American (or Black) women school leaders, (e) Black Women's Standpoint Theory, (f) Leadership for Sustained Improvement. This literature review is grounded in Black women's standpoint theory and leadership for sustained improvement.

Table 1.

Literature Review Organization

Topics	Relationship to the Study
Role of School Leader in Reform	Context of the Study
Turnaround Policy	Education Policy Context/Concept Under Exploration
Turnaround Leadership	Concept Under Exploration
African American (or Black) Women School Leaders	Context of the Study
Black Women's Standpoint Theory	Framework Used for Analysis
Leadership for Sustained Improvement	Framework Used for Analysis

The history of Black women in education is long and ripe with the experiences of race, class, gender, and other structures that influence their experiences (Tillman, 2004a).

Generational location shapes Black women principals' structural constraints and opportunities

(Loder-Jackson, 2009) and necessitates the examination of the literature on African American women school leaders. Thus, a review of the historical literature on Pre and Post *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* case, is provided to add historical context to the work of African American women educators in the United States. However, this literature review begins with a review of the role of the school leader in a reform effort. A review of the literature on the principal's role in reform is essential to understanding the nature of school leadership.

Principals are change agents (Fullan, 2007a; 2007b). They are expected to lead the implementation of various reform efforts. Turnaround reforms are qualitatively different from the typical school reform initiatives and require a particular skill set (Kowal & Hassel, 2011). The section on the role of the school leader in reform explores the typical roles and skills that effective educational leaders possess. School turnaround leadership differs from traditional school reform, or change, as turnaround leadership occurs in the context of direct policy demands and accountability requirements. This review of the literature explores turnaround policy in order to provide a meaningful understanding of the federal policies that impact Black women turnaround leaders.

Role of Effective School Leader in Reform

The role of the principal is as complicated as it is multifaceted. Principals are teachers, supervisors, instructional experts and leaders, social workers, therapists, facilities managers, safety officers, mentors, public relations directors and spokespersons, coaches, philosophers, visionaries, cheerleaders, and more. Principals' roles have significantly changed since the wave of accountability and high stakes testing in education (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000). In the past, principals primarily managed schools and their inhabitants. Now, principals adhere to federal and state-mandated education goals. The consequences of

ineffectiveness and failure to improve schools in measurable ways often results in removal or termination.

State and federal policy mandates are the drivers of many school reform initiatives. Federal accountability pressures from education policies, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Race to the Top (RTT) tie accountability to federal financial resources. State and district mandates in addition to reforms initiated by school leaders drive change in schools.

School reform is educational change, and the purpose of school reforms is to influence student achievement and to improve the learning environment (Good, 2008). School leadership is an essential component of education reform and is second only to teachers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals are critical to school reform as they have the most potential to influence school policy and practice. Principals are knowledgeable about school resources and are, therefore positioned, to support and encourage school reform (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Moreover, principals recruit, hire, evaluate, and terminate teachers, who have the most significant impact on student learning. Thus, school leaders have an impact on teaching and learning (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivikin, 2013).

Principals allocate time and resources to learning, make decisions about instruction, and supervise the teaching and learning in the building (Good, 2008). Therefore, leadership is a crucial part of recruiting effective teachers for improving student learning, especially for historically marginalized populations (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Without a competent instructional staff, successful school reform is not achievable.

Leading a school reform effort requires a certain degree of coherence at the school and district levels as well as guidance from the professional community (Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003).

School development relates to schools' learning conditions and the commitment of leadership to the development of a positive learning culture (Fullan, 2007; 2014). During the change, a period of uncertainty and risk-taking, the leader must maintain the daily operation of the school. Thus, the school reform is dependent on the leaders' abilities and skills to envision, motivate, and direct change (Soini, Pietarinen, & Phalto, 2016). The challenge of school reform is complex as the population of America's school-aged children is becoming more heterogeneous. As this shift in the demographics of the population continues, the individual needs of students will shift simultaneously.

Principals are the leaders and administrators in schools and hold the responsibility to implement change in schools while simultaneously managing the operations of the school (Soini, Pietarinen, & Phalto, 2016). Accordingly, principals are required to consider and navigate both of the roles for the success of school reform. During reform, the principal is responsible for setting the goals and directions, overhauling the organization, developing personnel, refining the instructional program, and other associated practices (Leithwood & Sun 2012). The success of school reforms depends on leadership quality (Day, Leithwood, & Sammons, 2008). The never-ending cycle of school reform has changed the role of the principal. The role of instructional leader has become prominent; however, scholars, such as Fullan (2002a) argued that the role of instructional leader could produce the educational change needed to establish the schools that are needed in the future.

The principal's role in school reform is manifold. The purpose of school leadership is to improve the teaching practice and student performance (Elmore & Shanker, 2000). Principals as the figureheads of schools are accountable for the success of the school. Elmore and Shanker (2000) argued that educational change centered on improving instruction, so the role of

leadership in the process was directly related to establishing a culture that focused on learning. Elmore and Shanker (2000) wrote that in order to foster instructional improvement schools needed cultures of continuous learning, leaders who modeled the behavior and values of the school, leadership that possessed a diverse skill set, knowledge, and assets, as well as capacity and accountability reciprocity. Elmore and Shanker (2000) further argued that the roles of the school leader should remain within the bounds of the existing role and responsibilities and avoid specific activities outside their expertise.

Fullan (2007a; 2007b) referred to school principals as change agents. Principals are the managers of change. According to Fullan (2007b), lasting and effective change had eight drivers: centering the moral purpose of the reform and appealing to people's moral purpose, building collective and individual capacity, leaders who understand the process of change, cultivating a culture of learning, establishment of a culture of evaluation, leaders who develop others' leadership skills, coherency throughout the change process, and fostering tri-level development. From Fullan's perspective, change has to occur at the individual and system level concurrently. Leaders are required to be systemic thinkers and to focus on each level of the whole system and how they are interrelated while providing opportunities for learning and growth within the contexts.

In an earlier article, Fullan (2002a) proposed that school improvement occurred at the system level. Therefore, principals should be concerned about all the schools in their district and argued that sustained improvement would not be possible unless the district is also improving. According to Fullan, "Culture of Change Principals," have six guidelines for comprehending the process of change: a) the goal of change is to innovate with coherence; b) help others assess and find a collective meaning and commit to new practices; c) learn to appreciate the early

challenges of change; d) reframe resistance as a positive force and work the politics of change towards their favor; e) change is about the reculturing of a system; f) change is a daily process of reculturing. The Culture of Change Principal understands that the best ideas are not always practical or best for their school. Principals consider each piece of the picture as well as the whole picture. These principals are forward thinkers and planners. They understand that change is a complicated process that is not always comfortable; also, change principals anticipate the hurdles of change and continuously consider, assess, and augment their processes using the most current data and observations (Fullan, 2002a).

Principals remain active in their daily roles and responsibilities within schools (Soini, Pietarinen, & Phyalto, 2016). During the change process, principals validate teaching and learning. They promote collaboration among teachers and staff to achieve the school's goals; they correlate the schools' goals with internal and external accountability measures and continually assess the implementation and effectiveness of the reform. Principals are the intermediaries between the district, schools, and the public. They act as liaisons throughout the reform process (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000) as they work to strengthen the relationship between school personnel and the people who they serve (Fullan, 2002a).

Perhaps one of the most critical roles for the principal during change is that of a visionary. Principals shape their schools' identities by defining and strengthening the beliefs, values, and culture of the school (Sergiovanni, 1984; 2006). Related to their role as visionary principals, the reform process must include school improvement plans and strategies (Elmore & Shanker, 2000) related to the context of their school. Principals have the power to derive and define meaning from certain situations. They have the power to influence meaning (Angus,

1996). Principals are responsible for addressing "issues of meaning construction, promote inclusive school cultures and instructional practices, and work to position schools within community, organizational, and service-related networks" (Riehl, 2000, p. 68). According to Riehl (2000), school leaders influenced meaning-making by reframing ideas and concepts that related to education and developed inclusive practices and structures.

Principals also face the challenge of creating a culture and practice that addresses the diverse needs of students. Effective school reform efforts require an understanding of and commitment to lasting change from all stakeholders (Riehl, 2000). As a result, the principal is responsible for creating buy-in among teachers, parents, students, the community, and others in order for lasting change to occur. Schools are communities that comprise many actors; all hold beliefs and values about education and the practice thereof. The practices, cultures, and structures within schools, reify the beliefs of school personnel and impact the learning environment (Riehl, 2000). The principal's role in persuading and motivating others for change is immense, especially when teachers and staff members hold deep-seated beliefs. When appropriate, such a process may even entail recruiting new teachers (Elmore, 2000) and dismissing current teachers.

Principals drive change; however, they also support the efforts of faculty, staff, and students (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000). They offer praise and celebrations throughout the process to maintain morale and encouragement. Furthermore, they buffer issues that are not related to instruction from teachers. For example, principals' roles in school reform include facilities management. The school facilities can influence the school climate, and research has found that the physical environment should reflect the school's reform vision (Council for Educational Development and Research, 1997). When a non-instructional

issue arises, principals should resolve such issues to prevent interference with the instructional programming.

Principals have instructional experience and maintain a broad vision for the school. They can foster a culture of learning within the building. Principals must address teacher development continuously during the process of school reform. They contribute to teachers' development by creating and maintaining conversations and strategies for improving teaching and learning (Riehl, 2000). Leading in times of change requires principals to engage teachers and other instructional staff members in new styles and forms of practice (Elmore, 2000). Teaching is a moral and intellectual profession (Fullan, 2002a). During school change, principals need to continuously remind teachers and other instructional staff that they are continually learning, practicing, and refining their practice for a greater good. Change leaders model this practice by conducting and disseminating the latest research, data inquiries, and information about their school and the education field. Teachers thereby benefit from the continuous process of learning and refining of their practice (Fullan, 2002a).

Principals act as teachers when implementing new school reforms. When teachers become learners, principals guide them through the process. Principals provide knowledge and information about research in order to support the reform (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000). Principals serve as instructors, consultants, facilitators, and colleagues in educational change. In addition to their roles as teachers, they are also mentors and coaches through the change process (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000). Principals identify areas for improvement and know each teacher's skill set. They encourage teachers to develop their skills and attempt new instructional strategies and rely on the student performance data.

Principals provide teachers professional and personal support through change. In the role of coach, principals set goals for the school. They create opportunities to have teachers visit other schools to learn new techniques and interventions. They ask and invite questions and help others understand and process the change. They encourage and help teachers to set goals. Additionally, they drive instructional practice and seek additional resources to facilitate implementation (Elmore & Shanker, 2000).

Principals leading change also focus on student learning. Successful change principals help teachers evaluate student work by examining their assessment performance collectively and individually and assist teachers with modifying their instructional practices in order to achieve better outcomes (Fullan, 2002b). Often the reforms that are mandated by the state and federal governments ignore practices and relational skills that are necessary for school change (Cohn, 2005; Tillman, 2006). Part of the role of the principal in school reform is guiding others through the challenges that are associated with implementing reforms in schools (Trail & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2000). Principals are resources for teachers; furthermore, they must remain aware of teachers' responses to the reform and the school's climate and respond to any disgruntled uprisings.

The most crucial aspect of the principalship during reform is relationship building and maintenance. Principals play an indispensable role in creating strong relationships with school stakeholders and help build relationships between educators, parents, and communities (Riehl, 2000). These relationships facilitate the entire reform process. The literature on school leadership identifies "relationships as the foundation of leadership" (Ishimaru, 2013, p. 22). Each principal will use his or her relational skills in interactions with teachers, staff members, parents, students,

the community, and with other stakeholders appropriately based on the needs of their school. How a principal builds and nurtures relationships reflects his or her approach to leadership.

Relationships are the foundation of school leadership. Relationships are a central factor that relates to effective change (Fullan, 2002a). If relationships improve, reforms are more likely to succeed. If relationships deteriorate, the foundation of change weakens. Principals must have relational skills. The traditional role of the principal as the manager is no more. Change leaders must cultivate positive relationships within and outside the building. Thus, relational intelligence is as valuable to school reform as great ideas.

Ultimately, school change is a social process in which the principal is the facilitator. The skills and knowledge that are needed for school reform are as complex as the implementation process. School leaders in the process of change have to function as the visionary, teacher, manager, and evaluator and use their personal and political skills to navigate schools and their actors through the process of school reform. Hitt and Meyers (2018) asserted that leadership in persistently low-performing schools is likely more important as they typically have suffered from leaders who lacked the skills necessary to implement a vision, manage and direct instruction, create a positive climate and culture, and commit to students. Stated differently, persistently low performing schools suffer from leaders who lack the skills necessary to lead and implement educational change. The following section of this literature review is a brief review of turnaround policy. Federal education legislation impacts the state education systems, and this section provides the context of school turnaround across the United States.

A Brief Review of School Turnaround Policy

School turnaround differs from traditional school reforms. School turnaround focuses on rapid change in the lowest-performing schools while school reform is considered a continuous

and incremental process (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). In other words, schools that undergo turnaround differ from schools that need improvement in that turnaround schools consistently and progressively underperform. The concept of turnaround interventions originated in the business field (Watkins, 2013). There are many definitions for school turnaround. Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007) defined turnaround as “a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that: a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years” (p. 2). Pappano (2010) similarly defined turnaround as “rapid and dramatic improvement [...] in test scores, [...] culture, attitude, and student aspirations” (p.3). School turnaround aims to improve student achievement and involves careful change and management of culture, reevaluation of how teachers are hired and rewarded to ensure improved use of data, and development of practical approaches to academic challenges and school discipline (Pappano, 2010).

School turnaround policies are a response to the moral and political appeal to resolve the plight of chronically low-performing schools (Meyer & Smylie, 2017). The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) increased the federal role in education by holding states and schools accountable for student performance (Meyers, 2013). School Improvement Grants (SIG) provided under the NCLB and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009’s RTT granted states funding to turn around the lowest performing five percent of their schools (U.S Department of Education, 2011). Under NCLB schools received \$500 million, which increased to \$4.25 billion under RTT (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a).

The federal funding that was provided by the School Improvement Grants produced many turnaround initiatives at the state and district levels (Meyer & Smylie, 2017). States and

local education agencies receive funding for implementing one of the four turnaround models that were defined in chapter 1: transformation, turnaround, restart, and school closure. The U.S. Department of Education restricted the grants to school districts that receive Title I monies and have at least one school identified as Tier I, II, or III (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Across the country, states instituted new offices and officials to specifically support and improve their lowest-performing five percent of schools (Rhim & Redding, 2014). Schools received \$500,000- \$2 million to implement a school turnaround model (Meyer, 2013).

In the 2014 regulation of SIGs, state departments of education could award a SIG to local education agencies for five years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Furthermore, the Department of Education expanded the SIG models under the new regulation. States could now partner with a whole-school reform model developer or a charter school operator, implement or expand their early childhood education and kindergarten programs, or submit their state-determined model (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), the federal government reduced its role by reducing its executive authority, returning the responsibility of accountability to the states (Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachin, 2017). States now choose and assess their accountability standards and goals and submit their decisions to the U.S. Department of Education for approval (McGuinn (2016). States must consider schools' performance goals when rating them. Three of the goals must be academic indicators, and one must be a non-academic goal (McGuinn, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). High schools must use their graduation rates as one of their indicators (McGuinn, 2016). ESSA outlines three classifications of schools that states are compelled to intervene and support: 1) Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools; 2) Targeted Support and Improvement Schools; and 3) Additional Targeted Support and

Improvement Schools (McGuinn, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The most consequential result of this law is the reduced federal oversight of school improvement and state accountability compliance (McGuinn, 2016).

Turnaround Leadership

NCLB and RTT defined turnaround school leadership as a state and federal intervention (Bogotch, Reyes-Guerra, & Freeland, 2016). Turnaround leadership is a leadership concept for improving persistently low-performing schools as measured by pupil performance on state assessments (Fullan, 2005). Bogotch, Reyes-Guerra, and Freeland (2016) defined turnaround leaders as “individuals with the skills to turn around struggling or ‘low-performing’ schools into “successful” schools” (p.35). Turnaround leaders are accountable for improving student achievement and thus turning a school around (Bogotch, Reyes-Guerra, & Freeland, 2016). The literature on turnaround leadership is not a relatively new concept to education. Since the late 1990s, scholars have written about the concept of leadership for dramatic improvement (Hassel & Hassel, 2009; Kowal & Hassel, 2011; Stoll & Myers, 1998); however, the empirical research on successful turnaround school leaders is scant (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). What is evident in the extant literature is the need for leaders who are adept at improving persistently low-performing schools (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Kowal & Hassel, 2011) as turnaround schools need leaders who possess the competencies necessary for change (Duke, 2004; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Goldstein, 1988; Lochmiller & Chestnut, 2017; Kowal & Hassel, 2011; Zimmerman, 1991).

The vast majority of turnaround schools are classified as urban (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and serve students of color (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). In fact, 479 of the 826 identified Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools were urban (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The difficulty in turning around high-poverty and low-performing schools resides in the contextual

aspects of high-needs schools. These schools often have high percentages of students from economically vulnerable communities (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Pappano, 2010) have ineffective teachers (Pappano, 2010), suffer from high teacher turnover (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009), have low parent involvement (Pappano, 2010), have large achievement gaps and high numbers of dropouts (Duke, 2004), have persistent discipline problems (Pappano, 2010), have ineffective instructional faculty, and have negative school climates and cultures (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). Due to the circumstance of turnaround, principals may encounter a range of faculty emotions including anxiety, frustration, and anger (Duke, 2004). Turnaround school leaders are required to address internal pressures while managing external pressures. These external pressures include federal, state, and local policy guidelines and oversight (Pappano, 2010).

These leaders are charged with making critical decisions about the educational programs within their schools (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007). Turnaround leaders are expected to build teams, raise expectations, motivate staff members and students, cheerlead, and sympathize while remaining tenacious and conveying a genuine caring posture (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). Turnaround principals lead under accountability policies and the pressure of school closure, state takeover, and termination.

Several prominent models of school leadership are present in school leadership literature: distributed leadership (Elmore & Shanker, 2000), transactional leadership (Burns, 1978), transformational (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), transformative (Shields, 2010; 2013), social justice (Theoharis, 2007), culturally responsive (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016), and servant (Bass, 2000; Greenleaf, 1970). Each model or style of leadership is unique in its purpose and underlying assumptions. Commonly, the goal of education reform is to increase student success.

Each model of leadership approached educational change from a unique perspective; however, many of the leadership behaviors were similar and germane to school leadership (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Business literature was congruent with this notion. Goldstein (1988) posited that turnaround requires a leader with particular personality traits rather than particular managerial skills. Zimmerman (1991) similarly stated that the dire circumstances of turnarounds required a leader with specific character traits. The education and business literature further concurred that successful turnaround leaders were optimistic (Mirvis, Ayas, & Roth, 2003), “opportunity-oriented” (Goldstein 1988, p. 48), opportunity driven (Gerstner, 2002), and committed to continuous improvement (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009).

Turnaround school leaders face unique circumstances. Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) developed three stages that were distinct to the turnaround process. The first stage was: Stopping the decline and creating conditions for early improvement. Stage 2 is: Ensuring survival and realizing early performance improvement. The final stage is: Achieving satisfactory performance and aspiring to much more (pp.44-45). These stages of turnaround present the specific demands of turnaround leadership. Unlike traditional leaders, educational turnaround leaders have to halt declining student performance and then establish a new learning environment that can foster quick improvements. The first stage is often more difficult as schools undergoing turnaround often are appointed new principals (Leithwood et al., 2010) in accordance with two of the turnaround models in NCLB and RTT that call for the replacement of the principal.

In the first stage of Leithwood et al.’s framework, the declining performance stage (Leithwood & Struass, 2008), new principals are often appointed. This stage creates the conditions for turnaround. The principal must assess (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and address the

reasons and or patterns that contribute to the declining performance. This stage may also entail reducing teachers' feeling of threat and confronting reactions and emotions about the intervention (Leithwood et al., 2010). Leaders have to contend with deprivatization of teaching and teachers who resist new leadership and more frequent classroom visits from administrators (Leithwood et al., 2010). During this stage principals implement short but dramatic initiatives that will result in quick wins to boost morale.

The second stage of Leithwood et al.'s framework, crisis stabilization (Leithwood & Strauss, 2008), entailed the formation of a strategic improvement plan based on the analyses in stage 1. This stage benefits from the quick wins in stage one and the resulting positive changes in attitudes. The authors suggested that leaders in the initial part of this stage are typically more autocratic, controlling much of the decision making and gradually incorporating staff participation as performance improves (Slatter, Lovett, & Barlow, 2006). Leaders continue to supervise the reorganization process. They rebuild teachers' feelings of self-efficacy, which drives the early gains in student achievement and provide professional learning to increase teacher self-efficacy and capacity (Leithwood et al., 2010).

The third stage in Leithwood et al.'s framework concerns being settled in the new normal of sustaining improvement efforts. During this state, the faculty have replaced the ineffective practices that led to the original decline (Leithwood et al., 2010). The leader and staff members have implemented effective research-based practices to improve student performance. Some of the new conditions within the school may include: an orderly and safe learning environment, a principal with advanced instructional knowledge, a culture of excellence and high expectations, and a curriculum that incorporates higher-order thinking (Leithwood & Strauss, 2008). The third stage is characterized by (Leithwood et al., 2010):

- a) a willingness to be held responsible for what students learn;
- b) a growing awareness of the long-term nature of the job;
- c) a new realization about the interdependence of elementary and secondary schools;
- and
- d) an awareness of the entire array of factors that produce strong student performance in the long run. (pp. 60-61).

In summation of their stages, Leithwood and Strauss (2008) contended that “the core leadership practices encompass most of what is required to successfully lead a school turnaround” (p.58).

They posited that turnaround required that the same skills be applied differently.

Intriguingly, research suggested that successful turnaround leaders hold competencies and lead differently than successful leaders in high performing schools (Kowal & Hassel, 2011). Similarly, Lochmiller and Chestnut’s (2017) qualitative case study of a turnaround principal preparation program, found in the literature that turnaround leadership differs from the notions of school improvement and instructional leadership. Finnigan and Stewart (2009) conducted a study of 10 low-performing elementary schools located in Chicago. They found that the leaders who quickly moved their schools off probation and maintained their achievement gains led differently than others who were unsuccessful or experienced temporary success. This discovery suggests that successful turnaround leaders lead in manners that are different to both successful leaders in high performing schools and leaders in persistently low-performing schools. Thus, not all principals are capable of turning around a low-performing school (Duke, 2004).

The business literature explained that turnaround leadership often required double the managerial effort than that of stable organizations (Goldstein, 1988). Turnaround leaders are compelled to support staff members professionally and personally as they build both individual

and organizational capacity and recognize that individual's and the organizations' needs will vary over time (Leithwood et al, 2010; Lochmiller & Chestnut, 2017). Successful turnaround leaders are typically hands-on (Bibeault, 1982), and have a great capacity for hard work (Goldstein, 1988). They require mental determination and thick skin as they are charged with making difficult decisions (Goldstein, 1988). Turnaround leaders are frequently more authoritarian (Bibeault, 1982) when compared to traditional leaders (Rindler, 1987). Moreover, these leaders are examples to others (Kramer, 1987). They gain trust and credibility (Kanter, 2003) through their own examples of morality, hard work, and honesty (Zimmerman, 1991).

The limited empirical research on successful turnaround school leadership research has found that successful leaders develop a vision for school improvement, establish collective school goals, articulate high expectations for faculty and students, allocate resources towards improvement and organization change, and commit to authentic improvement that exceeds the requirement cutoff (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). In *School Turnarounds Actions and Results*, Brinson, Kowal, Hassel, Rhim, and Valsing (2008) identified 14 turnaround leader actions that are noted in table 2.

Table 2.

Turnaround Leadership Actions by Phase

Phase	Turnaround Leader Actions
Initial Analysis and Problem Solving	Collect and Analyze Data Make Action Plan Based on Data
Driving for Results	Concentrate on Big, Fast Payoffs in Year One Implement Practices Even if Require Deviation Require All Staff to Change Make Necessary Staff Replacements Focus on Successful Tactics, Halt Others Do Not Tout Progress as Ultimate Success
Influencing Inside and Outside the Organization	Communication a Positive Vision Help Staff Personally Feel Problems Gain Support of Key Influencers Silence Critics with Speedy Success
Measuring, Reporting (and Improving)	Measure and Report Progress Frequently Require all Decision Makers to Share Data and Problem Solve

Note: Adapted from PublicImpact.com; Copyright Public Impact. *School Turnarounds Actions and Results* (Brinson, Kowal, Hassel, Rhim, & Valsing, 2008, pp. 6-8)

Their report demonstrates how the actions listed in the table contributed to the success of turning around failing schools. The University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education extended Brinson et al.'s, work by incorporating their empirical data from high-performing turnaround leaders. The University of Virginia (n.d) identified seven empirically derived competencies that included, focusing on sustainable results, holding people accountable for performance, impacting

and influencing, engaging the team, committing to students, thinking conceptually, and thinking analytically (pp. 3-4).

Successful turnaround leaders facilitate these competencies by recruiting teachers with the dispositions and abilities to achieve student success (Kannapel & Clements, 2005), supporting teacher's efforts to improve through professional development, increasing teacher collaboration time and developing positive school climates and cultures undergirded with relational trust (Lochmiller & Chestnut, 2017), continuously monitoring implementation and student data, and protecting teachers from negative external pressures (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). Turnaround leaders have moreover been found to be mission driven, practice strategic decision-making, build positive coalitions and relationships, seek early wins, foster trust and gain credibility, and maintain visibility (Baeza, 2010). They are responsible for finding more instructional time, regularly monitoring multiple sources of student data, supervising the development of instructional skills, and establishing and maintaining an orderly environment (Duke, 2004).

Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) developed a conceptualization of turnaround leadership that includes practices, emotional intelligence, and dispositions. Their work is based upon the work of Baeza (2010), Caulkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007), and Stewart (2009). Their work outlined turnaround leadership practices, Cai's (2011) work on emotional intelligence, and the Council of Chief State School Officers' (2014) work on leaders' dispositions. Hewitt and Reitzug's qualitative study of a turnaround principal expanded their conceptual framework and underscored the importance of understanding what turnaround principals do and further, recognized the importance of knowing leaders as individuals and how their identities impact their practices and the school.

The context of school turnaround is fertile ground in learning how leaders think about rapid school improvement within the context of their schools. Murphy (2008) posited that people should be skeptical of “leader-proof” (p. 90) turnaround models and argued that more attention to turnaround leadership is needed in order to increase the likelihood of turnaround success. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) posited that school leaders’ thinking is situated in their context. In other words, the perceptions and understanding of school turnaround are not and cannot be understood without its context.

School leaders have to identify, coordinate, and allocate the use of resources and materials to form proper learning conditions (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Turnaround leaders trigger change (Stopford & Baden-Fuller, 1990), set directions by establishing goals and priorities, signal urgency, exude zeal and dedication; designate responsibilities, and celebrate successes (Slatter, 1984). The context of school turnaround heightens the effects of the decisions made, and thus makes an understanding of how turnaround principals think essential to future turnaround success.

Scholars have attended to various aspects of leadership; however, little attention has been given to how they think about their role and actions (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). Successful turnaround leaders are strategic thinkers. Their ability to successfully implement and maintain change requires forethought and planning. Learning how turnaround leaders perceive leadership for turnaround is essential to gaining a better understanding of school turnaround. Scholars have argued that research needs to address the underlying thinking of leadership rather than solely describing successful leadership behaviors (Hallinger & McCary, 1990).

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) identified six components of how leaders solve problems that include interpretation, goals, constraints, principles and values, solution processes,

and affect. How a principal assesses and defines the problems within his or her school is unique to them (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). How they define the problems within their school influences the resulting outcomes as change depends on understanding (Osterman, 1993). How principals define problems and develop solutions greatly influences their success (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995).

According to Kanter (2003) “leadership matters most” (p. 67) during turnarounds. Scholars posit that leadership is a critical component of successful turnaround (Gerstner, 2002; Leithwood et al. 2010; O’Shaughnessy, 1995). In Murphy’s (2006) literature review on organizational turnaround, he argued that leadership is critical to turnaround. The role of the leader is fundamental to the turnaround process. Rindler (1987) posited “strong leadership can create order out of chaos and excellence out of mediocrity” (p. 219). To such a degree that turnarounds are dependent upon strong leadership (Murphy 2008), the other components of school turnaround are “inexorably linked” (Short, Palmer, & Stimpert, 1998, p. 154) to leaders’ cognition and understanding. Consequently, this means that sustained improvement depends on the leaders’ cognition.

Scholars have critiqued the limited nature of turnaround models. Fullan (2006) stated that turnaround is a systemic process that begins at the state and district level. He also argued that turnarounds are problematic as they aim for mere adequacy and not high-achievement. Other scholars share skepticism of the concept of school turnaround. Peck and Reitzug (2014) also critiqued the concept of turnaround in education; they stated that the concept of turning around organizations has a checkered 30-year history, yet education is embracing the concept as an innovative approach to rapid and dramatic increases in student achievement. They also contended that although there was not widespread evidence of successful turnarounds, federal

education policies prioritized this approach. Moreover, the education community has become increasingly aware of the cultural aspects of school; however, the literature on school turnaround has paid little attention to the cultural factors that affect schools (Peck & Reitzug, 2014).

Leithwood et al (2010), argued that many of the research-based practices that high-performing high-economically vulnerable schools exhibited are absent from turnaround schools. They contended that the absence of these practices contributed to the inability to sustain improvement. Research is needed to fill the void as scholars have not empirically researched leadership practices or leaders who are able to generate long-term transformations (Hitt & Meyers, 2018).

African American (of Black) Women School Leaders

Black women have historically served and nurtured other people's children (Collins, 1986). Black women's history of service as caretakers of their children as well as those of others' is rooted in Afrocentric culture and further reinforced during American slavery. Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Civil Rights and Women's movements, the literature on Black women principals and educators has developed as a line of research for understanding and examining the experiences of Black women in education (Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005; Peters, 2012; Tillman, 2004a). Within the school leadership literature on Black women educators, concepts, such as intersectionality, Black women's standpoint theory, Black feminist epistemology, and Black feminism have been used to produce Black women's knowledge, ideas, and experiences, which established a space to present a counter-narrative within the educational leadership discourse.

African American Female Educators and the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education

The agenda for the education of Black people in the United States dates back to the slavery era (Foster, 1997). “Blacks have always been teachers, even when it was done in secret” (Alston, 2005, p. 678). During slavery, Black women held school under cover of darkness in efforts to provide education (Shakeshaft, 1989). Only after the Civil War did the government and other organizations provide schooling for former slaves (Collier-Thomas, 1982). The post-slavery Jim Crow laws segregated Blacks and whites and prohibited Blacks’ access to public spaces where the races might have mixed. After slavery, schools became the symbol of culture and pride in Black communities; they also reinforced the community’s values and morals (Dempsey & Noblit, 1996). Black educators built and operated schools, located funding, additional resources, and advocated for Black children (Tillman, 2004a). Black educators played a vital role in the education of Black children during segregation.

Black educators were hired to educate Black children. During the late 1800s, Black women who were literate could find employment as teachers. These Black women teachers taught Black children with limited facilities, resources, and educational opportunities. In virtue of social progress (Gist, 2010), Black educators served as advocates and educators who reflected the collective belief that education was the path to improving Blacks' life potential. Within the Black community, teaching was a prominent profession, particularly for women (Foster, 1997; Shakeshaft, 1989). They were the community’s leaders and role models, who comprised a significant portion of the Black community’s middle class (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999). The majority of Black educators found employment in segregated schools in the south. In 1940, 46,381 of the 63,697 Black teachers worked in the southern United States (Foster, 1997). In the north, Harlem had become the most diverse and largest urban community. By 1930,

Harlem's Black population increased by 158% with over 33,000 Black school-aged students (Johnson, 2004). By 1935, almost 3% of Harlem's teaching force was African American. These educators played a vital role in the lives of Black children. Black women principals recognized the students' intelligence and potential, held them to high expectations, and were devoted to their students' success.

Black female teachers were the backbone of Black children's rearing and schooling in the pre-*Brown* era. As African American women are Black and female, they face the 'double jeopardy' (Graves, 1990) of discrimination from their own race and white colleagues. Black females became educators in part as a form of resistance to the hegemonic society and structures that classified them as second-class citizens. They also became educators as a commitment to uplifting their race. Blacks' respect for the teaching profession reflected their high regard for education (Fairclough, 2000).

After the Civil War, Black female teachers experienced a period of hope. Black education developed and expanded during the reconstruction era (Bair, 2009) as Blacks led the initiative for public schooling in the south (Anderson, 1988). Former slaves had a strong desire to learn literacy skills and felt that slavery had robbed them of their education (Anderson, 1988). Blacks wanted to become self-reliant and to sustain their own public schools (Anderson, 1988). Ex-slaves with the assistance of Republican political leaders laid the groundwork for public education across the south (Anderson, 1988). During this period, Blacks established their own educational associations that were staffed by Black educators (Anderson, 1988).

Southern Black schools became the beginnings of public schooling for Blacks (Bullock, 1970). By 1890, half of the 25,000 Black educators were women (Perkins, 1983). At the turn of the 20th century numbers of Black women became college educated, and schools for Black

children developed in the north and south. The period of reconstruction was short-lived and was an era of exploitation and violence and perpetuated the division between the races (Gilmore, 2008).

Black female educators experienced a history of discrimination as a result of their multiplicative identities. Post-slavery, Black female educators lived in the between spaces in an era of social change where they were marginalized because of their race and gender identities (Perkins, 1983). Post-Reconstruction, Black female educators continued to experience this compounded discrimination. Black women teachers were trained to educate elementary and secondary school-aged children, while Black men were afforded the opportunities to enter higher education at higher numbers (Johnson, 2004). Black women educators of the time confronted the issue of racism and sexism unabashedly. Scholars, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Fanny Coppin, and Other's speeches, books, and writings document their fight against racist and sexist subjugation from Black males and whites (Cooper, 1892; Perkins, 1983). Black women educators during this era continued to advocate for social justice and civil rights.

Teachers were preparing Black students for the desegregated world to come. Black teachers' educational philosophy emanated from their cultural norms (Siddle Walker, 2001). Siddle Walker (2001) identified five tenets that undergirded Black teachers' shared beliefs about their profession. Siddle Walker (2001) suggested that, 1) teachers should form a relationship with the students' community; 2) teaching necessitates a caring posture towards their students; 3) teachers should address the students' needs in the curriculum; 4) teachers should remain committed to professional standards and ideals; and 5) teachers should receive school and community support. These tenets represented Black educators' commitment to both the Black community and the education of Black children.

Black women teachers have long been committed to the education of Black children, and records dating to the pre-Civil War era depict their perspectives on education that continue to permeate today. Nannie Helen Burroughs, an early 20th-century Black female school founder, spoke at length about her position on education. In a speech quoted by Bair (2000) to her staff, Burroughs spoke about her commitment and position on education.

Burroughs stated:

The theme of all education is character building [...] To do this the teacher must be wide awake, progressive: all education is continued growth [...] in everything- in our thinking, in our methods of teaching, in our choice of books as supplementary material and also in our professional attitudes, personality, clothes, and everything. Every teacher's atmosphere should reflect the very best possible for character building (Blair, 2000, p. 570).

Burroughs conveyed a perspective that Black teachers were role models of good character for students. Black teachers understood that character was needed to ensure the social uplift of the Black race. Blacks understood education as a means of racial uplift, post-Civil War Black women teachers became primarily responsible for implementing this ideology (Perkins, 1983).

Black female teachers were political and community activists. Black female educators were not only leaders in the African American community, but they also acted as political activists who sought to agitate the hegemonic structures in order to uplift generations of their people (Johnson 2004). These Black women teachers assumed leadership in labor unions, community organization, and bridged the gap there in between. Their love of community also led them to work in the community. Gertrude Ayer, a Black teacher in Harlem in the 1930s, started a mentoring program for African American girls in which where Black women teachers

were mentors. Layle Lane, another Black woman teacher, operated a summer camp for Black children from North Philadelphia and Harlem, where the girls were encouraged to read avidly, communicate using proper English, encouraged to live by moral principles and virtue, and learned other life lessons (Johnson, 2004). For many of these Black women teachers, they did because others had done for them. Margaret Lawrence, the first Black psychiatrist, and pediatric psychiatrist recalled her teachers in Harlem:

Those Negro ladies had a tremendous effect on me... They were learned, with a concern for you as a person... Being a dedicated teacher in Harlem was a life, not a job. It meant teaching generations of children in the classroom, but it also meant standing as a symbol of knowledge, grace, and truth in the community, and reaching out to youngsters who had the capacity to follow in your footsteps. The demands were both professional and deeply personal. These women were mothering Harlem (Lightfoot, 1992, 89-90).

As Lawrence stated, Black women teachers' work was more than a professional obligation, it was deeply personal and an essential part of who they were.

Into the 20th century, Black women continued to be educated to provide teachers to uplift the race (Noble, 1965). Jeanne Noble conducted a study in 1965 of college-educated Black women. The findings indicated that Black women were continually being educated to uplift the race through their work as educators. Black female teachers led the fight for racial uplift through education in the first half of the 20th century. The fight for educational equality led to the 1954 supreme court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in which the court ruled that segregated schools were inherently unequal.

Brown vs. The Board of Education Topeka, Kansas resulted in the widespread dismissal of Black educators and educational leaders. Dr. Linda Tillman (2004a) referred to the mass layoff of Black educators as “one the (un)intended and (un)anticipated consequences of segregation after *Brown*” (p.285). The dismissal of Black educators impacted the structure of the Black community and had lasting effects on Black children’s emotional, social, and academic success (Tillman, 2004). School desegregation disproportionately burdened Blacks. They had to endure busing, loss of Black schools, and the mass demotions and loss of Black educators (Dempsey & Norblit, 1996). Samuel Ethridge (1979) referred to the *Brown* decision as a civil rights decision and less that of an education verdict. As a result, judges were not prepared to respond to the massive resistance nor were they eager to interfere with school segregation practices and policies. Black teachers who were associated with Black schools were deemed inferior and subsequently dismissed.

Between 1954 and 1965 thousands of Black educators lost their positions (Tillman, 2004a). Black teachers were the victims of segregated practices and policies (Tillman, 2004a; 2004b). During the Pre-*Brown* era 82,000 Black teachers taught Black children, and after *Brown*, 38,000 Black educators lost employment (Tillman, 2004b). From 1975-1985, the number of Black college students in teacher education declined by 66% (Tillman, 2004b). By 2001, 6% of public-school teachers were Black, and 17% of the student population was African-American (Hudson & Homes, 1994; Tillman, 2004b).

Post-*Brown* through 1965, numerous lawsuits were filed on behalf of Black educators in response of enduring discriminatory policies that demoted and or displaced them by the thousands. Boards of Education across the country imposed discriminatory policies that attempted to prevent Black educators from asserting their rights. For example, in 1955 the state

Board of Education in Georgia passed a resolution that barred teachers from holding membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). *Naomi Brooks et al. v. School District of the City of Moberly, Missouri* in 1959, became the basis for rulings in which Black teachers sued school districts for massive firings. The court ruled that the board of education retained the right to make such decisions. Many Black teachers were never reinstated after being fired (Tillman, 2004b). Some Black educators were forced to integrate into White schools or relocated to the district office (Tillman, 2004b).

Wilson and Segall's (2001) narrative work of Black female teachers who integrated into white schools detailed the challenges that Black educators experienced in white spaces. One teacher, Iola Taylor, described the process of what she defined as 'un-selfing,' which was the process through which one takes another person's dignity overtly or covertly. Iola Taylor faced hostility from white faculty members and students. Her experience illustrated the struggles that Black women endured from their socio-location as women and persons of color immediately post-*Brown*.

African American Female Principals and *Brown v. Board*

The literature on the post-*Brown* era for Black principals is not as plentiful as the literature on Black teachers (Tillman, 2004a). The limited literature is attributed to poor data collection and record keeping (Ethridge, 1979). Black principals before *Brown* were prominent leaders in the Black community, and even though some Black principals retained their employment post-*Brown*, the decision negatively impacted them (Pollard, 1997; Tillman, 2004a). The loss of Black educational leaders led to the loss of prominent community leaders and advocates and champions for Black educational excellence.

The early literature on Black principals post-*Brown* indicates that 90% of Black high school principals lost their employment (Coffin, 1972). This decrease in the number of Black principals was a trend across the south. The literature found that although Florida's population of Black students increased in the 1970s, the number of Black principals steadily decreased (Abney, 1980). The number of Black principals also declined in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, West Virginia, and Delaware (Ethridge, 1979). By 1977, African American principals represented 3% of high school Principals (Yeakey, Johnston, & Adkison, 1986).

According to Tillman (2004b), racism was the reason why school boards fired thousands of Black educators. Overall Black educators lacked the political and social power to thwart the effects of school districts' racist and discriminatory policies and practices. The closure of Black schools was another tactic to reduce the number of Black educators. School boards barred membership in civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and the Urban League, which was another tactic that school boards employed to limit Black teachers' political power and to deny Blacks from employment. Other tactics included revoking Black teachers' education licenses, eliminating teacher education programs, and using standardized tests to evaluate Black teachers (Tillman, 2004b).

The literature notes the impact of the mass dismissal of Black educators and its profound effect on the Black community and its children (Hudson and Holmes, 1994; Tillman, 2004a; 2004b). According to Tillman (2004a), the *Brown* case affected the African American community academically, socially, culturally, and economically. Ethridge (1979) found that from 1970 to 1971 Black teachers lost \$240,564,911 in salaries due to dismissal; this loss had a negative impact on the Black community. Education was one of few opportunities for educated Blacks, so the loss of this middle-class profession devastated the Black economy (Tillman,

2004). In her 2004 article, Tillman argued that *Brown* had a significant impact on the number of Black educators at that time. The lack of professional mentoring, limited financial resources, and the increase in other lucrative professional opportunities for Blacks has led to the decline in Black educators.

Historically, Black principals led schools in hostile conditions (Tillman, 2004b). They resisted hostility and discriminatory policies while championing curricular evolution to both academic and manual labor programs. They improved teacher quality in Black schools by employing teachers who were educated in prestigious Black institutions. For these leaders, providing Black children with an excellent education was the driving force. Tillman (2004a) explained that historically Black educational leaders have done more with less. Black principals continued to serve as role models for their students, and they were among the most educated in the Black community and provided symbols to motivate and inspire African American students.

Pre-*Brown* Black educational leaders were also prominent figures in the community and segregated schools (Henig et al., 1999, Siddle Walker, 2000; Tillman, 2004a). Black administrators served as agents between the community and the school (Tillman, 2004b). They were liaisons between the Black and White communities. Black principals served in various roles within the Black community. The disinterest of Whites toward Black education created an autonomous role for Black principals. They exercised their role to hire and lay off school officials, allocated resources, and implemented small reforms and programs as needed; however, they only had autonomy in the Black schools and Black community (Tillman, 2004b). Black principals had no legitimate power outside their racial communities.

According to Rodgers (1967), Black principals were superintendents, employers, supervisors, community leaders, financial advisors, family counselors, and politicians within the

Black community. Most notably they were leaders in the fight for Black education and students. Research on Black superintendents did not emerge as a distinct area of research before the 1970s (Tillman, 2004a). After the 1960s, the increasing number of minority students increased the demand for Black superintendents. In 1974, there were 43 Black superintendents in the United States (Jackson, 1995). Dr. Barbara Sizemore became the first Black woman superintendent in a large metropolitan city. She was appointed the superintendent of Washington D.C. Schools in 1973. Congruent with the literature on Black educators, Dr. Sizemore, advocated for Black students. She worked to alter the school system and make it more responsive to her predominantly Black student demographic (Tillman, 2004b).

Dr. Sizemore was among many African American women who played critical roles in Black education (Alston & Jones, 2002, Tillman, 2004a). Black women opened and operated schools in the north and south, where they served as both teachers and principals as they advocated for social change. The Jeanes Supervisors was a group of 200 educators who labored on behalf of improving education for Black southerners from pre-emancipation. They were in essence superintendents as they assisted white superintendents, introduced new curricula and teaching methods, and organized teacher workshops. The Jeanes Supervisors also were crisis-handlers, negotiators, information disseminators, specialists of resource allocation, personnel specialists, and staff developers (Alston & Jones, 2002). During tumultuous times, these women did all they could to improve Blacks' education (Dale, 1998). Like other Black women educators, they faced issues of race and power (Alston & Jones, 2002). They were ultimately phased out during desegregation (Alston, 2005).

Other notable pre-*Brown* African American female principals included Anna Julia Cooper who led a school in Washington D.C., Fannie Jackson Coppin who led Philadelphia's

Institute for Color Youth during the turn into the 20th century, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary MacLeod Bethune. For these early Black women school leaders, the education of Black children involved “training of the mind and empowering the spirit” (Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 600). Coppin led what was considered one of the best secondary schools for Black students. During her tenure, she worked with over 5,000 African American students. The success of her students is credited to the school’s tradition of educational excellence (Tillman, 2004b). Anna Julia Cooper was one of few African Americans to obtain a graduate degree before the 20th century. She became a teacher at the only African American high school in Washington D.C. She later became principal of the M Street School in 1902 (Tillman, 2004b). One of her notable accomplishments was maintaining a curriculum that prepared Black students for higher education. Under Cooper’s leadership, her students later attended prestigious universities that included Dartmouth, Oberlin, Harvard, and Brown. She displayed a commitment towards preparing her students to thrive in postsecondary universities (Tillman, 2004b). Cooper’s tenure shortly ended when she was dismissed from her position.

Nannie Helen Burroughs was one of Anna Julia Cooper’s students. She opened her school for colored girls in 1909. The National Training School for Women and Girls operated in Washington, D.C. with the motto: “We specialize in the wholly impossible.” Like Cooper, the school prepared young Black women for the workplace and life as African American women (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Similar to other early Black female education leaders, she maintained a tradition of excellence by challenging racism in the white-supremacist society and sexism from Black males (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). The moral imperative of the times complicated the early educational leadership of Black women. These women were social justice leaders of their time (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). They understood the importance of quality

education for African American students and the vast opportunities that education provides and they committed their lives to their student's success.

The literature on the early African American female principals demonstrates their commitment to Black children. Their leadership was a form of resistance against the racist power structures that disregarded the academic intelligence and capabilities of Black students. Coppin's and Burroughs' legacies embody the nurturing and determination that these leaders exhibited towards their students. They educated their students in hopes of a brighter future for African Americans in the United States.

Post-Brown African American Female Principals

There is a growing body of literature on Black principals and Black female leaders post-*Brown* (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Tillman, 2004a). Benham (1997) presented several reasons for the limited research on Black female principals. First, there are higher numbers of whites and Black men school leaders. Second, few Black researchers are examining the issues that Black women face in educational leadership. Lastly, the extant literature on women in leadership frequently regards women as teacher leaders. Bloom and Erlandson (2003) expressed a similar sentiment and stated that perspectives and statements from minorities were dismissed and unlikely to be presented in professional journals. Bloom and Erlandson (2003) contended that the inclusion of Black female principals in the dominantly white feminist discourse is problematic and would result in the negative consequences of contributing to the distorted “appearance of acceptance in women's studies is using an ethnic additive model and failing to acknowledge that white women retain white privilege” that Black women do not hold (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 344).

From the extant literature, post-*Brown* Black principals face many of the same challenges they faced in the pre-*Brown* era as well as others (Sowell, 1979; Tillman, 2004b). Tillman (2004b) conducted a literature review on Black principals in the pre- and post- *Brown* eras and identified four consistent elements: (1) leadership styles grounded in interpersonal caring, (2) resistance to individual and ideologies opposed to educating African American students, (3) the significance of the cultural knowledge and perspective of African American principals, and (4) the importance of the social and academic development and success of Black students (Tillman, 2004b; Tillman, 2008).

Before *Brown*, principals were responsive to the needs of the Black community. Post-*Brown*, Black principals, were responsive to educational policies and shifting demographics of large metropolitan urban cities, more diverse student populations with more needs, societal and technological changes (Loder, 2005; Loder-Jackson, 2009), and changes in the role and responsibilities of school leaders. These are distinct differences in the context of pre- and post-*Brown* school leadership.

Contemporary Literature on African American Women Leaders

Contemporary literature suggests that Black women principals remained committed to educating Black children (Lomotey, 1989). In Lomotey's (1993) qualitative study of successful African American female principals, the principals were concerned about whole child development and assumed an ethno-humanist style of educational leadership. Similar, to Tillman's (2008) findings, Lomotey's participants' leadership emanated from compassion, commitment, and confidence. Black women principals post-*Brown* consider it their responsibility to address cultural norms that hinder students' future opportunities (Tillman, 2004).

Doughty (1980) conducted a study using a national survey of Black educational leaders. The literature from the past twenty years coincides with the results of Doughty's 1980 study. African American female leaders are typically appointed to lead urban elementary schools with high populations of minority students from lower socioeconomic families (Doughty, 1980; Jean-Marie, 2013; Johnson, 2007; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012). Doughty's results indicated that Black women often began their first leadership position in their mid-40s to early 50s, which is an older age than Black and white male principals. Furthermore, Doughty argued that Black women principals faced unique challenges that were associated with their race and gender and that these challenges had negative implications for aspiring Black women principals, which contributed to the myth of the Black woman as a superhuman.

The recent literature reaffirms this narrative and myth of the Black woman superhuman. The literature contends that Black women principals are K-12 education's clean-up women (Peters, 2012). They are often charged with reforming poor performing schools, and are held to higher expectations (Jackson, 2007; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012) without the ability to express discontentment, frustrations, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Jean-Marie, 2013).

African American Female Principals' Experiences in Leadership

Black women's social location reflects their intersectional identifies (Collins, 1990). A prominent strand of literature on Black female principals explores how their intersectional identities as Black and female and other facets of their identity inform their school leadership experience. Doughty (1980) described the 'double bind' Black female school leaders experience. This double bind is the embodiment of several denigrated statuses concurrently.

American society generally does not highly regard Black women's race and gender (Collins, 1990).

Doughty's work was significant as it illustrated that more than 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* school districts continued to appoint Black women to positions on the grounds of their race and gender (Tillman, 2004b). Black women remain likely to be appointed to urban (Murtadha & Larson) elementary schools (Peters, 2012; Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993). Likewise, this study highlighted the specific challenges associated with race and gender for African American female school leadership. Similar findings are present in the past ten years of scholarship on Black female educational leaders.

Black women's educational leadership has developed into a line of scholarship that examines how Black women lead, experience, and interpret school leadership. Scholars have explored the impact of race and gender on Black female principals through empirical research. Research has shown that race and gender impact the experiences of African American female educators. Recent literature by Reed (2012) detailed how race and gender impacted three Black female principals' leadership. The findings were congruent with the pre-*Brown* literature on Black female school principals. The purpose of Reed's study was to examine how Black females' intersectional identity influences their leadership practices. The participants were leaders in three urban secondary schools with predominantly Black students. These principals worked steadily to advance the education and lives of their students. The findings suggested that race and gender influenced how they led.

The first participant, Principal Johnson shared her experience of teaching during integration in the South. Her response to the prejudice and racism she experienced was to strive to be among the most effective educators. The second participant, Principal Powell was a student

in a predominantly white secondary school during the Civil Rights Era, and her experiences with injustice motivated her to become an advocate for marginalized students. Mrs. Cox, the third participant, noted her experience of racism, sexism, and ageism. She experienced what she described as disrespect from Black parents because of her age, educational attainment, and professional experiences. All three of the participants noted that stakeholders did not regard them as seriously as their male colleagues. Moreover, Ms. Cox noted that she also experienced pay discrimination based on race, gender, and age.

Reed's (2012) findings further supported the research by Witherspoon and Mitchell (2009) and Peters (2012). Witherspoon and Mitchell's (2000) qualitative study of Black female school leaders found that the participants faced resistance in the form of authority challenges based on race and gender. Research has found that Black women experience sexism from Black male counterparts. Jean-Marie conducted a study of two Black female principals and the intersection of race, ageism, and sexism. The findings of this study suggested that the principals experienced each form of discrimination and combinations of them all. One of Jean-Marie's (2013) participants experienced sexism in the form of being called a sexist, derogatory term from her Black male supervisor. The participant felt that her principal patronized her and wanted to exert control over her.

The intersection of ageism, racism, and sexism reached its apex when the district informed both of Jean-Marie's participants that they would transfer them to new schools with little notice. The district made the decisions without including them in the discussion. The transfer then evolved into an interview process when one of the participants had to apply and interview for the position she was supposed to transfer to as principal. She stated, "I went from being appointed to a failing school to now a national search for the position, creating uncertainty

about me moving into a principalship position” (Jean-Marie, 2013, p. 630). When she finally received an appointment, she received a low salary. She questioned this experience, “Had I been a white male or female, would this have occurred? I seriously doubt that” (Jean-Marie, 2013, p. 631). The other participant echoed in a similar statement. The district appointed her to a low-performing school.

She offered (Jean-Marie, 2013):

I think there are some people who have been married to institutions. It’s still their school. They are not going to let me be here. There’s nothing I can do or say.

We’re [Principals Wilson and I] coming here to clean-up schools. But, we are not [given] respect. They [constituents] have issues with race, gender, and age (p. 631).

The participant commented on her school community. She faced resistance from the community who wanted a male principal. Jean-Marie’s (2013) principals would recall another incident in which they felt isolated from the group of principals. As Black women, they felt that they were not able to express frustrations with their increasing responsibilities as the White female principals. Unlike their white female counterparts, they could never express discontentment or express a breakdown.

Peters (2012) examined two Black female principals’ experiences with implementing a small reform initiative using Afrocentric feminist epistemology as the theoretical lens. Peters’ findings concurred with the previous literature and further indicated that African American female leaders also experienced ageism in addition to racism and sexism. Peters found that in addition to a racialized and gendered experience, these principals’ ages and social classes informed their leadership and experiences. Peter’s findings suggested that participants felt as

though their multiple aspects of identity influenced others' perceptions of their leadership. The participants felt to a certain degree that their age and gender were more prominent when disaggregating race, gender, and age. Furthermore, the principals perceived that the multiple aspects of their identities had advantages and disadvantages in their schools. For example, one of the participants suggested that her same-race identification with her students gave her privileges during interactions. Conversely, the same participant acknowledged that Black femaleness was not implicitly interpreted or associated with authority. She also suggested that her gender occasionally hindered her leadership. These studies demonstrated how Black women experience discrimination based on race, gender, age, and class.

Similar to Peters' (2012) findings, Black women principals face ageism. Few African American female leaders enter school leadership in their late twenties and thirties (Jean-Marie, 2013; Peters, 2008). African American female educators report experiencing age as a barrier to their leadership appointments. Jean-Marie (2013) conducted a qualitative case study of two young African American female leaders. They reported that their districts were reluctant to promote them on the basis of age. They felt that the districts overlooked their professional experience. Furthermore, one participant had experience working on behalf of the district. She trained district personnel and was turned down by the very people who she trained. The second participant reported that in her interview for a leadership position, district officials inquired more about her attire and the age of her child than about her experience in the field of education. These women felt that they were more than qualified because of their experience in and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, the principals reported that they received scrutiny from colleagues and subordinates once appointed. One participant perceived that others in the district felt that she was

too young and had not paid her dues. The second participant recalled a similar experience. School officials equated her young age with inexperience.

Roane and Newcomb (2013) conducted a similar study to understand the experiences of three young African American women school leaders. Two of their participants responded that gender, age, and ethnicity had little impact on their leadership. However, they shared previous experiences in which they encountered bias. The third participant had a clearer understanding of how ethnicity, gender, and race impacted her leadership experiences. She understood that her identity in a predominantly Black school benefited her in many ways, yet she spoke at length about the pressure she felt as a Black woman leader.

She elaborated (Roane & Newcomb, 2013):

I feel like I'm always proving myself. I feel like everything that I do is under a microscope. I feel like I don't answer just to the 600 students and the 70 faculty members in this building. I feel like I answer to a race; I feel like I answer to a generation; I feel like I answer to forefathers. I don't know if that makes sense. But I always feel that each decision I make impacts so many people at so many different levels and that I'm always being challenged. I always have to be two steps ahead and I have to be better than the next person because I'm Black—and because I'm a female (p. 12).

The scope of scrutiny on Black women principals is immense. Scholars have found that Black women principals' lives are under a microscope. These principals received questions about their personal dating lives, are pressured to restrict their hairstyles and professional attire, and are even asked to remove tattoos (Reed, 2012). In addition to the heightened scrutiny, Black women principals perceived a lack of district support and mentoring (Jean-Marie, 2013; Peters, 2012;

Reed, 2012). These findings coupled with the lower numbers of African American women leaders limits the opportunity for co-mentoring, and potentially could cause to African American women principals to feel isolated at the top (Loder & Spillane, 2005; Loder-Jackson, 2009).

The findings of these studies suggested that Black women leaders share common experiences in educational leadership. According to Collins' (1990) Black women's standpoint theory, these common experiences, framed by their experiences of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989), construct a shared knowledge that forms their Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990). Black women's standpoint, therefore, reflects a subjugated knowledge that informs Black women's understanding and practice of educational leadership.

How African American Women Enact Leadership

The literature reveals that Black female principals' cultural norms influence their leadership practices (Tillman, 2004a). The literature on Black female school leaders highlights their styles of leadership as a form of resistance against an unjust society that devalues and underestimates the potential of African American children. Black women's leadership styles emanated from cultural knowledge. They are whole student-centered and focused on students' needs in order to prepare generations of Black students for academic and life success.

The literature does not suggest that only Black women can educate Black students or face challenges that are associated with the multiple facets of their identities (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Tillman, 2004a). Instead, the literature on Black women educational leaders illustrates and brings forth the experiences and perspectives of this particular marginalized population. Furthermore, the literature on Black female school leaders presents a body of knowledge that allows Black women to identify, name, and define their histories, knowledge, perspectives, and power (Collins, 1990).

Dillard (1995) conducted a case study of a Black female principal in an urban secondary school and found that the leader understood her role as the person charged with cleaning “up this mess and (relating) to these kids” (p. 545). The principal embodied caring leadership. She set high expectations for students, held teachers accountable for student success, and confronted white teachers who maintained lower expectations for Black students. The principal acted as a role model and an othermother. Othermothering refers to the act of taking on maternal-like responsibilities for non-biologically related children (Dillard, 1995). An othermother is one who encourages, protects, and nurtures other’s children (Dillard, 1995).

Dillard’s participant additionally enacted what Dillard identified as ‘authentic leadership,’ which is a leadership style that is based on protecting and nurturing others’ children. She was committed to the community and building relationships with parents in order to increase students’ academic achievement. Her same-race and cultural association with students and parents directly related to her leadership. Congruent with Doughty’s (1980) findings, Dillard’s participant confronted racism, resistance from teachers, and an overall lack of enthusiasm and commitment to the students’ academic success. The commitment towards her students was consistent with the literature on pre-*Brown* African American principals. According to Dillard, the principal’s leadership was an act of resistance towards a discriminatory society that is determined to “stand in their way” (Dillard, 1995, p. 550).

Bloom and Erlandson’s (2003) qualitative study of three Black female principals in urban schools resulted in similar findings. The three principals demonstrated a personal commitment towards their students and leadership that was influenced by their cultural understanding and affiliation and sought to create a caring school culture to benefit their student populations. These principals were charged with improving their schools and they increased parental involvement,

devoted time for teacher planning, and conducted state development purposed to address teachers' racist practices. They rejected racist and sexist theories regarding student capabilities, and one participant executed servant leadership. Moore (2013) analyzed 22 interviews with Black women principals on the issue of race in suburban settings. Moore's (2013) findings indicated that part of Black principals' roles as 'race specialist' was to address issues of diversity. Participants noted that white teachers often relied on them to address issues with Black parents and students. Two of Moore's participants perceived their role was to negotiate racial and classist gaps between teachers and their students. They felt a responsibility to teach white teachers how to educate better and serve African American students. Likewise, for the women in Moore's study, their commitment to students did not contend with racial affiliation. They were there to serve better and educate all students. Moore contended that some people may regard Black women school leaders as racial tokens. Their positions evolved into the "unofficial role of race specialist who are expected to focus on race issues in their schools" (Moore, 2013, p. 505).

Camille Wilson's (2016) African American female participant was another example of a principal confronting teachers' deficit mindset. The participant, Principal Simms served in a school that served predominantly low-income and African American students. She enacted transformative leadership, challenged teachers' expectations of students, instructional practices, and interactions with students. She removed uncaring and ineffective teachers. Her mission was to improve the lives of her students in and outside of the school. She did so by advocating for her students with child protective services, making home visits, restructuring the school's organizational structure, improving the school culture, and critiquing the zoning system that isolated economically vulnerable students in lower performing schools.

Many Black women perceived their work of nurturing and guiding African American students as a spiritual calling (Harris & Ballinger, 2004; Loder-Jackson, 2009). African American women principals understood their work as part of their commitment to uplift the Black community (Beauboeuf, 2004). The literature suggested that turnaround models often neglected the contextual aspects of turning around schools (Peck & Reitzug, 2014). Scholars have found that Black women leaders led by and are attuned to the school's contextual factors (Bloom & Erlandson, 2013; Dillard, 1995; Doughty, 1980; Moore, 2013; Wilson, 2016).

Othermothering and Care

Othermothering is a phenomenon in the extant literature on Black female principals. The literature on the style and embodiment of Black female leaders supports the notion that Black women are nurturing and caring leaders (Alston, 2005; Collins, 1990; Loder, 2005; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Roane & Newcomb, 2013; Tillman, 2004a). Research on Black women school leaders suggests that they interpret and understand their roles through cultural values that are associated with motherhood such as caretaking and nurturing (Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005). Collins (1990) defined othermothering as “work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability, which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality” (p. 132).

In Loder's (2005) article on African American women principals' leadership reflections, the author examined the literature on Black women and othermothering. In the literature review, Loder presented the discourse on the effectiveness of othermothering. Loder contended that a racialized and gendered cultural lens is needed to interpret Black women's othermothering. Bryl et al. (1998) and Payne (1997) challenged the effectiveness of othermothering. Bryl et al. argued that othermothering does not support collaborative practice as it consolidates leadership power to

the principal. Payne posited that maternal approaches to school leadership might be unrealistic for urban schools that typically face harsh autocracy. Loder positioned Eugene's (1989) argument that forms of motherhood can be an exhibition of authority and care in Black women's experiences in contrast to Bryl et al. and Payne's perspectives.

Part of othermothering is a form of genuine care. Dillard's (1995) case study of an African American female urban principal found that her participant's leadership emanated from a desire to nurture and protect children. Black women caring for children originates from the communal responsibility and accountability for all children beyond biological relation (Dillard, 2005; Collins, 1990; Tillman, 2004a). Black women principals exhibit othermothering which is related to their historical and cultural traditions. The literature on Black women's experiences details their role in caring for and nurturing white children as well as their own during and after institutionalized slavery (Collins, 1990). In the literature othermothering is a phenomenon that connects Black women's cultural authority, knowledge, and tradition of care and nurture to their work as school leaders. Dillard (2005) found that her participant was committed to nurturing her students through interpersonal interactions. For the participant, Principal Natham, caring for children was not an option, it was "a lifelong responsibility" (p. 552). She perceived this responsibility to encompass her students' cultural, educational, and personal achievements. Othermothering, as defined in the contemporary scholarship on Black women leaders, was present in the philosophy and practice of Black women educators during the pre-slavery era.

Noelle Witherspoon and Bruce Arnold's (2010) qualitative study on four African American women principals presented the notion of care. They examined the role of religion and how it was used to navigate intersection oppressions as they led social justice efforts in their schools. The findings of their study suggest that Black women school leaders' conceptualization

of care can resemble pastoral care exhibited by ministering caretakers in Black churches. Like pastors, these women worked to ensure the academic success of their students through a holistic approach to care. These women cared for their students' spirits, minds, and bodies through an interwoven system of spiritual, maternal, and community realities. Similar, to Witherspoon's and Mitchell's (2009) previous findings, these women perceived their work as "an extension of God's care for their students" (p. 226), and through this caring relationship, they would have the most significant effect on their students' lives. Part of their pastoral care is indistinguishably linked to social justice and empowering marginalized students.

Contrarily, Latish Reed and Andrea Evans' (2008) qualitative study on the intersection of professional socialization, gender, and race found that their participants critically approached their interactions with Black male students as she perceived them to be disrespectful towards female educators and their mothers. As Reed and Evans suggested, their participants showed that identity is fluid and contextually influenced. Their participant worked in a white context, which may have contributed to her professional practices and notion of care. The literature has found that not all Black women strongly identify with experiences of oppression (Reed, 2012). This finding is in accord with the assumptions of Black feminist epistemology that not all Black women identify with the shared experience of oppression. Similarly, intersectionality supports the literature which posits that aspects outside of race and gender will influence one's positionality.

The literature suggests that Black women lead differently (Dillard, 1995). They lead from a deeply personal and rooted care for children. They act as othermothers and go above and beyond to educate all children. Grasping how African American women lead informs part of our understanding, and the other half is gaining an understanding of how they think about their roles

as turnaround school leaders. Black women's unique history and intersectional identity form a common standpoint (Collins, 1990) that informs how they think about their roles as school leaders.

The literature on Black women in education is not without limitations. As previously stated, much of the research on Black women in education has been qualitative. Additionally, the studies referenced above have very small sample sizes and, therefore, are not generalizable. Tenets of Black women's thought, a theory often employed as part of the conceptual framework in research on Black women, further assumes that Black women do not unilaterally subscribe to a common experience, which suggests that although the area of research has produced knowledge about Black women and their experiences, the area is limited and representative only of the participants sampled.

Conceptual Framework

Historically, the experiences of African Americans living in the United States has been conceptualized as 'outsiders within' (Collins, 1986). In a white patriarchal society, their existence as women and Black persons positions them in-between as members in two marginalized groups, Black or African American, and female (Crenshaw, 1989). Their position in-between shapes an intersectional identity that is distinctive in the U.S. Given the historical experiences of African Americans and the political and social structures in U.S. society, Black women's racial and gendered identities creates an intersection of gender and race, and each compounds the other as two "structures of domination" (Collins, 1986, p. S19) meet. The dominant discourses have historically ignored Black women's experiences of racial and gendered equity issues. This location as members of society, yet isolated from dominant society structures their existence as 'outsiders within.' Black women's standpoint theory and leadership

for sustained improvement was used to interpret and understand the complexities of how Black women principals think about turning around and sustaining student achievement in previously failing schools. This study uses black women's standpoint theory to interpret and understand the perspectives of African American women participants as they share their everyday experiences and social locations.

Black Women's Standpoint Theory

Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought* documented Black women's collective consciousness and knowledge and delineated its complexity. Within this work, Collins asserted that Black women's shared experiences of oppression form a shared knowledge about the world. Race, gender, and class have shaped Black women's experiences in the United States (Collins, 1990). According to Collins (2000), gender and race are distinct, but Black women experience them in conjunction, which is the "work together producing injustice" (Collins, 2000, p. 18). Black women's' experiences of the multiplicative oppression produce a Black feminist thought that reflects a standpoint (Collins, 1986).

Collins (1991) explicated Black women's standpoint and defined it as the "experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society, and theories that interpret these experiences" (p.22). Worded differently, the experiences of an oppressed group positions them to see and interpret the world differently (Harnois, 2010). Collins (1990) contended that feminist theory evolved from a white context, which excluded the experiences of women of color. The frame contends that Black women have historically been marginalized and this maltreatment constructs a collective consciousness. Feminist theory examines gendered experiences through sexuality and patriarchy and often overlooks the influence of race. White feminists have ignored how their race privileges

them and contributes to the oppression of other women (Collins, 1990). Black feminism emerged from the alienation of Black women's experiences in the Black power movement and women's rights movement (Collins, 1990).

Black feminist thought reflects a standpoint on society, family, and self that is particular to Black women. Black feminist thought is the intellectual source of knowledge of Black women and is shaped by their worldview and culture in the United States (Collins, 1990). Collins' text constructed and defined Black feminist thought as both feminist and Afrocentric. Black feminist thought is what she called subjugated knowledge. Collins argued that the dominant systems of power suppress Black women's intellectual knowledge. Black feminist thought developed as an emancipatory lens for reflection and resistance against oppression (Collins, 1991) and holds that Black women share a social location as a result of their specific social hierarchies, race and gender, that produces shared common perceptions about society and social relations. Further the assumptions of Black women's thought underscore this theory: knowledge is inextricably linked to the historical and social context that shapes it; Black women maintain certain commonalities; Black women's standpoint diverges on the basis of sexual orientation, class, religion, and age; and not all Black women accept or subscribe to the assumptions mentioned (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Collins, 2002).

According to Collins (1986) Black feminist thought "specializes in formulating and rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African-American women" (p. 750). Black feminist thought developed as an emancipatory lens for reflection and resistance against oppression (Collins, 1991). One of the central arguments of Black feminist thought is that Black women's political, social, and economic status bestows them with a unique perspective and experience of the world. Thus, Black women interpret the world distinctively.

Scholars have produced numerous pieces delineating standpoint theory; however, little empirical research has critically examined its tenets (Harnois, 2010). Harnois (2010) conducted a quantitative study that investigated Black women's standpoint. She studied the extent to which Black women and men identified and held Black women's standpoint. Harnois' found that Black women's beliefs were in accord with the central themes of Black women's standpoint.

Scholars who examined women of color in school leadership have utilized Black feminist thought, Black feminist epistemology, and Black feminist standpoint as lenses to examine the experiences of Black female school leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005). The literature on Black female leaders over the past few decades highlights their experiences in educational leadership. Another element of Black feminist thought encompasses initiatives to redefine and underscore the importance of Black women's culture (Collins, 1986).

Black women's culture helps provide an ideological framework for understanding their experiences and perceptions of race, gender, and class oppression. For Black female principals, the historical era in which they live shapes, in part, their Black feminist standpoint. The social, political, and economic context of African Americans' lives continues to shape the work of Black women educators.

In studying African American women in educational leadership, a framework that pays homage to their experiences and subjugated knowledge as a distinctive group must be used. The researcher employed Black women's standpoint theory to describe and understand the perspectives of successful Black women turnaround principals. This theory will be useful for examining Black women's approaches to turning around and sustaining improvements in once-failing schools.

Leadership for Sustained Improvement

I used the leadership for sustained improvement framework as the second lens for this study's conceptual framework. I believed that Black women's standpoint theory and the leadership for sustained improvement were valuable to understand the perspectives of Black women principals. These two theories cooperate in an analysis of the understanding and behavior of Black women who are improving schools. Black women's standpoint theory was invaluable in exploring their ways of thinking while the leadership for sustained improvement described the domains and practices that facilitate leadership for sustained improvement in schools.

Each year hundreds of schools embark on the journey of school turnaround and attain initial success and then plateau or regress (Duke, Carr, & Sterrett, 2013). As a result, scholars' interest in sustained improvement has increased (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). In order to extend the concept of turnaround schools, Hitt and Meyers (2018) conceptualized and delineated the leadership for sustained improvement framework. The domains of leadership for sustained improvement emerged from a synthesis of literature across four lines of research. The literature included a review of: "school turnaround, effective educational leadership, turnaround external to education, and sustained improvement external to education" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 4). Hallinger's (2014) framework for conducting literature reviews guided their work.

Hitt and Meyer (2018) argued that turnaround is not a sufficient indicator of sustained positive change. They argued that initial gains were essential but not adequate, and what matters was whether schools could maintain a positive trajectory beyond the initial period of improvement. Schools should develop into high-functioning institutions (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Given the recent ESSA implementation, this evolution is even more crucial to the future of education in America.

Turnaround schools require effective leaders. Leadership is entangled in the recovery of schools, as principals supervise many of the elements that could contribute to their poor performance (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Turnaround schools require high-quality leadership (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Hitt and Meyer (2018) contended that turnaround leadership was not a more compounded type of effective leadership (Meyers & Hitt, 2017), who concurred with Harris et al., (2002) and suggested that effective leadership and turnaround leadership share commonalities, but the leadership models have distinctions.

Hitt and Meyers (2018) defined turnaround as “a rapid and dramatic improvement in a school within the bottom five percent of schools that demonstrates at least 20%-point gains in two years in both math and English Language Arts” (p. 7). They conceptualized sustained improvement as not merely protecting the initial increases in student achievement but sustaining growth for four or more years without regressing or plateauing.

Hitt and Meyers (2018) conceptualized two phases on the path to sustained improvement: turnaround and continuous improvement and growth. As described in Chapter 1, the first phase is a dramatic intervention led by the leader or school leadership team with the aim of stopping the present decline and initiating the recovery. Phase two is the effort to protect and maintain the positive gains and transition the school into continued growth. They posited that leaders in the second phase will use both turnaround and effective leadership practices, and asserted that schools in the second phase need “continued dramatic improvement and change (turnaround leadership), but also acknowledges that some capacity has been built in terms of both structures and human capacity (effective leadership)” (p. 9). The problem of turnaround schools is their inability to attend to the challenges they encounter (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Successful turnaround

schools unfold in three scenarios: 1) success plateaus, 2) student achievement declines or reverts, or 3) student achievement continues to increase (Hitt & Meyers, 2017).

Turnaround leadership and effective leadership both seek to improve student achievement (Hitt & Meyers, 2018), but the rate of improvement gains and the school's organizational context determines which form of leadership is needed (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Schools with declining student achievement and a despondent organizational context require turnaround leadership (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The leadership for sustained improvement assumes that turnaround leadership will not yield enduring growth. Sustained growth in formerly low-performing institutions encompasses a transition from the focal point of dramatic gains to the "ongoing vision and mission refinement, building capacity, distributing leadership, ongoing and powerful teacher learning, and dynamic and authentic community partnerships" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 10). The transition from the need for dramatic intervention to the need for ongoing support and improvement signals a shift in leadership behaviors; therefore, it is not unreasonable to fathom this shift also signals a mental shift in how a leader conceives the shift from turnaround school leadership to leadership for sustained improvement.

Leadership for sustained improvement encompasses five syntheses of domains and practices: a) designing, conveying, and refining an inspiring vision; b) transforming the organization: engaging and motivating teachers to maintain commitment to the organization's work; c) leading instruction: helping teachers to advance and evolve; d) insisting upon a high-quality learning experience for all students, regardless of their background; e) garnering support from partners.

Hitt and Meyer's (2018) literature review found that turnaround leadership and effective leadership diverge at the concept of distributed leadership. Effective leaders make broad

participation a priority. They encourage faculty, parents, and community members to engage in decision-making. The turnaround leadership literature suggests that initially, turnaround calls for swift decisions to stabilize the school were made by a small number of actors or possibly the principal alone (Brinson et al., 2008; Hitt & Meyer, 2018).

Energizing and motivating school stakeholders is another element of leadership for sustained improvement. Hitt and Meyer (2018) found that leadership motivation was absent in the education literature. They suggested that motivation's presence in the organizational literature indicates its nuanced importance and demonstrates the necessity to maintain individual and organizational efficacy.

The effective leadership literature did not address talent management or the recruiting, hiring, retention, and removal of a school official (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Conversely, the turnaround school leadership literature asserted that leaders should attend to the hiring, retention, and dismissal of personnel (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The organizational literature suggests that leaders should consistently consider the work environment as a means of retaining talent (Rhim & Fish, nd). Leadership for sustained improvement considers the ongoing need to address talent management issues.

The literature on sustaining turnaround outside of education suggest that leaders connect and engage the external community to form mutually advantageous partnerships (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Turnaround literature lacks the emphasis on creating partnerships with the external community (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The framework assumes that creating a community partnership is an essential aspect of leadership for sustained improvement and implies that sustained improvement principals find support from their networks with the community and use these partnerships to advance their influence and extend their work within the school.

The leadership for sustained improvement framework is useful to guide research into leadership for sustained advancement in student achievement (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The framework offers a synthesis of practices that encourages school leaders to influence student performance. The leadership for sustained improvement framework will be useful to this study for understanding and distinguishing the differences between the principals' perceptions of leadership and their subsequent leadership practices. Given the infancy of the framework, this study will be one of the first to use this frame to guide and analyze data. However, the use of this framework is promising and incorporates other frameworks that have been examined extensively in both the education and business literature. The next chapter presents the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this multiple case study dissertation was to explore, describe, and interpret the perceptions and practices of successful Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround. Specifically, the aim was to explore, describe, and interpret successful Black women leaders' perceptions and practices for turning around and sustaining improvements in student achievement. This study focused on the how principals made sense of their leadership and leadership practices and how they led other school officials during the improvement process and during the process of continuing improvement. The researcher employed interviews and documentation as the data sources. Five Black women school leaders from two southern states participated in this research.

The methodological literature includes numerous definitions of a case and case study research (Simons, 2009); however, no consensus exists on the characteristics and boundaries of case study research (Blatter, 2008). Stake (1995) asserted that "case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p.xi). Woodside and Wilson (2003) posited that case methods were appropriate for describing explaining, predicting, or controlling processes that related to different phenomena organizationally or individually. Yin (1994) asserted that case study was an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13), while Merriam (1988) defined case study as an intensive descriptive and examination of a phenomenon,

instance, or social unit. This study was influenced by Merriam's (1998) definition and notion of case study research.

Case studies may examine a policy, person, program, or phenomenon intrinsically bounded (Merriam, 1998). Simons (2009) concurred and stated that what defines a case study is its singularity. Simons stated that a "case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). The common thread between these definitions is the commitment to researching a situation in its context in order to understand its complexity (Simons, 2009).

Case studies have descriptive and interpretive goals (Blatter, 2008). Case study methodology was appropriate for this research as the purpose of this study was to examine, describe, and interpret (Hamel, DuFour, & Fortin, 1993) successful Black women's perceptions of leadership and leadership actions. As case studies' interests revolve around examining mechanisms of cause and effect (Blatter, 2008), the findings of this study may inform and provide examples of actions and practices to consider for success with improving student achievement and turning around chronically low-performing schools.

In accordance with Creswell (2002), the researcher's purpose was to understand a phenomenon by examining it in differing contexts. Qualitative methods were appropriate for this research due to the constructivist nature of understanding how one understands school improvement leadership. This study examined five Black women principals' perceptions of leadership for school turnaround and sustained improvements in student. The findings of this study, although specific to the contexts of the schools, identified similarities across the schools' contexts that provided insights related to successful urban elementary school leadership;

however, the researcher is not seeking to mislead readers into believing these findings would produce similar effects in other schools.

According to Stake (2006), the multiple case study design is appropriate for examining linked cases and for examining a phenomenon or issue at different sites with no common link. Stake (2006) argued that investigating situational complexity is a crucial component of social science inquiries. A multiple case study research design was best for investigating the complexities and intricacies of maintaining school improvement and success in five school contexts. This method was essential in gathering and providing a multifarious, in-depth understanding of school leadership and was an essential part in learning "how all the parts work together to form a whole" (Merriam, 1998, p. 16). For this study, each leader and their school were considered a case. In accord with Yin's (1994) characteristics of a case study inquiry, the data collection for this study came from multiple sources.

Schooling is contextual, and an essential part of researching schools and leadership is unpacking the context of each school and gathering a detailed description of the school's leadership that maintains and supports the learning environment. Case methodology was advantageous as it produced a depiction of reality (Gagnon, 2010). The rich description that is gathered through case research, is unlike the capabilities of quantitative research. The rich descriptions gathered in this case research was appropriate for and facilitated cross-case analysis.

The strengths of case study research include an in-depth inquiry into the study interest. This methodology was most appropriate for exploring and understanding the principals' change processes (Simons, 2009). Multiple case research was most beneficial as the evidence and findings from two or more cases is often more robust and compelling (Klenke, Wallace, & Martin, 2015). The limitations of the case study inquiry include issues of power, how the

researcher represents the participants, and how the researcher maintains power in writing and publishing the findings. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to gauge the transferability of the findings to their own school settings.

Subjectivity Statement

Addressing the researcher's subjectivities is an essential part of this methodology. As a Black woman, a former educator, and current doctoral student, the researcher was aware that her racial, educational, and professional background influences the way she interpreted and engaged the world. Her position as a scholar of educational leadership and studies in various theories that relate to educational leadership, race and gender in leadership, and leadership for school improvement contribute to her epistemological understandings of this subject and qualitative research.

The researcher taught high school social studies in Florida and interned as a school counselor in Georgia. In higher education, she taught an introductory undergraduate course and was a research assistant at the University of Georgia. She was a fourth-year educational administration and policy doctoral student and spent three years attending classes three to four times a week studying the educational leadership and turnaround literature. Likewise, she studied qualitative research methodology. The researcher completed numerous education courses that include but are not limited to: leadership in a diverse society, school-community relations, administration theory, teacher supervision and evaluation, leadership for learning, critical race theory, supervision theory, education law and policy, introduction to qualitative research, qualitative interviewing, and qualitative data analysis. Her studies in these subject areas influence how she approached her research design. The questions she asked, how she interpreted the data, and her educational experiences influenced her findings.

The researcher's interests aligned with many aspects of her identity. Her identity as a Black woman in her early thirties impacted her research approach. Her interest in researching Black women emanated from her sincere appreciation for her mother and other Black women who have served as mentors, sheroes, colleagues, and complete strangers whose intellect, strength, courage, and beauty she admired. Her knowledge and appreciation for the Black women who have gone before her resonates with how she identified as a Black woman. The history of African American women in the United States is another source of her interest in this population. For centuries Black women's bodies and minds were subjected to the hegemonic realities of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and other structures of discrimination (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2013). Her desire was to bring forth the voices of Black women, to document, share, and appreciate their brilliance, vulnerability, beauty, dignity, and majesty.

In addition to her interest, the researcher had no experience leading schools. This fact limited her knowledge and understanding of the principalship and it benefited her as she could not assume specific knowledge about the principalship. She was able to center the participants' knowledge and limit her preconceived notions about Black women in the principalship. Acknowledging her position as the researcher, she took additional steps within this project to inform the readers of her subjectivities and also conducted validity measures, such as continuous member checking in order to increase the transparency and quality of this study.

Research Purpose and Questions

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this multiple case study is to examine, describe, and interpret the perceptions and practices of successful African American principals in relation

to leadership for school improvement, turnaround, and leadership for sustaining improvement.

The research questions that guided this multiple case study were:

1. How do successful Black women principals who have led a school turnaround initiative understand and describe how their leadership has changed over time?
2. What leadership characteristics, actions, and strategies do Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround initiative believe are the critical components for leadership for sustained school improvement?

Research Design

With this case study approach, the researcher collected interview and document data on each leader and their school. Draper and Swift (2011) attested that no universal method of data collection exists, and the researcher drives data collection. The researcher conducted two one-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant. Three participants were interviewed in person, two participants were interviewed at their schools, and one participant was interviewed at a public library. The two remaining participants completed their interviews via video phone calls. The researcher collected documents, including the schools' performance data, school profiles, school websites, and school improvement plans. The researcher collected publicly available documents via the Internet. Additional information provided on the schools' district and state department of education websites yielded data for this study. When document data were not publicly available, the researcher requested the documents from the participants. These data included each school's demographic information, each school's report cards, and each school's performance data. The interview data was the primary data source with the documentary data acting as secondary data sources. The researcher analyzed the data using inductive or open coding and deductive or theoretical coding processes. The researcher

conducted single case and cross-case analyses that were consistent with case study analysis (Merriam, 1998). Cross-case data analysis informed data collection until the research reached saturation.

The multiple case study design was appropriate to research and gather detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (Herroitt & Firestone 1983; Simons, 2009). According to Simons (2009), it is essential to investigate the "situational uniqueness" (Simons, 2009, p. x) of the contextual condition. The researcher elected a multiple case study design in order to examine the contextual intricacies of each school. The researcher did not elect to conduct a comparative case analysis between the two states from which the participants resided as this study had a small sample and the number of cases from the states were not equivalent. The data would have been skewed towards one state in particular as the research was not able to visit all of the school sites. Furthermore, the focus of this study were the leaders' perceptions and beliefs and not specific state policies and practices regarding school turnaround. An analysis of the schools expands the literature about Black women school leadership, school turnaround, and sustained improvement, and concurrently provided an in-depth illustration of school change and success as led by African American women principals.

Case of Inquiry

School leadership has a significant impact on school improvement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found that principals' practices influence the actions, thoughts, and effectiveness of other school personnel. Leithwood and Sun (2012) stated that more attention should be given to distinct leadership practices rather than leadership models as they share practices. Therefore, the conceptual framework includes Black women's standpoint and leadership practices that were derived from school leadership literature. The focus of the

inquiry was Black female principals' leadership perceptions and practices for school turnaround and sustained improvement. Generally, school improvement encompasses various facets of the school, and includes the principal's practices, school demographic factors, instructional practices, parents, community, building facilities and technology, teachers, students, and external factors, including the district and state personnel. An understanding of how the principal navigated and interacted with the instructional environment and school stakeholders was critical to this study.

Context, Recruitment, and Sample Selection

Criteria

Black women's standpoint theory was the primary theory that guided this research study. The theory was useful for understanding Black women's conceptions of school improvement leadership and leadership for sustained improvement. The leadership for sustained improvement framework was used as a secondary framework during data analysis in order to explore how the described leadership practices compared to the practices delineated in Hitt and Meyers' framework.

Qualitative research often focuses on small samples to permit understanding of and exploration into a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The researcher selected individuals who had the knowledge and understanding of the research focus (deMarrais, 2004). The principals in this study had achieved a successful turnaround and now were in the process of sustaining improvements in their student achievement. Since the language around school improvement and turnaround are in flux, success was defined as a 10 percent increase in student achievement since 2015, and/or removal from the focus or priority school lists. The criteria for participant selection include:

1. Self-identification as a Black and or African American woman;

2. An urban elementary school principal who has led a successful school turnaround initiative with at least a 10 percent increase in student achievement since 2015 and/or led a school to improvements that led to the school's removal from the focus and/or priority lists.

Site Selection

The school sites that were explored in this study were selected as the principals met the criteria for the study. The schools were located in urban classified districts and predominantly served students of color from economically vulnerable communities. The schools were either once identified as a focus or priority school or were once identified in the bottom 5% of its district's schools. Further, in accordance with the literature, as Black women educational leaders are disproportionately appointed to urban elementary schools, the selected schools were urban elementary schools (Doughty, 1980; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015). Participants in this study came from two states, as the number of willing Black women principals who met the criteria in required the expansion of recruitment to a second state. Further, the second state was selected as it had a number of urban areas to recruit participants, easy to navigate open access education accountability records, and its proximity to the researcher.

States' ESSA turnaround policies

Within state A's education plan submitted to the Federal Department of Education, Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools are those with 1) a current a grade of D, who had a D or an F grade the previous year; 2) schools with a current F grade; or 3) schools that are not currently a D or F school, but have lower than 31% on the Federal percent of points index. To exit the comprehensive support and improvement school classification, schools must achieve a 41% or higher on the federal percent of points index and achieve a school grade of C or above.

Schools that were identified as a comprehensive support and improvement school because they were an F school, are mandated to implement a two-year turnaround initiative immediately.

Schools that fail to earn at least a grade of C are mandated to close or reopen under a charter or external operator. Similarly, schools that were identified because they earned a D are mandated to develop and implement an improvement plan. After two years, if they fail to earn a C, they are mandated to close or reopen under a charter or external operator. Schools identified as a comprehensive support school because they performed lower than 41% on the federal percent of points index are mandated to develop and implement a comprehensive improvement plan.

Additionally, they will receive intensive supports for the state department of education. In particular, comprehensive support schools receive more targeted, focused, and constant support from their districts and the state department of education that includes on-site supervision.

Targeted support and improvement schools are those with 1) a current grade of D, that was not a D or F school the preceding year; 2) schools with federal percent of points index between 32% to 40%, and 3) schools with subgroup performances at or equivalent to 31% on the federal percent of points index. To exit the targeted support and improvement school classification, subgroups must achieve at or above 41% on the federal percent of points index. Targeted schools receive support from their districts and state department of education that includes professional development, technical assistance, best practices assessment, and problem-solving groups.

All turnaround identified schools receive Tier I support from their districts.

Comprehensive support and improvement schools are Tier II schools; Targeted support and improvement schools are Tier I schools. Tier I support is access to online content and materials for all school stakeholders and includes student resource materials, lesson plans, formative

assessments, and curriculum maps. Schools with the grade of D or F receive Tier II support. In addition to Tier I supports, Tier II supports group support at the grade-level, school, and district level; this support is based on school data and targets specific subjects and subgroups. Schools that fail to earn the grade of C receive Tier III support, after a year of implementing a turnaround option plan, these schools are mandated to select another turnaround option. In addition to Tier II supports, Tier III support includes individualized and intensive interventions at the school and district levels. This support is highly individualized and data-based.

State B (U.S. Department of Education, 2019)

In accord with ESSA, state B is identifying their comprehensive support and improvement schools as the lowest five percent of schools in the state based on their accountability system. Comprehensive support and improvement schools receive Tier III support. To exit the comprehensive support school classification, schools would have to be in the top 95% of schools in the state and improve on the state's overall school assessment index with a score higher than three percent of the school's preceding three-year average that initially led to its identification.

State B identifies its targeted support and improvement schools as those that have at least one subgroup that did not make progress in its achievement and those are in the bottom five percent when ranked by their three-year-average subgroup performance. Targeted support and improvement receive Tier II support. To exit the targeted school and support classification, the schools must not meet the identification criteria, and the subgroups must have shown progress for two consecutive school years. State B identified turnaround schools as those with the greatest need of assistance and the lowest-performance in the state. These schools are classified as a

subset of the comprehensive support and improvement classification; These schools receive Tier IV support under the Chief Turnaround Office.

All of state B's identified schools received tiered support. All schools receive Tier I supports that include guidance, resources, and tools. Tier II and III schools receive targeted support outlined by federal definitions. In addition to Tier I supports, Tier II schools, targeted schools, receive professional learning, monthly district and state communications, a state-developed needs assessment, a grant for targeted support, and state and district support. Tier III schools, or comprehensive schools, in addition to the Tier II supports, receive support from the regional education agency, state and regional provided professional learning, and a state-administered school review. Tier IV schools receive intensive and targeted and comprehensive supports. Tier IV schools receive priority state and federal funding from the state, grants from the governor's office of student achievement, and rigorous monitoring by a state turnaround coach.

Data Collection

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Participants were purposefully selected to provide relevant information to examine in terms of the research questions (deMarrais, 2004; Maxwell, 2013). Purposeful sampling was essential for recruitment (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is defined as the selection of one instance, situation, person, or place that reflect the phenomenon of study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher identified participants through a review of state student assessment records from 2014-2018 and state published focus and priority school lists. Schools that met the criteria were then researched in order to identify the principals. Further, the researcher consulted with her committee members to identify potential research participants. Initially, the researcher contacted

potential participants by email to introduce herself, provide her credentials, describe the nature of the study, and invite their participation.

The researcher contacted 45 principals by email, and 9 responded to the invitation, and 5 participated in the study. The four principals who did not participate in this study, did not respond to further communications. Five principals were ideal to strengthen the integrity of the study and present the opportunity for cross-case analysis. Following expressed interest in participation, the participants received the informed consent form and an invitation to schedule an interview time and location. The informed consent form detailed the research design, data collection, and analysis. Moreover, the email detailed the participants' commitment and inquired of them to state lingering questions or concerns. Further, the email presented a request for dates of availability for one-hour interviews and the option to select in-person or virtual meetings (See Appendix A). The researcher accommodated the participants' availabilities and interview location preferences.

Methods of Data Collection

Interviews.

Methodological scholars have contended with the concept of interviewing as a method of research in the social sciences (Roulston, 2010; Seidman, 2013). Bertaux (1981) argued for the use of interviews in qualitative research. He asserted that unlike the natural sciences, the subjects under examination are human, so they can think and speak (Seidman, 2013). Humans have been using language to make sense of their experiences throughout history (Seidman, 2013).

The researcher elected to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants. Interviewing is a form of inquiry (Seidman, 2013). Many methodologists have defined an interview for the purposes of qualitative research (deMarrais, 2004, Morris, 2015; Seidman 2013). deMarrais

(2004) defined an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 54). According to Roulston (2010) “interviewing is used to encompass many forms of talk [...] [where] [...] the basic unit of interaction is the question-answer sequence [...] with the aim of eliciting answers” (p. 10). Seidman (2013) acknowledged the value of interviewing in order to gain an understanding human action in context. He posited that interviewing created a means of entry into understanding the meaning of individuals’ behaviors within their context (Seidman, 2006; 2013).

The interview process positioned the interviewee as the expert, while the researcher influenced the conversation carefully to allow space for the participant to convey as much pertinent information as they desired (Morris, 2015). Interviewing was the method of inquiry as the interest is in researching how principals conceptualized and enacted leadership. Simply stated, the researcher was interested in learning about them, from them, and about those who they supervise. The interest was in how *they* described *their* understanding of leadership and leadership behaviors.

Within the methodological literature, numerous scholars have defined an in-depth interview and in-depth interview research. Morris (2015), related the in-depth interview to a conversation in which two people discuss a topic of common interest. He stated that the conversation is relaxed, honest, and open (Mason, 1998).

Morris states that (2015) an in-depth interview:

involves a researcher asking questions and following up on the responses of the interviewee in an endeavor to extract as much information as possible from [...] the interviewee who has expertise on the topic/s the interviewer is interested in.
(p. 3)

Similarly, Cook (2008) noted that in-depth interviews encouraged and prompted participants to discuss in depth the topic of interest without the use of short-answer, targeted, or preset questions.

The essence of interviewing is a genuine interest in people's stories as they have value (Seidman, 2013). The heart of an in-depth interview is "an interesting in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). In-depth interviews were appropriate for this study to gathered detailed in-depth information about Black women principals' perceptions and practices.

The literature addresses the advantages and limitations of in-depth interview studies. The disadvantages of in-depth interviewing included the time dedicated to interviewing participants. Additionally, a significant amount of the time was spent corresponding with the participants to schedule interviews. Several times due to school emergencies the principals had to reschedule. The in-depth interviewing process consumed a considerable amount of time for analysis and transcription (Morris, 2015).

Conversely, in-depth interviews offered many advantages. In-depth interviewing facilitated the collection of rich data (Morris, 2015). In-depth interviews were advantageous as they gave the researcher the opportunity to understand the participant's contextual environment and motivations (Morris, 2015), and were also cost-effective (Cook, 2008). The researcher's ability to probe contributed to additional information that benefitted the study (Cook, 2008). In-depth interviewing allowed the researcher the opportunity to form a congenial rapport with the participant, which created space for the participant to elaborate on the topic of interest (Morris, 2015). Moreover, in-depth interviews were straightforward and not extremely cumbersome.

Yin (2003) contended that interviews are crucial sources of data in case studies. Each principal participated in two 60-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews. According to Morris (2015), many researchers conduct one interview with participants, despite the argument that in-depth interviewing ought to involve multiple interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). During the in-depth interviews, the researcher gained access to the interviewee's interpretations, thoughts, understandings, and motives (Morris, 2015) towards school turnaround and sustained success.

The researcher constructed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to elicit participants' responses and to understand how the participants made sense of their leadership and leadership practices during the turnaround process and the process of sustaining improvements (See Appendix C). Participants responded to narrative questions that elicited biographical information pertinent to the study such as how they came to educational leadership and also answered phenomenological questions in which they recounted their experiences and practices as turnaround leaders (deMarrais, 2004). The semi-structured approach created space for probing and space for more in-depth data to come forth during the conversations. Open-ended questions provided the participants an opportunity to offer their perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2003). The researcher recorded the formal interviews using two digital recording devices and the researcher's personal computer.

Follow-up questions and probes brought forth deeper insight and clarity into the participants' understanding, perceptions, and behaviors. Participants answered questions about their context of their schools and student achievement data in order to create profiles of the leaders and frame the context in which they worked. In accordance with Maxwell (2013), the components of this research design were modified to respond to developments as they unfolded. After the first interview, the interview protocol was revised to clarify questions and elicit specific

information about school improvement initiatives. In total, 10 interviews totaled 589 minutes of interview data.

Documents.

Documents were secondary data sources. According to Bowen (2009), documents have five functions in qualitative inquiries: 1) contribute contextual data, 2) indicates questions to ask and circumstances to observe, 3) contribute supplementary data, 4) a method for following change and progress, and 5) corroborate and verify findings and evidence. Documents for this study included school improvement plans, school achievement data, school websites, state aggregated data, and documents produced on the districts' websites. This data was critical in order to examine the leadership and school improvement context as written communication reflected the social and political aspects of the schools. The school performance data verified that the leaders met the criteria for the study. The school improvement plans verified the improvement approaches and initiatives that the leaders reported to implement in their schools. The documents also corroborated the leaders' reported prioritizations and indicated clear goals for each school year. The documents were extensively used to create the case profiles.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves organizing data to facilitate the disaggregation of data into smaller sections, coding or labeling those sections, and identifying the shared emergent themes that become the findings of the study (Creswell, 2007). There are three broad phases of analyzing interview data: 1) data reductions; 2) data reorganization; and 3) data representation (Roulston, 2014, p. 201). As Morris (2015) and Seidman (2013) recommend, the researcher accurately transcribed the interviews and assigned pseudonyms to all participants, actors, locations, and schools that were mentioned in the interviews; however, the researcher corrected

each participant's vernacular per their request. The document data was organized by date and topic.

The researcher performed a cross-case analysis of the five leaders and their schools. A cross-case analysis is a process by which two or more cases are compared to determine their differences and commonalities (Klenke, Wallace, & Martin, 2015) to form a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon of interest (Stake, 2006). The researcher conducted a cross-case analysis by comparing and contrasting the codes and themes across the cases determining what was similar and different among the cases. The cross-case analysis facilitated the comparison and analysis of each case and allowed the researcher to examine the distinctiveness of each case as well as form explanations of commonalities and differences across the cases (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

The initial analysis began with organizing the data by the collection method. The researcher read and analyzed the data as it was collected to ensure the most accurate analysis and interpretation, and to allow new ideas and theories to develop as the amount of data grew (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher removed the identifying materials from the transcripts, the researcher shared the transcripts with participants to member check and ensure validity and present any revisions to the wording. The participants did not provide substantial revisions for the transcripts. Atlas.ti was the data management software and was used to organize, code, analyze, and store qualitative data. The transcripts were identified by the participants' pseudonyms. The audio recordings were saved in digital password-protected files.

The research questions and conceptual framework guided the data analysis. Black women's standpoint (Collins, 1990) was the critical lens that was used for understanding how each leader perceived her leadership for improvement and leadership for sustained improvement.

Hitt and Meyers (2018), leadership for sustained improvement guided the exploration of the reported leadership practices. The assumptions of these conceptions guided data analysis and framed the connections between the research questions, the data, and the conceptual framework (deMarrais, 2004).

Inductive and Deductive Coding

Seidman (2013) defined coding as “the process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files” (p. 127). The researcher conducted a two-step coding process through inductive coding, which was open coding, as well as deductive coding, also known as theory-driven coding (Galman, 2013). Coding occurred via Atlas.ti.

Seidman (2013) influenced the data analysis approach. The coding approach began by bracketing rich passages within the transcripts (Seidman, 2013). This process determined what text within the transcript was of interest. Concurrently, each line of the transcripts received codes related to broader emergent themes. The preliminary codes emerged from common words, themes, patterns, and actions found participants’ responses. The researcher studied the interviews’ coding to gain a more in-depth understanding of the research interest and further support the preliminary emergent themes. Sixty-seven initial codes emerged from the transcripts. Groups of these passages merged into categories for thematic analysis. Categories form when related codes are grouped to form broader themes (Maxwell, 2013; Roulston, 2014). A reduction of codes transpired through another review of the codes by studying and analyzing the larger common threads.

Cross-Case Analysis

The first step in the cross-case analysis was to review each case and its findings separately (Stake, 2006). The second step referred to the research questions and delving into the

cases and comparing how the principals perceived their leadership, led, and planned to maintain a trajectory of improvement. The cases were compared and contrasted to find similarities and differences across the leaders and their responses. Each case was compared to the others to identify the particularities of the leaders and their schools. Within each case, the student demographics, the experiences of the teachers, the external environment, and profession and personal information about the leaders, the cases were constantly compared. Codes from each case were compared and contrasted, looking for similar and different words, working, phrases, and approached. From cross-comparison of themes the commonalities and the dissimilarities between the cases emerged. In the same manner as the single case analysis, common factors from across the cases came forth. The researcher identified seven themes in the findings. Following analysis, interpretation of the findings formed a discussion of leadership, school culture, and improvement across the contexts, as well as a discussion of the inherent challenges and advantages that were associated with each context (Stake, 2006).

Document Analysis

Documents provided information about the schools' context, including the data trends for the past four years, students' demographic information, school's long-term and short-term goals, best practices, and prioritized needs. The documents were analyzed by comparing and contrasting the present information (Bowen, 2009). The researcher analyzed the documents to construct the case profiles. The researcher specifically analyzed the documents to learn detailed information about the school not collected in the interviews. The school improvement plans detailed pertinent information regarding an assessment of the schools' prior goals the practices they sought to implement. It became evident that some schools outlined more comprehensive improvement plans and incorporated various data sources to respond to their goals, outlined who

was to participate in the response, and how they planned to communicate their plans to school stakeholders. Further, the school improvement plans outlined practices for implementation and how leadership planned to assess and monitor the implementation. Most importantly, the school improvement plans supported the participants' responses and listed the relevant standards for each practice. This data was most useful in constructing the case profiles.

Representation of Data

There are numerous ways to present qualitative data. Methods of case study research representations are varied (Boehrer, 1990). Stake (2000) suggested that since researchers draft the participants' accounts, they construct knowledge. The researcher presented the qualitative data in written form at utilizing transcript excerpts and quotations. Chapter four consists of detailed profiles outlining the principals' and schools' contexts to provide a contextual understanding of the settings (Simons, 2009). The participants' profiles provide contextual information about each participant, including biographical information, such as their career history in education, narrative of leadership appointment, experience in educational leadership, and school improvement data over time.

Criteria for Evaluating Quality

The research addressed the quality of this study in several ways. This study benefitted from rich descriptions. The participants' rich descriptions provided the opportunity to assess the study's quality and validity (Creswell, 2007). In order to assess the quality of the study, the researcher consulted the methodologist about the quality of the research design and interview protocol.

The researcher considered the questions that Roulston (2010) proposed in her article *Considering Quality in Qualitative Interviewing*, including what questions the researcher asked,

how the researcher asked the questions, and how did interviewing fit with the epistemological and theoretical assumptions that framed the study. Additionally, the subjectivity statement imparted the researcher's assumptions and background. By providing such descriptions, readers can evaluate the analysis and interpretations of the findings. Further, readers can assess the transferability of the findings to their own settings.

Member Checking

Member checking was another method for increasing the quality of a research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique of member checking is the process in which researchers solicit the participants' perspectives on the credibility and quality of the findings and the interpretations (Creswell, 2007). The participants received full access to the interview transcriptions. After the transcription of each interview, the participants received copies of the transcript so they could express their perspectives and validate the transcripts. After the analysis, the participants received the interpretations and findings for the same purposes of validation. In both of these correspondences, the participants had the opportunity to clarify misrepresentations.

Triangulation

Triangulation is another method of increasing the credibility of a research project (Klenke, Wallace, & Martin, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) defined triangulation as the researcher obtaining and using data gathered from multiple methods and sources to validate the findings. Data collection involved semi-structured participant interviews and documents. Multiple data sources are better than single data sources because they lead to a greater understanding of the phenomena studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The collection of data from multiple sources produced a better understanding of the numerous facets concerning the schools' cultures. The primary data, which were the interviews yielded

information that was not publicly available and presented specific data regarding the principals' perceptions and thought processes. The document data provided statistical data that related to school performance, enrollment numbers, student demographics, and leadership prioritization over time. The researcher analyzed individual sources of data to construct reasonable explanations about how Black women leaders led and perceived successful school turnaround initiatives.

Researcher Bias and Reactivity

The formation of research questions required forethought. The researcher conferred with her committee to review the research questions, findings, and interpretations prior to notifying participants. The presentation of discrepant data within the discussion chapter offers the counterargument to the findings. In accordance with Maxwell (2013), the researcher was cognizant of her influence on the participants in a productive manner. As a researcher, the researcher was part of the study and influenced the data in some manner (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Although one cannot reduce their influence, the researcher was mindful of biases and addressed them within the design of this study. To address bias, the subjectivity statement was essential to position the researcher properly within this research.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. This study was limited to internal generalizability (Maxwell, 2013). The data that was collected for this study was limited to African American women principals; however, not all Black women subscribe to shared ideas and experiences (Collins, 1990). In addition, this study is limited in that the data collected is self-reported. This study was conducted during a transition period in education and turnaround policy. The limitations of this study also included the small sample size of five and the absence of other

stakeholders' contributions, including teachers, staff members, and students. The small sample size was a result of the participant criteria that include race, gender, and success as a turnaround leader.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT AND SCHOOL PROFILES

This chapter provides an introduction to the participants. For this dissertation, the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Additionally, the schools' enrollment numbers were rounded to the nearest one hundred for the same reason. The five participants were purposefully selected. Interview and documentary data were utilized to write the participant and school profiles. The number of years which the principals had served as leaders in their schools ranged from 4-6 years. Each principal had over 20 years of experience in K-12 education. They entered education as happenstance and eventually found themselves appointed to schools in need of a turnaround. Each of the principals' schools experienced turnaround in three years. The schools were formerly considered the lowest performing schools in their respective states and districts; at the time of this study the principals and their schools were embarking on school improvement to sustain the positive increases in student achievement.

Table 3.

Participant information

Principal Name (Age)	Highest Degree Obtained	Marital Status	School Enrollment (rounded to nearest 100)	Years in Principals hip	Years in Principals hip at Current School	Previous Positions in Education
Dr. Minard (44)	Doctorate	Divorced with children	1200	6	6	Teacher Literacy Leader Grade Chair Assistant Principal Interim Principal Principal
Lee (51)	Masters	Widowed with children	600	4	4	Teacher Counselor School Improvement Specialist Assistant Principal Principal
Claire (47)	Masters	Married with children	600	7	4	Teacher Assistant Principal Principal
Mae (45)	Masters	Married with children	400	4	4	Teacher Instructional Coach Assistant Principal Principal
Flowers (45)	Masters	Married with children	400	4	4	Teacher Department Chair Assistant Principal Interim Principal Principal

Dr. Minard

Dr. Minard was a 44-year-old lifelong educator. Before entering the principalship, she taught nine years and was an assistant principal for three years. She was in her sixth year as the principal of Apalachee Elementary. Dr. Minard described herself as a laid-back analytic leader, who led with her heart and head; however, her “head always c[a]me first.” She related that she was a facilitator leader who “makes the best decisions for kids.” Guided by her faith, intuition, and instructional knowledge, since 2015, Principal Minard has raised her school’s grade from a D to a C.

Dr. Minard never aspired to enter education. She desired a position that “would allow [her] the opportunity to be on the same schedule with [her] son.” Desiring the opportunity to be “a more hands-on parent” and be on the same schedule with her young child, she obtained a master’s in education. Shortly thereafter, she obtained her first position in an elementary school. Over the next nine years, Dr. Minard taught elementary education. In her 10th year in education, her district appointed her to the assistant principalship and held that position for three years before being appointed to the principalship.

At the time of Dr. Minard’s appointment to lead Apalachee Elementary, it was the lowest performing school in the district. Before her leadership, the school had experienced a dramatic decline in student performance for several years. Dr. Minard’s district appointed her the principal of Apalachee two weeks ahead of the school year with the direction to increase student achievement within a specific timeframe. The consequences of not meeting her directives included removal, demotion, and possibly dismissal.

Apalachee Elementary was a large urban predominantly Hispanic Title-1 elementary school with a predominantly English Language Learner student enrollment; 96% of the student

enrollment were students of color, and 95% of the student population qualified for free and or reduced lunches. Fifty percent of Apalachee's teaching faculty was of color. When compared to other schools in the state, Apalachee had performed lower than the state and district averages in reading, math, science, and social studies. Since the 2014-2015 school year, Apalachee experienced a 10% increase in the number of students who were reading on grade level.

Apalachee was a well-organized and decorated school. The front office school was decorated with positive quotes in the school's colors on the walls and banners with the school's mascot. The office was decorated with comfortable seating, and two rugs with the school's name and mascot. The secretary's desk was the focal point of the front office. The administrator's offices, located in the rear, were decorated with the school's colors and mascot, and the administrators' college's mascots. Walking through the halls, there were banners over each teacher's door with their college flags affixed. The school was bright with colorful murals on the walls. Photographs of the faculty for the past several decades lined a hallway. Dr. Minard shared that she and her administration spent previous summers purchasing furniture and décor to create a welcoming and familial climate. The hallways were silent as classes walked to and from the cafeteria. It was evident that the school had processes that the teachers and students ascribed to.

Throughout her career, Dr. Minard was instructionally driven. Literacy instruction had been her passion and pursuit. Interestingly, when she taught kindergarten, she was moved to another grade level as "they thought I was too academically focused to teach kindergarten." She confessed, "I believe I could teach a rock to read. I love reading." Dr. Minard's love for literacy was the path that she thought would lead her to a position at the district office. Alternatively, the path led her to the principalship. As she entered her seventh year in the seat at Apalachee, she admitted "I do love this work.... It's definitely, a great job. It becomes more than just a job; it

does become a part of your life.” The principalship had become a central component of Dr. Minard’s life that consumed a significant amount of her time.

Dr. Minard’s life had evolved over the past six years and she had experienced a “whirlwind” since her appointment to Appalachee. She met her assistant principals two weeks before the school year began and met the teachers the week before the first day of school. The transition to Apalachee was “overwhelming because [she] really didn’t have much time and [she] knew the school was in trouble.” At the time, she was also in graduate school, pursuing a doctoral degree.

Reflecting on her appointment she stated:

We were the lowest performing school in Brittan County and just the idea that I now had to meet with the assistant principals and plan out everything that had to happen before I met the teachers. I was also in grad school thinking that I wasn't going to become a principal. I never would have put the two on top of each other. So, where there was a little bit of excitement, there was also this feeling of being overwhelmed.

Her sentiments about the feeling of being overwhelmed also came from the sheer magnitude and pressure of the undertaking that she faced. When appointed, Apalachee had almost 2000 students. She felt external pressures from the district to move the school and an internalized pressure to increase student achievement to maintain her position and serve her students. She was simultaneously pursuing a doctoral degree. The pressure of moving the school at one point made Dr. Minard consider leaving graduate school.

Ultimately, she decided:

I decided that, no, I won't quit. I won't let anybody decide for me what happens with my life and my career. After three years, when my dissertation is done and I finish my doctorate, after three years of trying to change or improve the school, I would make my own decisions. I would choose for myself and then nobody else would choose for me. And so, I decided to go to Grad school. I stayed in Grad school, but it came at a cost for me.

That cost would be Dr. Minard's family. She believed she dedicated a considerable portion of herself and time to improving the school and responding to the needs of the school personnel. She felt that the dissolution of her family ensued from her substantial commitment to Apalachee. She revealed, "I felt like I had given, the school and the teachers the best of me. At that point, you realize that they didn't love you back. Not the way that your family would have loved you." During that period, Dr. Minard held her devotion to the school partly responsible for her divorce.

Undeterred by the challenges of improving her school, Dr. Minard understood the purpose of her work. She proclaimed, "God does not call the equipped, He equips the called." The students were centered in every decision she made. She mentioned, "I may not always make the decision that's most popular with teachers, but I always do the right thing for kids, every single solitary day. I want to be able to change that poverty trajectory for my students." Her commitment to students emanated from her own experience as a student. As a student, she attended schools where teachers held a deficit mentality towards students based on their family backgrounds. In 'the seat,' as she described it, she challenged teachers' deficit mindsets about their students and maintained, "I've seen people treat kids that look like me, differently. And so, whether or not they look like me or Hispanic or whatever; you're going to treat kids right and you're not going to slip them into this program or that program. You're going to teach." Dr.

Minard's primary education experience influenced her leadership philosophy. She held teachers in her school to high professional standards.

Principal Lee

Principal Lee was a 51-year-old educator who was entering her fourth year as principal at Fairview Elementary. During her tenure, Principal Lee has served as a middle school teacher, school counselor, school improvement specialist, and principal. Principal Lee was a young single parent during college. She realized that a career in education would enable a corresponding calendar and schedule with her child. She taught at the middle school level for 11 years before she became a school specialist. She practiced as a school improvement specialist for five years. Afterwards, her district appointed her to the assistant principalship which she held for five years. In 2015, she became the principal of Fairview, which was her childhood elementary school.

Principal Lee was ecstatic to return to her childhood school as the principal. The first in her family to graduate from college, she was overwhelmed with emotion when she received her appointment.

She shared:

I got a call from the superintendent and I'll never forget. I was at a gas station pumping gas and he called me, and he said, "I'd like to offer you the principalship at Fairview." And I remember being in my car talking to him and when I got off the phone with him, I jumped out of my car and I just started jumping up and down and jumping up and down. And it was like the, the highlight of my life other than having my children. It was just a really emotional, just overwhelming emotion that I just couldn't imagine that this would [happen], because I never thought I would be a principal. Never, ever... I was the first college graduate in

my family... So, me getting my degree and becoming a teacher was a big thing in my family. And then when I became a principal, it was something that I probably never dreamed of as a kid.

Her excitement was coupled with the sobering challenges that lay ahead.

The superintendent informed Principal Lee about the significant challenges at Fairview. The superintendent said, “There were a lot of challenges as far as academics.” School culture and personnel issues also needed to be addressed. Her directive was to “come in and bridge the gap between, what should people should be doing versus what the expectation was around here.” She was to develop a long-term plan to implement changes within the school; “it was a marathon and not a sprint.” Unlike the other principals, Principal Lee did not feel pressure from her district to quickly turnaround the school. She felt supported throughout the entire process.

Fairview was an F school when she inherited it. With almost 600 students, Fairview was one of the lowest performing Title-1 elementary schools in the state, and was listed on the state’s chronically failing list. The school was a neighborhood school with a high population (97%) of students of color. It was a 100% free and reduced lunch school. The school had a majority faculty of color. Fairview was one of the schools in the district that offered English as a Second Language and had an established Pre-Kindergarten program. Fairview was a walk zone school, meaning the school did not operate buses and the students walked to and from the school each day.

Fairview was a one-story elementary school. Students’ artwork and bright streamers spanned the hallways. The school’s colors were striped atop the hallways throughout the building. Similarly, the cafeteria was white with the school’s colors stripped atop the room. The kindergarten hallway was lined with students’ pictures. The teachers decorated their classroom

doors with construction paper and 3D art that included flowers and banners. Bookcases and canvases of well-known children's books lined the walls. Students' work covered the remaining wall spaces in the library. The classrooms were painted different colors. Each teacher developed a bright color scheme to decorate and complement their classroom wall color. In the rear of the school, the school's garden was ripe for the picking of the peppers, onion, squash, and greens.

Since Principal Lee's appointment, Fairview had experienced an 11% increase in the number of students reading on grade level. In fact, from 2016-17 to 2017-18, the school experienced an almost 9% increase in the students reading on grade level. Furthermore, under Principal Lee's leadership, the school raised its grade from a F to a C. Fairview's and Principal Lee's marathon was not easy. She expressed, "It was tough, and I mean it was three years, four years out before we actually have seen a great result." Fairview experienced high teacher turnover, the implementation of a new instructional framework, and formation of a new leadership team. In 2017 year, the school improved and was removed from the state's chronically failing schools list. Despite the fact that Fairview continued to perform below the state and district averages, it experienced tremendous progress and growth and closed the gaps between student subgroups under Principal Lee's leadership. Supported by her district and superintendent, she was focused on making a difference in the lives of students.

She elaborated:

My biggest thing was I just didn't want to let the students here, the parents here, the teachers here, down. I wanted to be able to make an impact and create a school where kids felt safe, kids wanted to learn, teachers want to come to work, and parents were invited in and felt a part of the educational process. I just wanted it to be a real school.

Principal Lee used her skills and experiences as a school improvement specialist, the knowledge of accountability, curriculum, instruction, and leadership to improve her childhood school. This work was personal as she had a personal connection to the school and understood that “these kids’ lives [we]re at stake.”

Principal Claire

Principal Claire never intended to enter education. She entered education studies in her junior undergraduate year after concluding that law school was “not going to be for [her].” Upon graduation, she submitted her transcripts to the state department of education. Based on their assessment, she required a year of student teaching and one additional course for educator certification. After completing the course and the year of student teaching, she located a teaching position in a nearby school district.

She began her teaching career at Moore Elementary, which was the school that she would later lead. Now, 47-years-old, she had spent 24 years in education. She remained at Moore Elementary for five years before she became the assistant principal at another school.

Principal Claire transitioned to the assistant principalship early in her career after she had taught for 7 years. As a young assistant principal, Principal Claire was eager to become learned in curriculum and instruction. She immersed herself in her craft. She admitted, I “did a lot of research, reading books and mastering, perfecting my craft.” She made herself a resource for teachers to dispel their concerns about her young age and perceived inexperience. In her own words, “You couldn't tell me I didn't know what I was doing, because I was solid. That was what I was known for, that curriculum and instructional piece.” After working as an assistant principal for nine years, she received the appointment to her first principalship. When her school merged

with another elementary school, she declined to apply for leadership at the larger school.

Principal Claire returned “home” when she received her appointment to Moore Elementary.

She fondly recalled her appointment call:

I received the call from my supervisor, and he said, "Well, Mrs. Claire, I'm calling to let you know where you're going." I said "Okay." [He replied] "You're going to Moore Elementary". I said [made elated physical expression]. I was so excited, and he said, "Wow, I didn't expect to get that kind of response". I said, "Do you understand I'm going back home?"

Principal Claire welcomed the idea of returning home, even with Moore’s then challenges.

In her ninth year as a principal, and fourth year as principal of Moore Elementary, Principal Claire remained enthusiastic about her work and particularly her students. Moore Elementary had been one of the lowest performing schools in its state. From 2014-2017, the school received an F grade. In the five years before her leadership, the school performed lower than 99% of the elementary schools in the state. Under Principal Claire’s direction, the school was able to increase its performance and produce an 11% increase in the number of students reading on grade level from 2015-2018. Moore Elementary’s enrollment was 100% students of color and predominantly (95%) African American. 100% of the students were economically vulnerable with a 55% mobility rate, which meant that the school had a high population of transient students. The school had four buses, and most of the students were car riders or daycare riders. The realities of her students’ lives became apparent when Principal Claire described her student population.

She offered:

Life has hit though. Life is hard. Our people are in survival mode. So, I tell my staff all the time, the parents are sending us the best that they have. It's up to us to take these kids, and just give them all that we can and move them forward. So, it's not just addressing the instructional needs but the affective of needs as well.

Moore's students faced many of the challenges that are associated with economic vulnerability. Moore had a large group of homeless kids who resided at nearby hotels. The majority of her students were being raised by their grandparents.

Moore had a strong internal and external sense of community. Principal Claire noted relationships and partnerships with faith-based organization and local universities. The Churches provided materials and services for the school community. The churches provided school supplies, backpacks, and clothing. They also participated in school events by supplying carnival stations, medals, and awards. The churches even washed clothes for students' families. Moore's school community was another strength. The grandparents who resided near the school provided a watchful eye over the school and notified Principal Claire of any incidents near or surrounding the school. In many ways, the grandparents were the school's "security" and "police."

Moore's teaching staff consisted primarily of novice teachers. The majority of the teaching staff was of color. The white hallways were lined with student lockers and educational posters. The some of the school's main hallways had colorful murals. In the classroom hallways, students' work hung on strings was draped between the lockers. Each classroom and office had a sign affixed with the teachers' and school personnel's name in the school's colors. The classroom doors displayed prominent African Americans and paper art of Black children for Black history month. Upon entry, the gym's back wall had a mural of the school's name in its school colors prominently centered. The classrooms were white, but decorated with student

work, posters, letters, numbers, and bulletin boards. Some of the teachers had rugs colored rugs for the students to sit. In one hallway, the ceiling tiles had been painted with characters, books, and positive sayings. Outside the school, the faculty planted flowers encircling the trees and walkways.

One of Principal Claire's missions was to increase teacher capacity and efficacy. In a school with a large new teacher population, Principal Claire spent a significant amount of time supporting teacher growth.

She remarked:

When you have a lot of newness, you spend a lot of time, you know, just trying to coach them and make sure that they understand what to do, and that they're confident in doing it. That's a whole other piece that people sometimes forget because as an individual you also got to feel confident that you know that you can do it.

Teaching literacy remained a growth area for Moore Elementary as she believed teacher capacity precedes student performance gains. Addressing student outcomes at Moore Elementary required teachers to practice with their minds and hearts as the parents relied heavily on the school.

Principal Claire reported that she informed her faculty:

It's not that parents don't want to, they're in survival mode. They're trying to provide Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food, clothing and shelter. And when they send their child to school, they want us to educate... I will never, you know, say that it's not important to them. It's just that's where they are right now in their life, because life has happened. They're in survival mode. That's the reality.

The students' life circumstances in addition to the foundational support needed to aid a majority novice teacher faculty, presented contextual challenges to improving student achievement. In the face of these factors Principal Claire implemented a successful turnaround initiative.

Principal Mae

Principal Mae was a “passionate”, “consistent”, and “no-nonsense” leader. Principal Mae never considered a career in education during her early years in college. She was an English major with intentions of going to law school. She was in her middle twenties at the time and felt that she was “too old to be in school” and decided to change her major to education. She thought she should enter law school after she secured a job. Once she began her teaching internship, she knew education was where she was “designed to be.” Her career prior to the principalship, included teaching and instructional coaching in Title-1 middle schools. Unlike the other principals, Principal Mae's transition to the principalship was not her initial decision.

She explained:

I'm just going to be truthful with you. When I became an assistant principal, I saw the ins and outs of what's required of a principal. And at the time I had just given birth to a little girl, and I did not [want a principalship]. I saw the time and how it consumes you, and I did not want that to take me away from my family. So, when

I initially was asked to [lead] Rickards, I said, “no,” I actually turned it down.

Her hesitancy to take the position was alleviated by her husband's support. She said he encouraged her by saying, “You have been preparing yourself for this. Why not you?”

Coming to Rickards Elementary, Principal Mae understood that she was walking into a school with considerable challenges. The school was six points from an F grade. In the years

prior, the school's performance had continually declined; the school was performing below the district and state averages. She admitted that she experienced some self-doubt.

She shared:

I looked at it like, "Oh my God, I'm new. I don't know what to do." You know, because you're good at being a second person, but you never realize you've been preparing for it all along, when you do take the seat. So, once I took it. It took me a while to transfer my mindset, I believe from assistant principal to principal, but that took the longest.

Principal Mae was nervous about the principalship seat and all the position required. She was new, and her doubt was grounded in fear of failure: "I was nervous. It was more fear of failure than anything else. It was fear of failure, and that really is powerful. Fear really is powerful. Especially fear of failure, because that can either make or break that growth."

Rickards Elementary was a small Title-1 urban neighborhood school with almost 400 students and offered grades pre-kindergarten through fifth. Sixty-seven percent of its students were economically vulnerable. Its enrollment was 73% students of color: 37% African American, 24% Hispanic, 6% Multi-American, 5% Asian, and 1% Pacific Islander. Rickards had a truancy rate of 16%. Fifteen percent of the students had limited English acquisition, and 12% were diverse learners.

Rickards was a small one-story elementary school. The school had a diverse teaching staff with about 35% teachers of color. The classrooms were painted one of the school's colors. The schools' classrooms were brightly decorated with letters, math formulas, and student work. The teachers had rugs located at the front of the classroom under their boards. Many of the classrooms had the alphabet circling the tops of their classroom walls. Each classroom had an

American flag mounted to the right of the dry erase boards. Posters of lions and other reading animals decorated one teacher's classroom.

Rickards Elementary was designated a turnaround school after it received a D grade for two consecutive years. Under Principal Mae's leadership, Rickards Elementary earned an A in 2018, which was its first A since 2009. When Principal Mae received her appointment at Rickards, 12% of its students were reading at grade level. In the most recent assessment, Rickards' English Language Arts third grade performance had exceeded the district's average of 50% and the state's average of 57% of students who met the grade's standard. Its fourth grade English Language Arts performance was equivalent to the district's average of 49%, and its fifth grade English Language Arts performance exceeded the district and state averages with a 63% average.

Turning around Rickards was a cumbersome feat. Principal Mae's leadership philosophy enabled her to remain data centered. She described herself as an instructional and situational leader. Her approach to leadership was "democratic," and she tried to be a "facilitator" and a "mentor." She described herself as a leader who "says what needs to be said and does not sugarcoat [her] words." She kept a data binder with current assessment data for each student.

At the beginning of her tenure at Rickards, data was the center of her leadership approach, and relationships were not. She disclosed that initially she was fixated on the data and improving instruction. In her school, "the standard was the standard," meaning she held teachers to high expectations with little latitude. Principal Mae was not the "sensitive, touchy feely person." She described her initial "no-nonsense" approach: "Initially, I didn't care anything about you. I didn't care anything about your feelings. This is the expectation. This is what I expect to

see when I come back.” She often relied on her assistant principal to help gauge her tone when interacting and delivering directives to teachers.

Reflecting on her posture over time she said:

I know that because I just say it, and I don't sugarcoat it. I don't, I don't sugarcoat it at all. So, one of those things I've been trying to watch is how I say it. Because my assistant principal is that, she's this sensitive, touchy feely person. I'm not. So, I do ask her after every meeting we may have, how did I convey it? What was my tone? So, I'm trying to be more conscientious of my tone....

Because she understood that relationships were an essential component of motivating the teachers, Principal Mae reported that she developed relationships with the teachers, subsequently, she noticed that “a lot of things started to change.”

She later shared:

So, I stopped to learn who the people were in the building there. Their styles. Learning who they were. And once I did that to start developing relationships, that's when a lot of things started to change...I had to realize they just didn't know.

Principal Flowers

Principal Flowers entered education in graduate school, and her husband was employed in a nearby school district. Her husband's school district had a summer school vacancy, and she thought, “I'm not working a real job or anything, and I can teach a couple of kids.” Her stint in education “was not supposed to be long-term.” If anyone would have asked her about a career in education, she would have replied, “Oh, I can't deal with other people's kids.” She “had no

aspirations of teaching whatsoever.” During that summer position, she fell in love with teaching. Twenty years later, Principal Flowers found herself “sitting in a principalship.”

After nine years in the classroom, Principal Flowers aspired to have a more substantial effect on students. She surmised that she could affect students on a larger scale in an assistant principalship and obtained leadership certification. She was hired as an assistant principal in the following year. Prior to her position in school leadership, Principal Flowers taught at the middle and high school levels. She made an intentional decision to apply for an elementary school leadership position. The school she was appointed to, Lincoln Elementary, was in close proximity to her childhood neighborhood.

Principal Flowers “was expected to produce” at Lincoln. She felt the district’s expectation for her was to “come in and do something different.” She never felt an immense pressure to turn the school around immediately, but she was expected to make a difference. Principal Flowers had her own expectations for her role at Lincoln.

She elaborated:

I’m an overachiever, so whatever I step into, I want to do it and do it big. So, if it’s worth doing, it’s worth overdoing. I wanted to come off of the list and constantly move. But I also want to put Lincoln in the same category as some of the school choice schools. Even though we’re a neighborhood school and we have to receive everybody that lives in our attendance zone. I want our scores to be that of the schools wherein school choice you have to fill out an application to actually get into the school, just to show that my kids can do it.

Principal Flower’s expectations for herself were grounded in her care and intentions for her students. Her expectations produced internal pressures not only for turning her school around but

also for preparing her students for middle and high school. Speaking on the pressures she felt and the need to prepare students with a solid foundation,

She imparted:

I feel like I have a huge responsibility because I have 400 lives in my hands every day and that's the population of the building. I don't take it lightly because if they're not prepared here, then they don't have the foundation to be successful in middle and high school. And coming from high school and middle school, I know what it looks like when a kid is not going to finish. I know what it looks like when those gaps are there. So, coming to elementary school, I put a lot of pressure on myself to make sure that these kids have a strong foundation under my leadership.

The district heightened the pressure in the year after her appointment when several principals were demoted. Several principals lost their principalships because of student performance. If the scores remained stagnated, within three years the district removed the principals from the seat. Principal Flowers maintained that she did not internalize these external pressures, and she reasoned that if she “handle[d] business” then she did not have to worry.

Principal Flowers’ described her leadership style as “fluid, distributive, and unorthodox.” She reported that she treated the teachers as professionals and granted them the space to practice. She cultivated the school personnel’s leadership skills and talents. She described her leadership approach as egalitarian in terms of leading the people in the school.

In describing her leadership style, she detailed:

I believe in cultivating talent and talent doesn't come with titles.... It just depends on what your talents are. We pull on everybody's talents and everybody understands that at any given point, it might be your time to shine. I don't believe

in titles. Everybody gets respect from the custodians to the cafeteria workers to the principal. I don't deserve more respect than your colleague or the Custodian.

We're all professionals. We are all here to get a job done.

The job she referred to was growing students. Principal Flowers relied on the strengths of every adult in the building to teach and care for the students.

Lincoln's students came from an economically vulnerable neighborhood. Their students "are not coming with this set of skills that they're going to automatically be successful." In other words, her students did not come to school with the necessary skills to naturally succeed.

Principal Flowers said she advised her teachers:

Some students go to school with their buckets already full. So, it doesn't matter if you put a mediocre teacher in front of them because of what they're bringing from home. They're always going to perform. That's not our story. We have to put stuff in our students. We are the ones that make their buckets overflow. And we got to just understand that going into it.

Principal Flowers was cognizant of "how the students come to us." She had honest conversations with everyone who is employed within her school.

She told the faculty:

This is probably the hardest that you're going to work in education... they don't have parents that are able to provide the additional tutorial outside of school or that are spending hours with them, to help them with concepts they don't understand.

Teachers at Lincoln had to "teach the standard" and also "fill in gaps" and "do some extra." She maintained, "this isn't a nine to five job." In order to meet the needs of students, Principal

Flowers understood that her teachers, “work every minute [they]’re in the building, and then [they] have to prepare in order to come back in the building.”

Lincoln Elementary was one of the smaller schools in the district. Principal Flowers described the schools as a familial atmosphere where children are allowed to be children, protected, and shielded from adult problems. Lincoln was on the focus list and was identified as a Title-1 school with low-achieving subgroups, when Principal Flowers took the helm. The school had a 100% economically vulnerable student population. Lincoln had a predominantly student of color enrollment (99%). The majority of their students (97%) were African American. Lincoln offered grades Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade. Twenty percent of the school’s population were differently-abled. The teaching faculty was predominantly teachers of color.

Lincoln was located in an older building. Approaching the main entrance, Lincoln’s mascot was painted on the cement outside the double door entrance. The school was understatedly decorated. A poster of prominent African Americans was located in the left hallway. In the front office, the secretary’s desk was the focal point. The principal’s office was located in the rear. The nurse’s office was located to the right. The counter had a computer for parent and visitor sign-in. The white classrooms were decorated with educational posters and students’ work. The white boards displayed the lesson’s objectives and vocabulary word walls. Tall bookshelves lined the library walls and rows of shorter bookshelves were parallel to the entrance and exit. READ posters were scattered across the library. Compared to the other schools I observed in this study, Lincoln had minimal decorations.

Since 2011, the school’s performance on the state assessment had continually declined before Principal Flower’s appointment. Lincoln was an F school when Principal Flowers entered “the seat.” In the past three years, Lincoln turned around. Lincoln’s assessment scores increased,

and the state removed Lincoln from the focus list. The percentage of students reading on grade level increased by 9% under Principal Flower's leadership. The school's grade had increased from a F to a C.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide pertinent background information on the six Black women principals and the schools in which they led a successful school improvement initiative. The interview transcript and document data enabled me to construct the participants' profiles. The women's profiles contextualized their journeys to education. The profiles detailed the participants' careers in education, prior positions held, and reported leadership style. The profiles also provided contextual information about each school, including student demographic information, school assessment performance, and growth under the participants' leadership.

From the profiles, we learned that three of the participants had no intention of entering education, and the two other participants entered education for a convenient career for women with young children. Four of the participants had personal connections to their schools, of the three, one principal led her childhood school. Principal Mae, in particular, did not aspire to leadership; in contrast, she initially turned down the principalship. Furthermore, she was the only principal who reported that she was not focused on relationships. Broadly, the principals stated that they were student centered and made student-centered decisions.

Interestingly, five of the principals entered the principalship at their current schools. This report means that the districts appointed novice principals to schools with significant academic deficiencies. Each school had glaring academic issues when the principals began. All of the principals reported a sense of urgency to improve their schools. Four of the five principals shared

that they experienced pressure to improve their schools; one of the four felt internal pressure as she witnessed the demotion of several other principals whose schools remained stagnated.

The respective states identified the schools as some of its lowest-performing schools. The schools were Title-1 schools, and the schools' student demographics consisted of high percentages of students of color and economically vulnerable students. Under the principals' leadership, the schools experienced academic gains despite the present challenges. The next chapter is the presentation of findings that explores the perspectives of these leaders.

CHAPTER V

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter is the presentation of findings from this multiple case study. The themes that were derived from the participant interviews present answers to the research questions: 1) How do successful Black women principals who have led a school turnaround initiative understand and describe how their leadership has changed over time? 2) What characteristics, actions, and strategies do Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround initiative believe are the critical components for leadership for sustained school improvement?

Five African American women principals who have led successful school turnaround initiatives participated in two one-hour interviews. These principal interviews, along with their schools' student assessment scores and school improvement plans were collected as data. The principals' interviews were transcribed and analyzed in order to understand their perspectives. Documents provided background and demographic information about the schools and a historical account of the schools' student performance. The documents served as secondary data to corroborate the interviews. Data analysis consisted of crafting rich descriptions of the context of each case and findings. The data were examined to explore, describe, and interpret the perceptions and practices of Black women principals. These principals were selected as they met the criteria for the study. Each principal's school was either on the focus or turnaround list or scored in the lowest 5% of the district's schools on the yearly assessment examination. The principals and their schools were assigned pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality. The following themes emerged from data analysis: (a) Stepping Backwards to

Move Forward: Addressing the School Context and Learning Environment, (b) Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process, (c) Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges, (d) Approaching with a Learning Posture, (e) Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations, (f) Doing Whatever it Takes: Advocate for Your School's Needs and Believe in Midcourse Corrections, (g) Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support. The themes are organized and explicated by the research questions.

How the Principals' Leadership Changed Over Time

Theme One: Stepping Backwards to Move Forward: Addressing the School Context and Learning Environment

The first theme concentrated on the descriptions and perspectives of Black women principals concerning how they altered their leadership strategies based on the context of their schools when appointed. The principals in the study began with the goal of rapidly improving their schools. They entered the school with the strategy of addressing the data; immediately, they learned that their schools had other imperative prerequisites to address. When Principal Flowers stepped into the leadership position, she focused on moving the school. She soon learned that in order to improve Lincoln, she had to prioritize her improvement strategy.

She stated:

What I thought my main priority was to come in and move scores. So, when we came in and my assistant principal, I brought her with me. So, we came in the school, I thought that we were coming in and we were putting in assessment data up and we were ready to go... And the first few days of free planning, I said, "I have completely missed the mark. They [the teachers] aren't with me. They don't

understand what I'm talking about." So, the focus had to change from, we're about to move this school and score by doing this, this, and the other with students, to What is the culture of the building? What is the climate of the building? So, I had to come away from what I thought was the issue and address what actually was the issue at the time. And that was creating a culture and a climate that people want it to work in.

Principal Flowers' statement corresponded with the statements of other participants in the study. All of the principals detailed how they began their jobs focused on and regarded the achievement data as the means to immediately begin their initiatives. The excerpt from Principal Flowers' interview describes her process to diagnose the underlying teaching and learning issues. She reassessed her approach based on the teachers' abilities.

Similarly, in Principal Mae's second interview, she indicated:

My first year was a year of, change. Simply because I'm new and when I came in, I came in with the mindset I got to change things and I knew academically I had to change things. Developing relationships with not the first thing on my agenda. The first thing on my agenda was to move the school...So, I came in with the mindset I need to change. I mean I was in their classrooms. I was in their classrooms daily, which is something that they were not used to having. When I say daily, I was in their daily just looking at instruction, looking at strictly instruction. So, they were receiving notes from me from almost every day and what I was doing. For a lot of them, I was tearing them down instead of really building him up. So, I had to step back.

The principals' haste to initiate the improvement process contributed to their narrowed focus on data and instruction. All of the principals were compelled to step back and learn more about the contextual factors that influenced the schools' learning environments. The principals realized that improving instruction involved prerequisite process steps. The teachers required additional coaching and learning to become data centered. The teachers in Principal Flowers' school did not know how to analyze data or make data-informed decisions. Principal Mae's initial approach was based on the notion that the teachers were not effectively instructing, hence the constant supervision. She, likewise, had to reassess her approach. She learned the importance of developing relationships with teachers as a strategy to affect instruction. In particular, the principals noted that one of the contributing factors that impacted teaching and learning was the fact that their schools were behind on many district initiatives.

Dr. Minard recounted:

I gleaned a lot on the things from working at, one of the highest performing schools in the district... And so, some of the things that I knew that other schools were doing or that that school was doing because they had in place were things that we were not doing here. And they were actually, some of them are district initiatives, but they had never been started at this school... So, I started thinking about all the things that they were doing at my former school and what would help make us successful. And then so I implemented those things here.

All of the principals communicated that their schools were behind on district initiatives. Moreover, the teachers were not current on broadly accepted practices, such as incorporating data into instruction. The principals incorporated effective practices from their former schools.

This prior knowledge of effective instructional practices informed their instructional leadership in their current schools.

Principal Flowers had a similar discovery:

What we learned is that Lincoln had been kept almost outside of all of the change that was going on inside of the district. So when we got here, there were certain county initiatives that were going on that I would mention, let's say math talks and I would mention them in a meeting and my teachers did not know what I was talking about and I'm just kind of like, "Now, that's been a county initiative for the last three years. What is really going on?" But then I realized that the school was so closed up [not up to date on district initiatives] that they did miss a lot of things that were going on, a lot of growth, a lot of new strategies that were going on in the district because they were so closed to themselves.

Such statements from Principal Flowers and Dr. Minard illuminate a larger problem that was occurring in these schools. Before the principals held the seats, the schools were behind on the current educational practices in their districts. The principals perceived this situation as a factor that contributed to the schools' previous lower performance. The closed environment indicated that teachers were not effectively prepared to improve instruction. This lack of teacher development precipitated a continual decline in student achievement. Thus, the principals had to rapidly update the teachers on the districts' effective instructional initiatives and practices in order to initiate student growth.

Theme Two: Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process

Changing School Climate and Culture

Once the principal held a firm understanding of the context of their schools, they proceeded to develop improvement strategies to turn the schools around. Ultimately, the principals initially contended with their school cultures. The literature on school turnaround indicated that school climate and culture are factors that influence the learning environment (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). The principals believed that changing school climate and culture was a prerequisite for affecting teaching and learning. One of the reoccurring strategies that principals implemented to affect the schools' climates and cultures was to open the school to parents. All of the principals implemented plans to welcome parents into the school buildings. They perceived parental involvement as an essential component for initiating changes toward improvement.

With initially 2000 students, Dr. Minard identified parental absence as troublesome:

When I got here though, we had 2000 kids, right. I had no parents in my parent center, like none. I know EVERYBODY'S not working. I said okay, I need to figure out a way to get my parents in the building... It's important to create a space where teachers want to be here, where students want to come, and parents want to bring their kids.

The principals understood that many of the parents may have had negative associations with schools.

Principal Flowers stated:

I think a lot of our parents had bad experiences when they were in school. So, the whole school thing is already hands-off and the whole going to the principal's office thing is just like, oh, that's when you get in trouble.

Parental involvement.

Each of the principals sought to increase parental involvement by welcoming the parents into the schools and establishing positive associations with their schools. The principals sought various methods to reach out to parents. In particular, Principal Claire's approach was to visit the neighborhood to reach the parents. Principal Claire shared:

I rode every bus, and when the bus stopped, I would get off and say, "Hi, I'm Mrs. Claire, the principal. We welcome you. Come to the school." I've been in car riders, "Hi, I'm Mrs. Claire, blah, blah, blah, boom. Come in."

Principal Claire began an initiative to increase parental involvement at her school. She instituted a grandparent support group. The group met bimonthly for a luncheon to support the grandparents in helping their grandchildren to grow academically. Her school also organized a male initiative for fathers or significant males in the children's lives to come and spend time with their child at the school on a monthly basis. She believed that granting the men a setting to talk about their issues and concerns would foster school support. The principals felt that parental presence and involvement played a critical role in opening the school climate and culture.

Principal Flowers affirmed:

The culture and climate piece had to extend to the parents as well. They have to be, they have to feel welcome and a part of the school. They have to, no matter how rough around the edges they are, they have to believe that the school is

someplace that they can go and be heard because their most prized possessions are here at the school.

Addressing teacher mindset and setting high expectations.

Principals also considered changing teacher mindset and maintaining high expectations as components of changing school culture and climate and initiating increases in student achievement. Teachers held deficit mentalities regarding the students and their abilities. Principal Mae illustrated this mindset by stating, ““When I first got here, the first thing they said, a lot of the teachers, "It's the kids", and so I said, “Kids only do what you teach them, so it can't be the kids.” Essentially, Principal Mae was conveying the deficit mentality that the teachers held towards their students. One of the most challenging parts about turning their schools around was the teachers’ mindsets. Dr. Minard acknowledged:

Most challenging was people's attitudes. They believe that because our kids were, a second language learners, because 97% of them are free or reduced lunch, they believed that the kids couldn't do it. It was almost like they were at a volunteer camp or mission camp and they weren't getting paid to do the work. And that they didn't have to teach the kids to standard. They just had to teach the kid. Even if they were in fourth grade, they wanted to teach kids, way lower. They had really low expectations for the kids could do.

The principals felt that the former administrator did not expect much of teachers. Dr. Minard assessed that teachers’ instruction was influenced by a deficit mindset toward students and the lack of accountability from the previous leader. Her approach to initiating improvement incorporated the enforcement of higher expectations for teachers and disrupting the negative discourse about student abilities.

Principal Lee also expressed the complexity of changing the teachers' mindsets:

When I first got here, it was a long road to change adult mindset, expectations for students, parents' perceptions about what goes on at school. So, all of those things had to come together, and it was a bit of a process.

Changing mindsets.

Changing staff members' mindsets was one of the hardest challenges that the principals faced as the teachers had become comfortable with the status quo. Teachers were not teaching the standards and criticized the students for low performance. The principals felt that the expectations for teachers needed to increase in order for the school to move. In particular, Dr. Minard discussed how teachers resisted the new expectations.

Dr. Minard stated:

Changing a person's mindset, of what can be done and mmm. It's hard, you know, their willingness to do it because see, they didn't know that they weren't performing well, in their mind, it was too much work. And so, and it was too much accountability, and we were too present. And so that was probably the hardest part. Because you asked me what was the hardest part about changing the school? It was the resistance from the staff. [They thought] that my expectations were too high.

Dr. Minard was the only principal who reported an organized effort to undermine her work. She experienced what she felt was obstructionist forces from inside her building.

She further added:

There were a lot of people in this school when I first started [that were] hired by the former principal, and they were angry, and they did everything I think in their

power to discourage the work that I was doing. I think they thought if they complained enough, I would be gone. If they complained enough about me, then they wouldn't have to do it. And so, it was hard.

Some of the principals endured teacher resistance. All of the principals experienced initial teacher turnover when they took the seat. Dr. Minard indicated that the resistance that she experienced from staff members “was hard” to overcome. She reported that she relied on her personal support at home and faith to cope with this challenge.

She shared:

But it was hard. It was, yeah. It was hard, and if I had not had a great support system at home...with my family or my parents, and if I had not had the faith in God to trust, mmm. I wouldn't have made it. I had to, you know, pray every day. Most days I went home completely discouraged and tapped out.

Dr. Minard's response demonstrated what she perceived as an exasperating time period in which she relied on her family and faith for encouragement. Further, her answer suggested that she experienced pressures from inside her building while simultaneously managing external pressures to improve the school.

Getting the right people on the bus.

Lower performing schools experience higher teacher turnover than persistently high-performing schools (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). When teachers were not willing to conform to the new expectations and standards, the principals discussed having to weed out obstructive teachers. Principal Lee discussed:

Getting a staff that was highly effective, highly qualified and ensuring that everybody on board had the same vision, that idea and, and believed in what our

district has for us was very significant. From where I started...I only have one, two, three, maybe three or four teachers that I started with originally. And I think that getting an effective and highly qualified teachers was crucial.

Through Principal Lee's process of establishing a highly effective teaching force, she encountered high teacher turnover. The principals' efforts to increase teacher effectiveness was essential for initiating improvements. Teachers who were resistant to the new expectations were coached out of the building or elected to leave.

Principal Mae shared a similar experience:

My getting here, my first year was a year of, change. Simply because I'm new and when I came in, I came in with the mind set and I got to change things and I knew academically I had to change things. So as a result of that, the people that were already here, were already the ones who left. They were already on the fence anyway. And so, I did not win them over, they actually ended up leaving, leaving my first year. I actually lost five teachers.

Similar to Principals Lee and Mae, Principal Flowers discussed the process of getting the "right people sitting in the right seats on the bus in order for the bus to move." She spoke about her position towards teacher turnover and transfers, and the process of arriving to where she is now, with 100% retention.

Principal Flowers added:

I am a product of the people that have trained me, and I do have the gift of goodbye. Just because we have to part does not mean that you're a bad person or it doesn't mean that I'm a bad person. It just might mean that my leadership style does not work for you or it does not inspire you to flourish... I've learned that

once that expectation is put on you, then you choose not to live up to it or you don't agree with it, then you choose to leave and go somewhere else. That has happened. Yeah, several, several times. But this past year we had a hundred percent retention rate. So, nobody left.

Principal Flowers' excerpt shows a transformation from then to now. When initiating the improvement strategies, teacher turnover occurred, as the practices and expectations were implemented, and she has experienced success in retaining 100% of the teachers. Additionally, this transformation suggests that Principal Flowers had retained a staff that she believed was acceptable, hence the lack of non-renewals, teachers whose contracts were not renewed for the following year.

Raising teacher expectations.

Raising the expectations of teachers was another initiative that the principals implemented to begin the improvement process. Each principal detailed their expectations for teachers. Overall, teachers were expected to come to work with a positive attitude, follow the instructional framework, teach to the standard, and maintain current data on each of their students.

Teachers had many growth areas to address. This process required a lot of progress monitoring. Principals described the level of support that they had to provide teachers with and conversations with teachers who were not meeting the expectations. Principal Flowers spoke about her process of guiding and encouraging teachers who were struggling to meet the expectation.

She offered:

It requires a lot of support because some of the times they don't understand that they possessed the ability. Some of the time they get in their own way. Like it's not that difficult. "You're overthinking, come back, bring it back. This is what we're going to do, this is what we want, and I would just have to figure out how to do it." So, there's a lot of support that's required and a lot of honest conversations when people aren't making the mark because sometimes people believe that they're making the mark, but they're still missing it. And you have to have the conversation and say, "I know you're trying your hardest, but I need you to try to the left just a tad to hit the goal."

Teachers required consistent coaching throughout the improvement process.

Having difficult conversations.

Having difficult conversations was a strategy for the principals to aid teachers in meeting the new expectations. The principals understood that if teachers were not encouraged to meet higher expectations, the school and students would continue to decline.

Establishing learning communities.

Professional development and learning communities were additional strategies that the principals used to initiate improvement. Professional learning communities provide teachers with continuing learning in order to advance their professional knowledge and support teaching and learning in the classroom. Principals initially used professional development to tackle areas of concern in their buildings. Professional development became frequent opportunities for teachers to develop. Each of the principals spoke at length about their use of professional learning communities. Principal Mae discussed how she employed professional development opportunities frequently.

She stated:

When we were doing implementations, we would always have professional development around it. And we would do PDs all the time, to make sure if we say we're going to do this now, let's plan it out. What does this, what does is this PD going to look like? Then how are we going to monitor it? And there's another professional development for that. So we constantly have professional development within school. My first two years I owed the district money because I constantly used in house professional development to build those teachers.

This comment exemplified principals' work to develop teachers' skills through professional learning opportunities. Principals utilized in-school and district level professional development in order to increase teachers' capacity. The principals felt that if they invested in developing teachers, their efforts would result in improvement of student achievement.

Theme Three: Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges

Addressing Student Needs.

The third theme focused on the persistent challenges that the leaders confronted. As the schools experienced growth through the turnaround process, the schools continued to grapple with persistent challenges. Studies on turnaround schools aligned with the principals' encounters (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Pappano, 2010). The principals' leadership strategies had to shift; and when they were able to implement initiatives to affect the facets they could change, they began to respond to persistent challenges. The principals expressed that serving economically vulnerable and transient student populations was a persistent challenge as their students come to them with 'gaps.' Principal Flowers described

frequent discussions with her teachers to help them understand their students' contexts and how they had to address all of the students' needs.

She shared:

I am honest with all of the people that come to Lincoln and the teachers that work at Lincoln. "This is probably the hardest that you're going to work in education because your kids are not coming with this set of skills that they're going to automatically be successful. They don't have parents that are able to provide the additional tutorial outside of school or that are spending hours with them, to help them with concepts that they don't understand. That's not the student that we serve. That becomes our job. So yes, you're going to cover the standard, but you're also going to have to fill in holes and you're going to have to fill in gaps and you're going to have to do some extra."

All of the principals discussed the gaps that their students presented at school. The context of the students' socioeconomic statuses presented circumstances that influenced the teachers' expectations. The principals were conscious of the "extra" work that their teachers would have to do to serve their student populations. Teachers in the improvement context have to respond to unique student needs. The extra work in these contexts became the expectations for effectiveness and the school. Moreover, Principal Lee expressed the apparent gaps that the students had:

So, our kids come with bits of gaps in academics... They're coming significantly behind their peers in different demographics because they don't have the vocabulary, they don't have the books in the home. They don't have, sometimes a sustained or stable environment where learning is enforced, or education is a priority or ingrained in them before they get here. So, we do a lot of catch up. And

so obviously that does impact us K-5, because we're always having to play catch up with them. And so that gap does significantly impact this achievement wise.

This account highlights the challenges that the teachers faced in serving their students. Evident in the principals' narratives were the reoccurring mentioning of student gaps, and the need for teachers to exert "some extra" effort as a response to these gaps. The principals reported their responsibility to address both student and teacher learning gaps.

Tackling transient student populations.

Three of the principals shared that their schools still faced the challenge of transient students. The high population of transient students influenced the principals' abilities to increase student performance. The principals discussed the challenges of increasing student achievement for students who were not enrolled for the entire year. Principal Lee spoke about the difficulty that her school faced in tracking students who moved a lot. She spoke about the frustrations that her teachers may have experienced in working so hard to grow students that they "don't keep them long enough for [them] to see the fruit of [their] labor." Essentially, her remarks alluded to challenges that the teachers contended with in assessing their own and students' growth. In describing the same challenge in her school, Principal Claire stated:

Well the challenge with tracking the data is because our community is so transient. I know what the third-grade class coming to fourth. We started off the year, not even with all of the kids. And so that's what kind of crushed the data.

The principals' responses further revealed the detrimental influence that transient populations can have on school turnaround success. Students who enroll or leave mid-year impacted both teacher assessment and student growth assessment.

Continuing to increase teacher capacity.

Continuing to address and increase teacher capacity continued to be a working goal of the principals. Although the principals initially sought to increase teacher capacity, teachers in some of their schools were still struggling with instruction. The principals' responses revealed that instruction remained a significant challenge that required ongoing development.

Principal Mae offered:

Now [our] weaknesses area, where we are still struggling with, [is] how to do small group instruction. It's the targeted small group instruction, [also] having multiple pieces data and knowing what that data means. Some [teachers] take the extra step [with the data]. Some do not.

Other aspects of teacher development presented themselves in Moore Elementary. Principal Claire in particular, shared how her school took a major hit when she lost teachers in third, fourth, and fifth grades. She had long-term substitute teachers in two of her testing grades. In her response, she alluded to the impact that teachers have on student achievement. In a later statement, she also alluded to the impact of having alternatively certified teachers who come to the classroom with little to no instructional knowledge.

She imparted:

When you have staff members that their background is not education, building their capacity is going to be totally different then the person who went through an education program. If you're coming from marketing or psychology or whatever the other field is and you haven't had just at least those basic education courses, you're not going to have an instructional tool bowl. Your mindset may not think along those lines. So, you've got the equipment them with that.

Principal Claire continued to simultaneously address the needs of alternatively certified teachers and long-term substitutes. Principal Mae, likewise, developed a strategy, which continued to develop teacher capacity. Her strategy to build teacher capacity and the learning environment was to participate in all of the training the teachers received. For her, if she participated in training, she was aware of the expectations and was able to coach teachers through the processes. Describing her approach, she said:

I have attended all of the training with the teachers because I wanted to hear and see what they are receiving. We would all attend together, and we would sit there and plan. What does this look like in our building? How are we going to roll this out? So, I've always been a part of those conversations and those trainings. So that's how we've been able to build those learning environments because we're looking at it, all of us are looking at it together and I will pull different types of resources needed.

This example underscored the principals' efforts to improve their teachers. Principal Claire reported that her school had a high population of novice and alternatively certified teachers. All of the principals shared that their teachers required continual professional development to meet their expectations. This conundrum influenced how the principals planned to continue their improvement strategies. Broadly, each of the principals in this study recognized the importance of having effective teachers in their classrooms. Endlessly, their leadership strategies and practices evolved to sustain increases in student achievement.

Critical Characteristics and Practices for School Improvement

Theme Four: Approaching with a Learning Posture

Reflecting on their experiences in turning around low-performing schools, the principals offered their perspectives on the characteristics of successful school improvement. The principals who entered their schools with change in mind believed that leaders transitioning to the seat in school improvement context should have a learning posture. Being knowledgeable about the schools that they were leading was a key characteristic of the principals in their efforts to improve their students' achievement. Principal Flowers shared her perspective on this learning posture, commenting:

You have to know what it is that you are leading. And in order to do that, you actually have to close your mouth sometimes and see what it is that you have going on. Because this situation might be different than your last situation. So you can't take all of the results in the rules from your last situation and just put them on your new situation as if some of the variables aren't different.

A part of the learning posture is to listen to your people. Principal Claire described her approach to listening to her people. She believed listening to the teachers and “giving teacher a voice” made the difference in her school. She explained:

What has made the difference I would think is just giving teachers a voice. Listening to them. When I first got there, I met with every staff member individually and I don't remember if I asked two or three questions, What do you expect from the principal? What did they see were some challenges in the school? What were some things that they saw as a strength? I think that's what I asked... And so I kind of looked at that and compiled it and said, okay, let me see how can

I help in this way? Because there were some glaring things throughout and the culture and climate was a really big piece. I wanted to address that first because everybody in some form or fashion talked about the culture and climate of the school.

The principals ascertained the challenges in their buildings by stepping back and listening to the staff members. They believed that teachers offered essential information about the practices and processes in the building. To this end, the principals' experiences and thoughts focused on teachers as a resource for improving the school. Moreover, their responses situated a learning posture as a strategy for school improvement.

Developing an effective leadership team.

Developing an effective leadership team based upon the principal's assessment of faculty and staff was another strategy for school improvement. The principals spoke in-depth about their leadership team's role in aiding student achievement. Principal Flowers shared how she "has to figure out how to build a team and come together to make the load a little lighter, even though they work even harder." The principals' leadership teams were described to participate in data analysis, monitor teachers' lesson plans, notify the principals of problems, contribute to vision planning, participate in teacher interviews, develop school improvement plans, and plan events and activities for the schools' staffs. Principal Claire's leadership team was her "backbone." They "keep [her] in line, and [they] lean on each other." She described how they meet to "do all the grunt work before it gets to the teachers." Her leadership team shared data analysis and data talk responsibilities.

When commenting on the necessities of a principal who is seeking to improve their school, Principal Claire declared:

I think definitely having a strong leadership team. Because a man on an island approach to make decisions probably does not work. It certainly would not work for me. I think you need to build a team that can support the bigger, the mission of the school.

Establishing relationships.

Establishing relationships with the school communities was another action and strategy that the principals felt was essential for leaders who were seeking to improve their schools. The principals believed that relationships with school stakeholders inside and outside the building were necessary for learning about the school's environment and advance the school. Each principal established relationships with her school faculty, staff, parents, and community organizations. Principals considered relationship development to be a strategy that would help the school by providing resources and services for the schools. Principal Lee's response summated the principals' overall position.

Principal Lee stated:

Develop relationships, not only with the parent. I mean the teachers. It's the teachers, the parents, the students, even your community. Some of your faith are, I do have a great faith-based partner. Developing relationships with them and how they can serve the school. Making sure parents are always aware of the school, the status of the school, and ways they can help improve it.

Relationships were valuable tools for school improvement. Leaders worked to establish and maintain relationships with people and organizations. Relationships fostered partnerships to facilitate the leaders' improvement goals. The critical leadership practices for school improvement were identified by the leaders based on their own experiences in the seat. The

practices detailed in the findings illustrated strategies that the principals found effective in their buildings.

Theme Five: Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations

In general, the principals in this study felt that leadership toward improving student achievement demanded leaders who knew their data, demanded accountability, and monitored the expectations of fidelity. When asked about the critical strategies for leaders in a turnaround context, Principal Lee said “Know the data. Be visible. Be the lead learner.” She later added, “You must demand accountability.” Principal Lee’s comment focused on the leader’s role as the lead learner in the building and positioned school data as a fundamental aspect of improving the school. Moreover, she elaborated on the importance of all student data. She said, “You have to be data driven. and what that means, various, it’s not only academics. You have to look at the whole child. When I say looking at data, that’s the whole child. Attendance, everything.” Likewise, Principal Claire, reiterated this thought, “I think being the lead learner and making data driven decisions, I think data is critical to, success or failure in school.”

Establishing an instructional framework was noted as a strategy of leaders who have led a successful improvement initiative. When speaking on what she believed were her successful strategies Principal Mae stated:

Creating an alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment. Making sure that what teachers are teaching is aligned to the curriculum is being taught. What's being aligned is being assessed, and what they're doing in class is going to help them get to a level of mastery for the students.

As previously mentioned, Dr. Minard discussed how her teachers were not teaching students the standard. They were teaching the students far below the standard. These principals highlighted their work in establishing an instructional framework that supported growths in students' learning. Monitoring teachers' fidelity to the instructional framework was considered to be another useful strategy which would ensure that teachers were implementing the instructional framework with consistency. Principal Mae spoke on the importance on monitoring, she shared:

Definitely monitoring. Setting the framework and setting the framework for the expectations and then monitoring those expectations. I think that you have to monitor, you know, that thing that they say, you have to inspect what you expect.

Principal Claire's' response similarly supports this notion:

Getting into those classrooms as much as you can. Keeping instruction at the forefront and not getting bogged down with the operational things that occur in the building.

Remaining goal oriented meant keeping students and student learning at the forefront. The principals frequently supervised instruction to monitor teachers' fidelity to the instructional framework and assess teacher growth. Getting into classrooms was also their strategy to maintain high expectations and demand accountability from teachers.

Theme Six: Doing Whatever it Takes: Advocate for Your School's Needs and Believe in Midcourse Corrections

One of the issues that the principals brought forth was the "same shoe fits all" district approach to school turnaround. These principals were knowledgeable about the needs of their schools and were adamant about advocating for their schools' specific needs. Some of the districts' initiatives were not effective in their buildings. When this situation occurred, they had

to deviate from the districts' plans and find support that was suited for their buildings. When talking about their practices and strategies for improvement, the principals explained their decisions to deviate from their districts' initiatives. Principal Claire shared;

The most challenging process has been several districts initiatives but trying to build capacity in teachers to even carry out one initiative of the district. So, if you're getting all of this, and we might be right here, that's a challenge because I'm expected to implement all of that. But if they aren't ready for all of that, then we're not. I don't want to be a compliant person. And so sometimes we do things out of compliance

Principal Mae expressed how she received permission to deviate from a district implementation since it was ineffective in her building. She detailed:

Now, I didn't do everything, all of the district curriculum. I didn't. I deviated from a lot of it because I saw the pieces that weren't working, and I changed them. But I had that flexibility from my boss, and she saw that data and it was working and that improvement was coming as a result of it. So, she allowed me to do a lot of things that I did in my building. And with that being said, that's how we were able my first year to move from to six points, from an F to a B, that was my first year. But that was constantly looking at data. Constant remediation. It was a constant. I mean when I say constant, we were looking at data every week.

Apart from doing whatever it takes to advance the school required that the principals learn to implement midcourse corrections, which the principals believed in. They felt that the context of turnaround did not present them much time, and they refused to "go down with a sinking ship." The principals practiced midcourse corrections often. They maintained that ineffective plans

needed to cease immediately in order to prevent the school from continually declining. Principal Flowers offered, "I am a very out of the box thinker. I don't necessarily stick to the status quo and I believe in change. If something's not working, we are changing it as soon as possible." Moreover, Principal Mae explained the urgency that she felt and how she handled midcourse corrections when she became the leader:

I didn't know where to start. I didn't. When I looked at the reading scores, they were something like 12 percent. The math was better. But from their data trends they had been in a constant decline. So, everybody was a priority. All content was a priority. My first year, I think I came in everyday with a plan. If it wasn't working, I came in with another plan every morning, and I know the teachers. The teacher, I know, I probably stressed them out. Because if I saw that it wasn't working, I would not let it continue. If I felt wasn't working, it's not working. We've got to change, we have to change something, it's not working. So I would put plans in place from day one I would put things in place and if it wasn't working, I would change it.

Principal Mae explained her strategy of moving teaching around to suit the teachers' specific talents:

I switched teachers around. Moving, shifting teachers. And that has to be something principals have to be willing to want to do. Switch teachers and sometimes, or you know, you look at their strength you try to shift them to where their strengths are. I try not to look at it from a such a negative. But I spoke to, you know, "these are your strengths, and this is what I feel you would be best." And I put my strongest teachers in my intermediate grades. Not only just the

strongest, but the ones who were just willing to learn that, that, that teachable mentality where you want kids to be the best, and you want to do things to make sure kids are successful.

Principals Flowers' and Claire's narratives exemplified the overall sentiment that these leaders felt towards leadership for school improvement. They maintained that leaders in the turnaround context looking to improve their students' achievement had to advocate for their school, even if that meant asking for permission to deviate from district initiatives. Likewise, the principals believed that leaders needed to be able to correct midcourse in order to keep from being "a leader that will go down with a sinking ship."

Critical Practices for Sustaining Increases in Achievement

Theme Seven: Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support

All of the principals were still working to improve their students' achievement. The principals' goals were to sustain increases in their achievement. Although each of the schools experienced success since the principals' appointments, there was still work for each principal to accomplish. When probed about practices to sustain the positive trajectory in student achievement, all of the principals discussed continuing the practices that they had in place. When asked about how she planned to sustain the improvements that her school has achieved, Principal Flowers stated:

Work, work, work, work, work. We understand that the higher we go, the harder we'd have to work because you fight to get to your goal, but you have to fight to maintain your goal or you're going to fall back to where you started. So, it's a constant fight and because we're always pushing forward, we're fighting even harder... So the teachers understand that and we just have to work hard to achieve

the goal. So, they get it, and not just the teachers, the faculty and staff, my para professionals. Everybody's on board that's just what we do. So, like I said, it has to do with the culture and the climate of the building. If you come here, you're going to work. There are no days off. Everybody works there...Everybody has to work.

Principal Claire maintained the same position. Her strategy for sustaining success was to continue with the practices she established. When prompted with the same question about sustaining the success, she said:

Keeping the same things that we had in place from last year and this year. And from here on.

Principal Lee echoed their statements:

I think that sustaining that instructional practices initiatives that we've put in place, and never going away from those things, and those being constant should attain us the same results or at least the same or similar results.

The principals' perspectives were consistent. They were like-minded in believing that the practices that they implemented to initiate the success could produce further increases in student achievement.

Continuing to motivate teachers was another practice that these leaders believed would promote sustained increases. The principals accepted that continuing to motivate teachers would promote a positive outlook and a commitment towards improving students. Principal Lee discussed how she used a positive solution-focused approach to motivating teachers in the improvement context. Principal Mae commented:

I mean, you just being honest, but you have a plan to address it. You don't just give, "this is the problem." You start with the solution. This is it, but this is the problem, and this is how we're going to address it. And I always try, I don't focus on the negatives and I refuse to allow teachers to focus on the negatives. If they give me a negative, I'm going to turn that negative into a positive, because there's always a brighter side to everything regardless.

Not allowing teachers to focus on the negatives and presenting them with a solution “keeps the morale and culture up in your building, which also aids student performance.” Principal Lee, used student growth as a means of encouraging teachers who may be discouraged.

She shared her approach:

I guess the biggest thing when I talk to teachers and we look at kids because we, you know, we look at data weekly, and when we see where a child has been the year before, I tell them, you know, small incremental gains, is just as good as somebody who can score distinguished. Because if you can move a child and grow from, you know, the beginning of the year to the end and you can see that progress and it'll show, then that's all you can ask for as support. You know, the teacher because you've done your job. It's, it's tough because sometimes kids may come in, you know, with from challenges academically and they're not on grade level. And they feel might not be on grade level by the end of the year, but if you can show growth, I said you did your job. That that's the part of teaching is just to have that reward.

The leaders reported that they planned to continue to motivate teachers throughout the improvement process. They understood that many of their students had not reached proficiency

and that teachers could have been discouraged. Continued motivation was also considered a strategy the principals employed to motivate and encourage teachers through bouts of uncertainty.

The final strategy for sustaining success was continuing to utilize support staff. The principals were prepared to utilize their support staff. When asked about how she strategized to continue success, Principal Claire noted:

I have EIP¹ teachers in my building now, so they're able to help with moving our low 25% children...Second semester we tried to push those kids over that we think can become proficient. Trying to increase the number of kids in there. So I had them working with them, those kids as well as some other, another group of children, to kind of help move and push them forward. So, my thing was being more strategic than I was last year with my support staff and helping close the gap with those kids and moving them forward. That was my plan. That she had to kind of get us over.

Principal Mae additionally had plans to use coaches next year to support teachers and increase the teacher and student growth:

This year I have placed in my budget for a math coach because that is where I need additional support because a lot of teachers still struggle with, especially my K, one, two, teaching math and understanding how to unpack those standards to those students... So I've been strategizing on how to maintain that level of professional support that we've had in the building just in case we do get new teachers. Even if I put somebody new there, I feel as long as I have somebody

¹ Early Intervention Program is designed to target students at risk of not performing at their grade level.

who is teachable. They will never be by themselves. I will always make sure that level of support is there. So that, because what's always at the front of my brain is student achievement and that means having that necessary support for those teachers. So that's where I am.

Data from this case study explored and described the perceptions and practices of Black women principals who have led a successful school improvement effort. The findings were categorized in seven themes: (a) Stepping Backwards to Move Forward: Addressing the School Context and Learning Environment, (b) Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process, (c) Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges (d) Approaching with a Learning Posture, (e) Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations, (f) Doing Whatever it Takes: Become a Noncompliant Leader with Permission and Believe in Midcourse Corrections, (g) Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support. The findings produced information about the principals' leadership over time. When they entered the schools, the principals were determined to focus on instruction. The principals encountered school environments that were behind on district initiatives, teachers in need of development, and students who required additional supports. The principals identified strategies which they implemented in their buildings and perceived as effective. They responded to the needs of their school and worked on establishing relationships within and outside the buildings, fostered teacher development, kept the students and the data at the forefront, and advocated for their schools' needs. The journey of improvement was a labor of the mind and the heart. These principals reported a commitment to improving the learning environment for their students and producing learning gains. In the following chapter,

these findings are discussed through the lens of the Black Women's Standpoint Theory and the Leadership for Sustained Improvement framework.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative multiple case study explored, described, and interpreted five successful Black women principals' perceptions and practices concerning improving and sustaining success in formerly turnaround schools. Two questions framed this study in order to explore the principals' perceptions and practices in relation to school turnaround and sustained school improvement:

1. How do successful Black women principals who have led a school turnaround initiative understand and describe how their leadership has changed over time?
2. What characteristics, actions, and or strategies do Black women principals who have led a successful school initiative believe are the critical components for leadership for sustained school improvement?

Summary of the Study

The explication of the participants' practices and perceptions of successful leadership for school improvement required a qualitative multiple case study approach (Stake, 1995). The researcher employed Black women's standpoint theory and the leadership for sustaining improvement framework as the lens and a thematic analysis method of data analysis to frame this multiple case study. The researcher centered the perceptions and practices of Black women who have led a successful school improvement initiative in the turnaround context. Essentially, the researcher wanted to acquire in-depth knowledge about Black women leaders' perceptions and practices for improving, turning around, and continuing increases in student achievement. The

use of Black women's standpoint theory allowed the researcher to center Black women's perceptions and practices in their contexts.

Purposeful sampling of participants facilitated the researcher's aim to capture an in-depth understanding of successful Black women leaders' perceptions and practices of leadership for turnaround and sustained improvement (deMarrais, 2004; Maxwell, 2012). Participants, 1) identified as Black and or African American, and 2) led a successful school improvement initiative with at least a 10% increase in student achievement since 2015, and/or led a school to improvements that resulted in the school's removal from the focus and or priority lists. Five participants enabled and entrusted the researcher to provide a viewpoint to explore this phenomenon.

The five cases were bound in the phenomenon of school turnaround in urban elementary schools that were led by Black women. The principals led schools that were among the lowest performing elementary schools in their states. Four of the five principals were in the fourth year of leadership at their schools; the fifth principal was in her sixth year of leadership at her school. Four of the participants entered their first principalship at their schools, the remaining participant was in her second principalship. Throughout their tenures at their schools the principals led successful turnaround initiatives. The principals' schools experienced at least a 10% increase in student reading achievement and/or were removed from their states' focus or priority school lists. As such, the principals had transition from the context of turnaround to the process of sustaining improvements in student achievement.

The five participants participated in two one-hour semi-structured interviews. Participant interviews were the primary data source for analysis. A semi-structured interview protocol enabled the researcher to ask follow-up questions and gain deeper insight to participant

responses. The researcher transcribed the 10 audio-recorded interviews upon completion and assigned pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

Documents served as the secondary data source for analysis and related to the interview data. The documents provided specific information for constructing the case profiles. Documents included school improvement plans, student population and enrollment data, school performance on state assessment examinations, and school report cards. The researcher collected document data from states' and schools' websites and from the participants when information was unavailable online. Data analysis occurred through a thematic analysis approach. Data collection concluded upon saturation (Bowen, 2008).

The utilization of Atlas.ti software provided the researcher an application to store, manage, and conduct data analysis. Data analysis began with transcription, and during the transcription process the researcher developed an understanding of what information was present within the data. Initial coding resulted in 67 codes. A reduction of the codes resulted in the formation of 13 larger categories. The researcher reduced the categories into seven broad themes. During the coding process, the researcher implemented a cross-case analysis by employing a constant comparative method.

Meaning was co-constructed throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Meaning was co-constructed between the researcher and the participants during the interview process. The researcher was mindful of the construction of meaning with the participants through her approach. Moreover, the researcher employed member checking, triangulation, and reactivity to ensure this study's quality and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Discussion

Several themes emanated from the participant interviews. The findings consisted of seven broad themes:

1. Stepping Backwards to Move Forward: Addressing School Culture and the Learning Environment
2. Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process
3. Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges
4. Approaching with a Learning Posture
5. Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations
6. Doing Whatever it Takes: Advocate for Your School's Needs and Believe in Midcourse Corrections
7. Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support

The themes emanated from patterns and repetitions in the principals' leadership perceptions and practices. The researcher considered the relevant literature on African American women educational leaders and leadership for school improvement and turnaround to examine consistencies and discrepancies within the data set and theme formation.

The seven themes that emerged in the findings provided lenses and knowledge from which persons can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of leadership for school turnaround. Therefore, the major findings of this study were consistent with the literature on African American school leaders (Pigford & Tonnsen 1993; Peters, 2012, Tillman, 2004a). Specifically, all of the participants were appointed to schools with predominantly student of color from economically vulnerable backgrounds. The school districts appointed the Black

women principals to lower-performing schools, who were expected to turnaround their schools. In fact, one principal received a specific time period in which the district expected positive increases in student achievement. Thus, this study is congruent with the literature in which Black women have coined themselves the ‘clean-up’ women in education (Doughty, 1980; Jean-Marie, 2013; Johnson, 2004; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2011; Peters, 2012).

All of the participants in this study were over 40 years old and held a special orientation and responsibility towards their students that stemmed from their personal connections to their school communities. Four of the five leaders were leading schools that: they or a spouse attended as children, were minutes away from their childhood home, or their first place of employment. These schools were their homes, and they were elated to be there to serve those children who they similarly identified with as people of color.

The principals’ journeys to the leadership position in their schools became a point of interest during the analysis. During adolescence, Black girls are reared to anticipate working and maintaining the responsibility for their families and social communities as these skills were necessary to their survival and that of those they cared for (Ladner, 1972). Given the cultural expectations for Black girls, Black women’s standpoint presented a lens from which to understand Black women’s responsibility toward caring and providing for their students (Hill Collins, 2000). Consideration of the larger discourse on Black women and their historical characterization as no nonsense, committed, and determined caretakers and nurturers, the question of the exploitation of Black women in education emerged. Does the broad education sector capitalize on the historical socialization for survival of Black girls? Are Black women then selected for turnaround schools based upon the larger discourse of the strong Black woman?

Despite the questions posed about extant institutionalized racism towards Black women in school leadership, this research indicated a larger phenomenon that requires further exploration.

All of the participants acknowledged that their schools faced significant challenges when the superintendents appointed them. Each of the participants spoke in-depth about the contextual factors they attributed the schools' previous low-performances. Their responses further illuminated the educational crises that occurs in low-performing schools (Mulford et. al, 2009) and urban areas. Such remarks included debilitated schools' climates that reinforced antiquated educational practices, lack of knowledge and teacher development, failure to incorporate data-informed practices and decision making, teachers' deficit mindsets towards students' abilities, and high teacher turnover (Mulford et. al, 2009). Undeterred by the present challenges, all of the principals remained determined to turnaround and sustain improvements in their schools.

Although district expectations externally motivated the principals to produce positive change, their love for children and sense of purpose motivated the initial positive changes in their schools. All of the principals reported a personal sense of urgency to improve their schools, as "the [children's] lives were at stake". Initiating successes was a laborious feat. Two of the participants underscored their feelings towards the improvement process. Reflecting on the turnaround process, Dr. Minard expressed, "Yeah, it was hard. Yeah. Very difficult." Her experience differed from the other participants in that she felt coordinated resistance from her faculty. Principal Claire, likewise, reflected on her ability to move her school forward.

She stated:

I've even told them, I said, "maybe it's time for me to move on and do something else... maybe it's time for someone else to take you. I got you to 61 so maybe somebody else [can] take you further."

Despite questioning her ability to sustain success, Principal Claire remained committed to improving her school. All of the principals' commitments towards their schools directly related to their leadership approaches for school turnaround. Education has been the mechanism through which Black people have socially advanced (Hill Collins, 2000; Tillman, 2004a; Tillman, 2004b). Historically, Black people have attributed significant value to education as a tool for economic and political process (Alston, 2005; Tillman, 2004a). Through the lens of Black women's standpoint, Principal Claire's concern for improving her schools had greater importance to her than her own position in the school. Her sentiment reflected all of the participants' position that the school's success was more significant than the person principal in the seat.

Leadership Practices Over Time

The first research question sought to explore the principals' perceptions of their leadership and how their leadership changed over time. The first three themes identified in the findings related directly to the principals' efforts to rehabilitate their schools. It was evident from the principals' accounts that turnaround entailed strategic planning and implementation. The first theme, *Stepping Back to Move Forward: Addressing the School Context and Learning Environment* was a reoccurring theme that was present throughout the participants' interviews. In the principals' efforts to initiate the improvement process, the stepping backwards to move forward emerged as a larger thread that was considered to be necessary for initiating change. Hitt and Meyers suggested that the crux of low performance in schools was the inability to address the schools' challenges. The literature on school turnaround suggested that principals in turnaround context establish the "vision for what the school can be" (Hitt & Myers, 2018, p. 5), before stabilizing instruction through teacher growth and development. The principals had

visions for what their schools could become, yet, they first needed to gain an in-depth understanding of the school's context and the rituals that stymied their success.

The principals in this study experienced what Hitt and Meyers (2018) would classify as short-term growth, which was a 10% increase in the number of students reading on grade level. Hitt and Meyers contended that short-term growth was not representative of a rehabilitation of a school. Hitt and Meyers defined turnaround as a 20% increase in two years, their framework centered quick, dramatic increases. The findings of this study suggest that turnaround is a continual process, a "journey not a marathon" that occurs over a short period of years. In accordance with the notion that turnaround principals act speedily and resolutely (Public Impact, 2008), the principals reported entering their schools with strategic plans to initiate quick changes, and they swiftly had to reassess their plans to focus on assessing the schools' needs and challenges in context.

In addition to tackling the schools' contexts the principals had to address the learning environment, the principals reported a sense of urgency to initiate improvements in the learning outcomes. Part of improving the schools' contexts was responding to ineffective learning environments. Part of *stepping back to move forward* involved assessing teacher capacity and working to fill the gaps in their development. In accordance with the literature on turnaround leadership, the principals continued to guide teacher development to support student learning (Grant, 2014). The principals directed their attention toward teacher development overtime to resuscitate the school climate. Such findings suggested that although turnaround aims to produce quick increases in student achievement, the process through which the leaders sought improvements was long-termed, well-constructed, and gradually implemented. Consequently, the two-year timeframe and 20% increases defined by Hitt and Meyers appears to be controversial,

as most turnaround successes seldomly persist beyond the initial improvement initiative (Duke, Carr, & Sterrett, 2013). Further, Herman et al., (2008) contended that turnaround schools typically produce significant increases in three years. Given the lack of successful long-term turnaround examples, the discourse in regard to the criteria for assessing turnaround success may require further explication.

Moreover, the Education Trust (2019), suggested that often schools are required to begin implementing changes as soon as they are identified for improvement, often with limited time to actually understand its challenges or engaging their communities in the problem solving. They posited that the urgency to implement change often results in school leaders' focusing on the low performance in lieu of diagnosing the causes of persistent underperformance. The findings of this study correspond to the Education Trust's notion. When the principals began their leadership, they focused on the low performance and came to learn the importance of conducting root cause analysis for sustaining change. The principals in this study achieved their success, over the course of three years.

In accordance with Hitt and Meyers (2018), the findings of this study suggested that the prior leadership may have influenced the previous low-performance. All of the principals reported that the aspects of schooling under the previous leaderships control that contributed to the previous lower-performance. Principal Claire's "school ha[d] been through quite a number of principals" before her appointment, and the previous principal at Dr. Minard's schools held the seat for a number of years despite the steady decline in student achievement. Their responses highlighted a critical issue in urban education, which is principal turnover and principal ineffectiveness (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The findings indicated that school districts enabled two problems. First, the district allowed an ineffective principal to remain at Dr.

Minard's school for a number of years despite its evident decline. Second, in part the district contributed to high principal turnover at Principal Claire's school.

The second theme, *Implementing Strategies to Initiate the Improvement Process*, was another overarching theme that was present throughout the principals' interviews. In the quest to turnaround their schools, the participants' leadership transitioned from focusing on understanding the context of their schools to implementing strategies to initiate changes in their schools. Through the lens of leadership for sustained improvement, principals are assumed to institute "rapid orchestration of instructional and organization change" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 10). The findings of this study suggested that albeit the principals orchestrated organization and instructional change, the process was gradual. The principals reported instituting orchestrated change with the support of professional learning and coaching. Hitt and Tucker (2016) posited that school context and the rate of increases in student achievement differentiates the need for either effective or turnaround leadership. In their first years, the principals realized that they were not going to initiate dramatic gains without addressing school vision and mission, distributing leadership, building capacity, fostering community partnerships, and ongoing teacher learning and development. Each of the concerns that they addressed were identified by Hitt and Meyers as effective leadership practices. Hence, the findings of this study indicated that the principals reported to exhibit effective leadership practices throughout their turnaround initiatives.

The principals' leadership changed over time to respond to their schools' contexts. As the schools evolved to reflect effective instructional practices and initial improvements, the principal reported persistent challenges. *Continuing to Tackle Persistent Challenges Addressing Student Needs*, the third theme, was another reoccurring theme across the participant interviews. Students' socioeconomic status, students' transiency, and teacher development were consistent

challenges that the principals encountered. In their first years, they produced positive contributions to the school community; for example, they each assembled a committed faculty and staff. Over the course of the preceding two years, the principals continued to mold and rehabilitate the learning environment.

Considering the persistent challenges turnaround leaders face, the literature on turnaround schools has delineated characterizations of turnaround leaders. Consistent with this literature, the participants in this study described themselves as strong leaders who comprehended the urgency and breadth of change (Herman et al., 2008). The principals suggested that they maintained a clear and undeviating concentration on improving teaching and learning. The findings of this study supported the literature on turnaround leadership. The principals reported utilizing assessment, problem solving, and motivating skills. The principals increased teacher capacity, addressed learning environment deficiencies, and influenced increases in student achievement (Grant, 2014). Even though these principals encountered challenges that were associated with urban schools, these principals adapted their leadership over time to address the needs of their schools to initiate changes in student achievement. These leaders' reports suggested that they embodied the necessary leadership competencies for change (Lochmiller & Chestnut, 2017). The principals' experiences leading in turnaround contexts informed their perceptions of the critical characteristics, actions, and strategies for school leaders seeking to sustain improvements in student achievement. In the next section we will discuss the findings of the second research question.

School Improvement and Sustaining Success

Research suggested that after teachers, principals hold the second most influence on student achievement (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). *The*

Ripple Effect, a report on the influence of the principal was conducted by Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, and Feters (2012), stated that principal knowledge, practice, and disposition create a ripple effect that influences instructional quality, teacher quality, and student achievement. As the literature suggested, a gap exists between understanding the practices and perceptions of leaders in turnaround context (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Research question two in this study sought to gain an understanding of the characteristics, actions, and strategies that successful Black women leaders who led a successful turnaround initiative believed were essential for sustained school improvement. The findings of this research consequently contributed to two gaps, the void of literature on Black women turnaround leaders and the limited literature on the practices and strategies relating to sustaining improvements in student achievement.

School Improvement

Beyond the characterization that turnaround schools suffer from lack of vision, negative climate and culture, infidelity towards students, and inadequate instructional and managerial direction (Hitt & Meyers, 2018), the schools in this study faced continuing issues related to the external factors that influenced their schools. These issues included transient populations, low rates of traditionally defined parent involvement, and student populations living in severely vulnerable communities.

Transient populations were a persistent challenge. Principal Claire reported an instance in which half of the third-grade student population did not begin the academic year at the school. Further, Dr. Minard mentioned long absences that her English Language Learners had when they visited their home countries. Factors outside the scope of leadership remained points of angst for the principals. The principals detailed their strategies to contact parents and the communities in

order to support their students. Their efforts to embrace the external environment and open the schools to their communities were their strategies to reap the benefits from the external environment. Contrary to this finding, the leadership for sustained leadership framework framed the “problem of low-performing schools” (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 6) around internal factors under the leader’s scope of influence and excluded interaction with the external factors that influence student achievement. This notion conflicts with the findings of this study.

School improvement differs from turnaround in that the former is marked by continual incremental improvements, and the latter involves a quick improvement within two to three years (Herman et al., 2008). The principals in this study exited the phase of turnaround and were entrenched in what scholars have defined as sustained school improvement (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Similarly stated, the principals’ schools were transitioning from a period of low-achievement to making steady gains in student achievement. While each school’s improvements in student achievement represented success, Principal Mae’s school was the only school to surpass the district’s performance on reading and math achievement.

School improvement is a long-term effort to increase student achievement (Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013). In order to answer the second research question in-depth, the researcher posed questions to ascertain the principals’ perceptions of successful leadership in terms of school improvement practices. The principals offered several practices for discussion. *Approaching with a Learning Posture* is the first theme pertaining to research question two. When the principals entered their schools, they learned to respond to the schools’ needs. Across the participants, each principal described this transition as a learning experience. A firm understanding of the school stakeholders was necessary to determine the root cause of the previous low performance and to implement improvement. Education Trust (2019) refers to this

process with the school improvement process as the diagnosis. During this period, the leader is supposed to implement a needs assessment to understand why the school exhibited low-performance. Principal Claire described part of her process of conducting a needs assessment by giving teachers a voice; she met individually with each staff member and inquired about the state of the school and how they felt she could best serve the school. Overall, the principals maintained that contextual knowledge was key to gaining trust, which was an essential factor in leadership for school improvement. To this end, the principals considered a learning posture as a means of gaining valuable information about their schools' processes and practices that led to the previous lower performance.

The building of an effective leadership team was a practice that was highlighted by the principals. Leadership teams were essential to the success of the participants' schools. Each of the participants spoke at length about the indispensable nature of an effective leadership team. The leadership teams supported the principals' visions and missions and were the cornerstone for change. Leadership teams in the turnaround literature can strengthen teachers' voices in school decisions and responsibility for school outcomes (Herman, 2008).

Similarly, the principals identified relationship building as a practice to support the improvement effort. Some of the relationships that the principals built with their faculty extended beyond the collegial relationships that were identified in the school improvement literature (Cosner, 2010). The principals acknowledged building strong nurturing relationships with their teachers and staff. The principals in this study established a communal and familial climate in their schools. According to the principals' narratives, they often embodied the roles of prayer partner, marriage counselor, second mother, and financial resource for teachers. Dr. Minard summarized many of the roles that the principals took on when she stated, "I have found myself

to be a marriage counselor or regular counselor, even a prayer partner, financial steward, basically, you know, whatever it is that people need from me.” Under the lens of Black women’s standpoint theory, Black women have traditionally taken on the roles of othermothers and domestic caretakers who share in the mothering and caring responsibilities for others (Hill Collins, 2000). The Black women in this study utilized the skills that were developed as a tactics to facilitate improvements within the school. In the same way that the principals expressed sincere care and concern for their faculty and staff, their care was a mechanism for success. Contrary to the literature on Black women leaders and othermothering which suggested that othermothering may be unrealistic in urban schools (Bryl et al., 1998; Payne, 1997), the principals practiced othermothering and care to support their work.

The fifth theme, *Remaining Goal Oriented: Know the Data, Establish an Instructional Framework, Demand Accountability, and Monitor the Expectations*, emerged from the principals’ beliefs toward a continued focus on student achievement. At the forefront of each of the leaders’ improvement plans was student data. Student performance data was the measure for instruction and teacher effectiveness. The principals incessantly relied on data to guide their instructional leadership. Moreover, the principals emphatically conveyed that the highest-priority was centering data-informed decisions. The literature on effective leadership practices promotes the use of data for continued growth (Hitt & Tucker, 2016); however, the findings of this study suggested that data was key to every component of school turnaround and improvement. The principals used student data to establish their mission, vision, and goals. Data also guided the instructional program and was incorporated into professional learning opportunities. Principals Mae, Lee, and Dr. Minard shared that their teachers were required keep data notebooks on all of the students and were expected to know their students’ data at all times. This strategy shifted the

onus from the leader to the teacher for collecting, analyzing, and monitoring student growth, which demanded accountability from teachers for student growth.

Classroom observations and walk-throughs were opportunities for monitoring the communicated expectations, assessing instruction, and providing feedback. Rigorous monitoring is a common practice within the school turnaround and improvement literature (Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss, 2010). During the process of turnaround, the principals relayed their approaches to classroom monitoring. They reported daily classrooms observations and visits. As the principals experienced success, their monitoring transitioned to classroom visits where they assimilated into the classroom and engaged in lessons with the students. Bearing in mind that data analysis and data-informed decision making is paramount to school turnaround, it is plausible to understand why these principals highlighted knowledge of data in their perceptions of strategies for success in school improvement leadership. Overall, it was apparent that the principals considered goal-oriented leadership as an essential component of school improvement.

The sixth theme, *Doing Whatever it Takes: Advocate for Your School's Needs and Believe in Midcourse Corrections*, reoccurred across the participants' interviews. The principals were determined to respond to the internal and external pressures to move their schools. Doing whatever it takes emerged from the principals' orientation of school improvement. The literature on school improvement recommends identifying advocates with the school to support the leadership (Herman et al., 2008); however, the literature does not explicitly contend with the issue of advocating for one's school at the district level. The principals said they addressed the discontinuity between the districts' prescribed initiatives and resources and what would suit their schools' necessities most effectively. The principals were not timid about engaging in

discussions with district personnel about the gap between what the district prescribed and what the schools actually needed. The principals requested permission to deviate from the prescribed resources to find those that were best suited for their teachers and students. This dissertation contributed to the scant literature that provides examples of principals who advocated for their schools even when advocacy meant deviating from the districts' directives. The literature on Black women leaders attested to the long history of Black women advocating for others, especially children (Tillman, 2004a). Black women's care for children may have originated from the cultural responsibility and communal nature of child rearing (Dillard, 2005). Furthermore, given the historical gendered and racial socialization of Black women (Hill Collins, 2000), one can fathom how their standpoint towards educating children encompasses advocacy for children's wellbeing.

Sustaining Increases

The principals in this study were in the sustaining increases phase of school improvement. Two of the principals expressed that their sincere concerns about their students upcoming state assessment. Principals Mae, Claire, and Lee were distressed and cited teacher turnover and student transiency as the core of their uncertainty. Their sentiments of anxiety stemmed from the pressures that they felt to maintain success. The principals in this study stated that their approaches to sustaining success was to continue their established practices that were both similar to and inconsistent with Hitt and Meyers' (2018) framework for sustained improvement leadership.

The principals' practices for sustained growth incorporated practices from the literature on turnaround leadership and that of Hitt and Meyers' (2018) delineated framework. Although Hitt and Meyers argued that turnaround leadership practices may become ineffective for long-

term growth once the decline halts, the principals continued to incorporate more authoritative practices, including the practices of defining, planning, and assessing school goals while also evolving their practices to reflect the more shared model that encouraged teacher development and creativity. The schools' contextual factors presented unremitting challenges that required turnaround leadership practices for rehabilitating the learning environment. Teacher turnaround and student transiency demanded practices that centered on stabilizing the instructional environment. The literature often assumed that improvement is a positive linear trajectory and that once the school is rehabilitated, its prior issues dissipate, and that turnaround leadership evolves to effective leadership (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The findings of this study suggest that turnaround in urban elementary schools requires leaders who exhibit both turnaround and effective leadership practices for longer periods of time.

Midcourse corrections were effective when the principals found cause for adjustments. The principals perceived the ability and skill to facilitate and practice midcourse corrections as a crucial for sustaining improvements in student achievement. The leadership for sustained improvement identified "Iteratively referencing data for vision refinement and assessment of progress toward vision" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 24). The principals described how the context of turnaround did not permit excessive time for failing initiatives or practices. When they made the assessment that a resource was ineffective, they modified or replaced the resource immediately. Such quick assessment and decision-making were present in the literature on leadership in low-performing schools. The literature suggested that ineffective tactics should be swiftly abandoned (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Public Education Fund, 2008). The findings of this study were congruent with said literature.

The *Continuing the Work and Utilizing Instructional Support* theme manifested from the principals' responses as to how they planned to sustain the positive trajectory in student achievement. The success of their current practices informed their perceptions regarding sustaining increases in student achievement going forward. Sustaining success was described as a constant fight and the principals' beliefs in motivating teachers, fidelity to the instructional practices and initiatives, and a commitment to data were described as key practices for continued success. The sustained improvement leadership framework identified motivating teachers in the second domain of the framework. The principals identified "Transforming the organization: Continuously engaging and motivating teacher to maintain the commitment to the organisation's work" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 20) as a key practice in sustained improvement. The findings of this study are in accordance with this practice as outlined in Hitt and Meyer's framework.

Practices related to fidelity to the instructional framework were not present in the leadership for turnaround literature (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The principals' leadership for sustained improvement delineated the "Developing and monitoring curricular programme aligned with state standards" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 22). Similarly, Herman et al., (2008) recommended that turnaround leaders conduct curriculum reviews to ensure that the curriculum is aligned to state standards and that leaders regularly monitor instruction to make adjustments. The leadership for sustained leadership framework lacked mention of monitoring lesson planning and teacher collaboration. The principals in this study attended professional learning with their teachers. They participated in lesson planning and led instructional coaching. Their leadership was embedded into every aspect of the teaching and learning environment. The findings of this study contributed to the gap in the literature by presenting examples of successful turnaround leaders who created and monitored teachers' fidelity to instructional practices and initiatives.

Utilizing instructional support was the last practice that the principals identified for sustaining growth in student achievement. Instructional coaches and subject specialists were identified as another form of support for sustained growth. As the principals planned their strategies for the upcoming school year, they devised plans to provide additional support to teachers in order to sustain growth. The literature on school improvement, turnaround, and sustained success recommended targeted professional learning for teachers (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). According to the literature on urban schools, principals were suggested to focus on instructional leadership (Dolph, 2016). As the instructional leaders, the principals allocated their resources to provide instructional support. The principals reported that they planned to allocate resources toward instructional coaches to target instruction and persistently struggling teachers. This finding was supported by research on improvement leadership in low-performing schools. Cosner and Jones' (2016) review of the literature on leadership for improvement in low-performing schools suggested that leaders who acquired resources for targeted instructional improvement were wise. The leadership for sustained improvement delineated leadership practices included "designing meaningful, engaging, and transformative professional development... to creat[e] high quality classroom experiences" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 21); "carefully aligning resources for vision attainment and long term continued improvement" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 25); and "integrating presence and availability of leaders into daily routines of teacher experience" (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 24). However, the literature does not explicitly state utilizing instructional coaches and subject specialists as a practice.

To this end, most if not all of the strategies and practices illuminated in the study in response to the research questions were appropriate in schools; the practices were especially relevant in persistently underperforming schools. The findings of this study contributed to the

gaps in the literature relating to school turnaround, leadership for school improvement, and leadership for sustained improvement literature. The Black women principals in this study identified and learned the context of their schools. Eventually they came to anticipate the needs of their schools and became the advocates and resources for school turnaround and improvement. The principals adjusted to their practices to achieve the schools' goals. Ultimately, their commitment and resolve to improve their schools emanated from their deep care and love for children.

Black Women's Careers as School Leaders

As previously mentioned, four of the five principals entered the principalship at turnaround schools; the fifth participant was in her second principalship. The literature suggests that Black women are often appointed leadership positions in urban elementary schools with the expectations of initiating educational agendas despite profuse contextual challenges. (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Tillman, 2007). Often, these opportunities are the only kinds of school leadership positions Black women receive in school leadership (Grant, 2014). This insinuation presents two points for discussion. If Black women are more often only presented opportunities in educational leadership in schools with significant predicaments, what are the implications for their career trajectories? Does this situation reify the notion of the Black woman principal as the 'clean-up' woman? If so, are Black women being designated to work in low-performing schools for their entire careers in school leadership? What do these questions imply about the value that school districts place on Black women leaders? Secondly, four of the principals were novice leaders. Transitioning to the principalship in a turnaround school presented its own challenges as the participants had to pursue turnaround with no previous principalship experiences. They held the responsibility and accountability for the

schools' successes and failures. The fate of their schools symbolized their success or failure as educational leaders. The principals' school districts appointed novice leaders to their persistently underperforming schools. The urgent context of school turnaround requires leaders who could initiate successful and immediate change. Despite the principals' lack of experience in the principalship, school districts entrusted their lowest performing schools to those leaders who had limited experience in school leadership. This is of particular interest as the turnaround literature suggested that turnaround leadership requires two times the managerial effort than stable organizations (Goldstein, 1988), also that turnaround requires leaders with particular character traits (Zimmerman, 1991), and not all principals are capable on leading a turnaround school (Duke, 2004).

The last question on the interview protocol asked the participants for additional information not previously asked of them. Four of the participants discussed issues related to turnaround leadership and Black women. The principals reflected upon their journey to becoming principals and the effect that this position had on their personal and professional lives.

Principal Flowers shared:

I will say through the conversation, I did realize for myself, that this women, Black women in leadership thing probably takes a completely different path then what's written out there... Because I know that I am standing on some really strong shoulders. I'm sitting here because of other Black women that poured into me over and over and over again. And once they started to pour, they just continue to pour and all of them are literally a phone call away. So, it's not like I did this by myself to get to this point at all. I think that as a Black woman, there is a very blurred line between personal and professional because these women are

not only my mentors, they're my friends, they're my family that I've chosen to be my family. But one thing that I know is that they will not let me fail, or, I will get tore a new one.

Principal Flowers' response illuminated the professional and personal relationships that she reported to have developed with her Black women mentors. Black women's standpoint theory positions these relationships within the historical community bonds of Black women. These women share racial and gendered identities that create a shared experience and knowledge (Hill Collins, 2000). Through the Black women's standpoint lens, one can understand how the communal aspects of the Black culture have evolved to the professional realm in which Black women mentors have become sources of support and guidance through professional and personal challenges. Further, her statement suggested that the relationships with her mentors embodied aspects of othermothering and care, characteristics that were associated with Black women in the education literature.

Leading turnaround schools was an experience that was new to all of the principals; however, the challenges that the principals faced on their journeys to the leadership seat provided experiences that would combat the challenges that they would later face. Principal Claire spoke in-depth about the ageism that she experienced when she was initially appointed assistant principal. She faced teachers' doubts concerning her abilities because of her age:

When I became an AP and I was in that affluent African American community, the pushback wasn't from the parents. It was from the staff. I wouldn't say it was pushed back. They have to feel you out. "Oh, You're young. How'd you get this position?"

This finding corresponds to the previous literature on the experiences of Black women leaders (Peters, 2012). Young Black women appointed to school leadership have been found to experience ageism from veteran faculty members. Further, Principal Claire spoke about her challenges with transitioning to another school and having to dispel teachers' concerns about her being the stereotypical angry Black woman, while also expressing her own understanding of some Black women and power dynamics:

I think [the school community's reception of Black women is] dependent on, if there were other Black females prior to me in the schools and had been in, "Is she going to be a B?" "Is she gone B? Cause that other one was a B." So, you have to break down that barrier to say, "Hey, I'm a sister that in this position. That's not threatened by anyone who may know more than me. That's a plus for me." So, I think that's the other thing you have to dispel because sometimes, like I stated, you have African Americans, some African American women, they get in positions of leadership and it's a power thing. It's a control thing. And so, when you have someone that comes behind someone like that, you got to kind of knock down some of those misconceptions that they have.

Here Principal Claire's narrative indicates a larger stereotype of the Black women as hostile. She expressed how she had to dispel the misconceptions that associated her with the hostile Black women stereotype. Black women's standpoint is beneficial to unpack and examine the use of the stereotype of the Black woman as "a B," as a function of control to suggest that Black women asserting themselves is problematic, while simultaneously controlling the behavior of Black women. This stereotype could infer to Black women that they should appear more congenial and docile in troublesome circumstances to distance themselves from said stereotype. Simply stated,

the stereotype of the Black woman as “a B” is representative of latent hegemonic influence over Black women.

Dr. Minard likewise shared a story of a Black woman colleague to express her perceptions on the challenges that Black women confront in school leadership:

An African American principal went to this high performing school... It didn't work for her. That school was already high performing. One of the top three schools in a district. Still, it didn't work. Most of the teachers there are Caucasian. The school demographics have changed a little bit, but she couldn't. It didn't work. But I think people judged her. They had preconceived ideas about her. She was the first Black principal at that school since it's been open. She was the first Black principal to go there and now she's gone. She's gone to a predominantly Black school...It's hard for us to stay. We don't get the same benefit of the doubt. I don't believe that we get the same benefit of the doubt as other people do. I don't think we get the same amount of times to not get it right. We're expected to get it right on the first try.

The example Dr. Minard shared presents two points for discussion. First, according to Dr. Minard, as the first Black principal at the school, the principal faced with the majority Caucasian faculty's preconceived notions about her race. The principal's tenure at the school ended quickly, and she was appointed to a predominantly Black school. Although Dr. Minard did not explicitly state the cause for the principal's removal, it was evident that the principal was given an opportunity at a high-performing predominantly White faculty school, and when “it did not work,” she was sent back to a predominantly Black school. Dr. Minard's response alluded to her belief that it was difficult for Black women to stay at schools with predominantly Caucasian

faculty. Secondly, Dr. Minard, stated her belief that Black women are held to higher expectations than their peers, and that districts were more stringent on Black women leaders. To this end, she provided the example of her own appointment to the principalship that came with a firm timeline for improvements.

The tenets of Black women standpoint theory are an appropriate lens for examining Dr. Minard's beliefs. Given that Black women share a social location, experiences within the district, and the contextual connection to the historical experiences of Black women in the United States, Dr. Minard's beliefs became tenable. Her experiences within her own school, and the resistance that she faced from her staff contributed to her understanding of Black women school leadership. The literature on Black women leaders is congruent with her sentiments regarding the resistance that Black women school leaders withstand (Dillard, 1995; Doughty, 1980).

In the same way, the findings of this study and the literature on Black women school leaders suggested that districts often appoint Black women to urban elementary schools with high percentages of economically vulnerable students (Grant, 2013; Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993). Principal Mae discussed her observations about her district:

I think what's unique about this school and just looking at the history and the location, the past couple of principals have been Black women, which was, Kinda like, okay, is this a theme? Is this the culture that they're trying to build... If you look and see, majority of the Black female principals are in certain areas [in this district].

Principal Mae's observation was congruent with the previous literature. Research has shown that districts often appoint leaders to specific schools with particular characteristics (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012). The historical treatment of Black women in the United States has

contradicted the dominant ideologies of womanhood in America (Hill Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) posed the question “If women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as ‘mules’ and assigned heavy cleaning chores?” (p. 11). Her question refers to the condition of Black women throughout slavery and the early 1900s; however, this question alluded to the inferior social location of Black women in America. Present in Principal Mae’s observation is the implication that Black women are still delegated to positions with heavier burdens than those placed on their racial counterparts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

School turnaround involves a concerted effort to rehabilitate a critically failing school (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The practices that were found in this study were essential to the participants’ success. The implications of this study pertain to education legislators, state department of education officials, school district officials, and school leaders. The findings of this study may be of particular interest to those who support principals in districts and those who prepare school leaders in colleges of education. This study may also be helpful to those who work and support Black women educational leaders.

Policy Implications and Recommendation

The Black women principals who participated in this study transitioned into leadership at schools that required quick rehabilitation. With the new implementation of ESSA, states and school districts must create school improvement and turnaround policies that foster the conditions that support and enable school improvement and turnaround efforts. One of the issues that the principals in this study reported was having to work with district’s prescribed one size fits all initiatives. Districts need to create policies for training district leadership and specialists

to support leaders in improvement and turnaround in specific contexts. District officials need training in order to understand the unique characteristics of schools.

The conditions that enable the deterioration of the instructional environment form over time. Policy makers need to implement policies that identify schools with declining student achievement before the schools are eligible for the turnaround classification. Furthermore, states need to provide policies concerning supports for students in persistently underperforming schools. Student in underperforming schools can enter and exit ineffective schools, so, these students are likely to require remediation in proceeding grade levels. School districts need to create policies that will supply additional instructional support for remediation. Additionally, the findings suggested a present need for states and school districts to establish policies around the preparation of leaders who lead school turnaround, as four of the five were first-time principals who were appointed to turnaround schools.

Practice Implications and Recommendations

The context of school turnaround presents specific challenges for principals who require particular knowledge that may not be taught in colleges of education. Considering the lack of formal training, the need exists for district-based training and development for leaders in a turnaround context. The principals in the study had to learn through on-the-job training. Through the professional learning process, districts need to learn from and incorporate past examples of successful and failed turnaround efforts.

School leaders who are appointed to schools in a turnaround context require the practice of data-informed decision making to maximize student learning and growth. Data was the center of each principal's improvement plans. Districts should offer leaders support through root-cause analysis and incorporation of data into the turnaround plans. Similarly, districts can facilitate the

support of turnaround principals by providing them with mentors who previously led a successful turnaround initiative. Districts should perform equity audits concerning leadership placement by gender, race, and other identity markers.

The literature on Black women leaders suggests that Black women were often appointed to schools in need of improvement. District officials may be mindful about presenting Black women with opportunities to flourish in differing settings and develop a range of leadership experiences. Furthermore, bearing in mind the pressures of turnaround leadership, districts can offer Black women leaders and other turnaround leaders professional learning and support groups in which they can express and discuss issues related to mental health and wellness of principals in turnaround contexts. Black women leaders appointed to schools in need of turnaround may consider seeking mentorship from other turnaround leaders. Further, these principals may find support from other Black women leaders who can serve as professional and personal support through the process of school turnaround and improvement.

Future Research

Leadership for school turnaround and improvement have remained important topics for educational leadership researchers. While the turnaround and improvement leadership literature highlights recommendations for practice, researchers have found that more research is needed to examine the practices and perceptions of successful turnaround leaders (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Many principals find themselves in low-performing schools in need of rehabilitation. Future research is needed to advance leadership preparation of principals who will need to respond to the challenges of chronically low-performing schools. Also, future research can explore the issue of transient students in turnaround schools to explore teachers' and leaders' perspectives and experiences serving these populations. Colleges of education and school districts that offer

courses pertaining to improving low-performing schools and should examine their graduates' feedback and assessment of their preparation programs.

The literature suggests that Black women are disproportionately appointed low-performing urban schools, so future research is needed to diversify the voices of Black women in school leadership (Grant, 2014). The majority of the Black women in this study ascended to the principalship in turnaround context, and research should examine the experiences of novice principals who were appointed to turnaround contexts. Further, the principals in this study briefly mentioned their mentors and others who supported them through their transition to leadership. Ultimately, understanding the experiences of Black women school leaders in a turnaround context is necessary to undergird and provide support and mentorship for leadership success and improvements in student achievement.

Limitations of the Study

Research on turnaround schools often are often case studies that examine the factors that possibly contributed to schools' success. This case study is limited in that the design of this study cannot allude to validity as there is no certainty that the practices and strategies found by this study are not common in schools that continue to underperform. Further, this study was comprised of a limited number of Black women principals. The purpose of this dissertation explored, described, and interpreted the perceptions and practices of five Black women principals who have led a successful school turnaround effort.

The researcher acknowledged that her presence and personal experienced attributed had an effect on the participants responses. With this knowledge, the research sought to create space for the participants' voices to come forth in an authentic and vulnerable manner. The researcher's racial and gendered identity as Black and female could relate to that of the

participants' identity and position as a member of their social group. The researcher had experience teaching in a low-performing school; however, the researcher's lack of experience in school leadership positioned her as a nonmember.

This study attempted to expand and contribute to the information that is known about Black women in a turnaround context, and leadership for school improvement; however, the study did not attempt to disprove or affirm the conclusions or findings of previous studies of school leadership in a turnaround context. The findings of this study in some areas supported previous literature, and in other instances, the findings were inconsistent with the existing literature.

Conclusion

Hundreds of years after the enslavement of African Americans, they, along with other marginalized racial groups remain marginalized in education, wealth, and health (Watson, 2018). The circumstances that produce and reify the marginalization of people of color is ingrained in institutional discrimination and racism. The "mythology of white supremacy" (Watson, 2018, p. 7) originated in colonial times and continues to influence many of the laws and policies that ground the foundation of our society. Education, one of the cornerstones of United States' society, continues to be afflicted by racial inequalities (Watson, 2018). The myth of education as the mechanism for equality has not reflected significant changes in society. Notable gaps persist between Black and Brown people and Whites in education, wealth, and health (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018).

The traditional institution of education was not established with concern for students of color. In fact, during the slavery era, Black people were not permitted to learn to read (Alston, 2005; Watson, 2018). After slavery, Black people established schools to educate and nurture

Black children (Tillman, 2004a). Racial inequalities in educational resources eventually led to the *Brown v. Board* decision that altered the Black community and Black schooling (Tillman, 2004a). The notion that the United States education system was not designed to support the success of Black students has influenced responses to said crisis in Black and Brown communities (Watson, 2018).

Black women have served as educators since the time of slavery (Alston, 2005). Their roles as othermothers and caretakers evolved from African cultural traditions (Hill Collins, 2000). Throughout the history of Black people in the United States, Black women have held a responsibility towards family and their communities (Hill Collins, 2000). In fact, Black women were encouraged to enter into education to support the cause of Black economic and political advancement (Tillman, 2004b). Almost two centuries since the emancipation proclamation, and almost 60 years since the *Brown* decision that reshaped the African American experience in the United States, Black women continued to serve children through the institution of education.

Urban schools are often associated with students of color and derogatory learning environment (Albright et al., 2017; McWilliams, 2017). The characteristics associated with urban schools detail the racial inequalities that exist between schools that serve predominantly Black students and schools that serve predominantly White students. Urban schools often serve students from low-income communities, have higher number of provisional teachers, and have fewer resources, and perform lower than their suburban counterparts (Dolph, 2016).

From their own experiences and knowledge of the world, the Black women urban principals in this study recognized that their students faced racial scrutiny from the larger society. Their shared knowledge about the experiences of people of color, motivated their passion for their students. The principals understood that they stood on the shoulders of the

Black women who came before them. The principals' work over 50 years since the *Brown* decision remained acts of resistance against the institutionalized discrimination and inequalities in education (Watson, 2018). These principals changed teachers' instruction, cared for and protected their students, and stopped the criminalization of students in their schools (Watson, 2018). Under the context of school turnaround, these principals perceived that school turnaround and sustained success were more consequential than increases on state assessments. Turnaround and sustained success symbolized changing their students' life trajectories.

Persistently lower performing urban elementary schools faced a number of challenges on the road to improvement (Dolph, 2017). The principals who find themselves in the leadership seat in these schools must exhibit a number of approaches and practices to surmount demanding obstacles. The Black women principals in this study were successful in initiating positive increases in their students' achievements. As principals influence student achievement these leaders led successful turnaround strategies that produced at least a 10% increase in student reading achievement and or their schools were removed from the focus or priority lists. The mostly novice leaders entered their position with a data-driven instructional plan. Their plans evolved to respond to their schools' particular needs. The principals reported exhibiting both turnaround and effective leadership practices to initiate change. While in the process of sustaining positive increases in student achievement, the principals still contended with challenges that were associated with urban schools.

Sustaining success was on the forefront of the principals' minds. Each of the principals discussed how they planned to maintain their gains while also continuing increases in student achievement. Based on their successes the principals planned to continue with the practices that they found effective and planned to rely on instructional support staff to perpetuate gains. Data-

based instructional practices, monitoring and supporting teachers, motivating teachers, and utilizing instructional coaches and instructional specialist remained at the center of the participants' approaches for continued success.

In the context and process of turning around their schools, the principals also learned more about themselves as leaders. Reflecting on their practices, they have learned the importance of getting the right people "on the bus", building and maintaining positive relationships with the internal and external communities, as well as attempting to find a work-life balance. Ultimately, they learned that although education was not the career they envisioned for themselves, education is the place where God has called them. The commitment that the participants in this study expressed is a testament to their love for education and their students.

The turnaround context is associated with the need for urgent change. The findings of this study demonstrated that the pressure to improve schools is felt by the principals in the seats. This study contributed to gaps in the leadership for school turnaround and improvement literature as well as to the literature on Black women leaders. Often, Black women find themselves in the context of school improvement and turnaround (Grant, 2014; Pigford & Tonnsen 1993). As the self-identified "clean-up" (Jean-Marie, 2013, p. 613) women of education, more attention is needed to respond to the needs of Black women principals. Furthermore, the voice of other women of color leaders is necessary to diversifying the discourse around women leaders in school improvement and the turnaround context. Black women leaders have been found to be "beacons of light within the darkness of their communities" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 347). It is hoped that this study further highlighted the contributions of Black women leaders to educating and nurturing children.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter

Greetings Principal _____,

My name is Tiffany S. Aaron, a Ph.D. Candidate in the UGA College of Education, Lifelong Education Administration and Policy Program. This correspondence is being sent to you because I am conducting my dissertation study on successful Black women school leaders. Your district has approved my research proposal. I have attached the approval letter from your district.

Your school has exhibited great success over the past four years. _____ growth is a testament to real school improvements. I am interested in learning about your approach to leadership. Specifically, my study aims to explore, describe, and interpret successful Black women leaders' perceptions and practices for improving and sustaining increases in student achievement. I am emailing to introduce myself and invite you to participate in my study.

I am seeking Black women leaders whose schools exhibited at least 10 point increases on the reading scores since 2015 or been removed from the focus and priority school lists.

The criteria for the principals include:

- self-identification as a Black woman;
- a principal who led an urban elementary school through an improvement effort;
- a current principal who has sustained at least a 10 point increases on reading/ELA scores since 2015 and or been removed from the focus and priority school lists

The research will consist of:

- Two 1-hour interviews (conducted in-person or via Google Hangout at the participant's preference).

I am available for interviews Monday- Saturday from 7 am- 8 pm at your convenience.

Please respond if you are interested in learning more information about my study or participating. If you would like to speak with me by phone, you contact me at 863-797-6755. If you are aware of another Principal who meets the criteria of this study, they may contact me at tia@uga.edu or via phone.

Best regards,

Tiffany S. Aaron, M.S.
Ph.D. Candidate | Educational Administration and Policy
Graduate Assistant | Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
College of Education

The University of Georgia
email: tia@uga.edu

APPENDIX B

Principal Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

Successful Black Women Leaders: Improving and Sustaining Increases in Student Achievement

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: *Dr. Sheneka Williams*
Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
smwill@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study will be to examine, describe, and interpret the perceptions and practices of successful Black women principals who have led a school improvement initiative that produced a 10 percent increase in student achievement, or led to the removal from the focus and priority school lists. The goal of this research is to explore Black women's understandings and experiences leading and sustaining improvements in formerly lower-performing schools. This study will focus on how principals made sense of their leadership and leadership practices during the improvement initiative and the process of continuing improvement.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- *Participate in two 1-hour audio recorded interviews about your experiences and perceptions relating to successful leadership. The interviews will cover your personal history as it relates to your experiences into and of school leadership. The most sensitive questions include: Talk to me about your leadership; Talk to me about any personal and or professional experiences you've had as a Black woman principal who has led a successful improvement effort; Talk to me about your perception of how the roles, responsibilities, and actions of a principal whose school is in need of improvement differs from that of a principal whose school is not in need of improvement?*
- *Participate in voluntary member checking: reviewing transcripts and preliminary interpretations for edits and reflections (not necessary to participate in the study).*

Risks and discomforts

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Direct quotes may be used in publication of this study; however, pseudonyms will be given to participants, locations, and schools. You will not be asked to perform any physical activity, and physical risks are not foreseeable. The psychological risks are minimal as you will not be pressured to answer any question and have the option to not answer any question you deem distressing. There are no social and economic risks as you will not be identified, and all information will be treated confidentially. The legal risks are not foreseeable from the interview questions.

Benefits

The potential benefits to participants include a sense of relief from self-expression and making meaning of ones' experience and accomplishments. Benefit will also include the contribution to the literature on successful Black women school leaders.

Incentives for participation

Participant will not receive any monetary or non-monetary incentives for being in the study.

Audio/Video Recording

Interviews will be audio recorded using an electronic audio recorder, for the purposes of transcribing the interview and making sure the participants' words are transcribed accurately. Upon the completion of the member check, the audio recordings will be archived on CDs, and stored in a locked disk holder, inside a locked drawer, inside a locked office. These recordings will be destroyed after 2 years. The data from this study will be used in future publications relating to the subjects of the case.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

_____ I do not want to have this interview recorded.

_____ I am willing to have this interview recorded.

Privacy/Confidentiality

All information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions and publication for all persons' names and locations. No identifiable information will be disclosed. Only the researchers will have access or knowledge of the participants' identities. Only the researchers will have access to the audio recording and full transcriptions. The researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. The findings of this study will be presented in a manner that will not identify the school district from which subjects are recruited. If you choose to conduct the interview via video conference please be aware this research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every

reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Taking part is voluntary

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time should you become uncomfortable with it. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Dr. Sheneka Williams at smwill@uga.edu or Tiffany Aaron at tia@uga.edu. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Dr. Sheneka Williams, a *professor*, and secondary researcher Tiffany Aaron, a graduate student, at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Dr. Williams at smwill@uga.edu or at 706-542-1615. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX C

Principal Interview Guide (120 minutes)

1. Background Information
 - a. Tell me about yourself
2. Educational Background
 - a. Describe to me the moment you decided to enter into education
 - i. What influenced this decision?
 - b. Talk to me about the various roles you've had in education
 - c. Talk to me about the moment you decided to become a principal?
 - d. Describe the moment you were named principal of your school
 - i. What emotions and thoughts did you have?
 - ii. What were the expectations of this role?
 - iii. What expectations did you have for yourself?
 - iv. Did you feel any internal or external pressure?
3. Context of School
 - a. I know that every school is unique. Talk to me about your school.
 - b. How would you describe your school to someone who has never been here before?
 - c. Talk to me about your school's strengths and areas for growth
 - d. Talk to me about what you know about your school before the improvement initiative
 - e. What do you believe contributed to the previous lower-performance?
4. Leadership for School Improvement
 - a. What was the charge you received when you were appointed?
 - b. What was your main priority when you were appointed?
 - c. What challenges did your school face before the improvement initiative?
 - d. Talk me through your response and planning when your school was identified as a low-performing school
 - i. vision and strategies for the improvement effort
 - ii. supports you provided faculty and staff during the change process
 - iii. professional learning opportunities for faculty and staff during the change process
 - iv. monitoring instruction and student learning
 - v. managing internal and external environments
 - e. How did you prioritize your efforts?
 - i. How did you determine the long-term and short-term changes?
 - ii. What steps did you take to make change?
 - f. Describe to me the specific improvement strategies your school implemented during the improvement effort

- g. How would you describe the challenges associated with turning around your school?
 - i. How did you plan to address these challenges?
- 5. Leadership Success
 - a. What prepared you to lead a school improvement initiative?
 - b. Talk to me about the district and external supports you received for the improvement reform
 - c. How did you define and describe success at your school?
 - d. What did you find to be most challenging about turning around your school?
 - e. Describe part of the planning and or implementing process that was significant to you and why?
 - i. What leadership practices or skills were used to address this?
 - f. What do you contribute to your success as a leader?
 - g. Talk to me about your work with teachers during the improvement? Were any replaced?
 - h. Talk to me about the hiring process during the improvement effort
 - i. Can you tell me how you (or the district) have applied funds to different improvement strategies?
- 6. Leadership Practices
 - a. Describe your leadership style
 - b. How has your leadership style changed over time?
 - c. What practices do you think are critical to the success of a principal seeking to improve their students' achievement?
 - d. Talk to me about your perception of how the roles, responsibilities, and actions of a principal seeking to improve their student achievement differs from that of a principal whose school is not in need of improvement? If not, how are they similar?
 - e. Talk to me about how your leadership changed overtime?
 - i. How did you assess this?
 - f. During your leadership, have you taken on other roles? Ex: activist, mentor, second-mother, counselor, cheerleader
 - g. What are some of the advantages and or/disadvantages of being an African American principal in your school?
 - h. Talk to me about any personal and or professional experiences you've had as a Black woman principal that has benefited or hindered your progress as a leader
 - i. How has these experiences shaped your perception as a leader?
 - i. As a Black woman, how has your identity impacted how you lead or think about leadership?
- 7. Sustaining Success
 - a. Now that your school has two or more years of success, how do you plan to continue this positive trajectory?
 - b. How are you defining success now that your school is no longer in the context of improvement?
 - c. How are you prioritizing your efforts now?
 - d. Talk to me about your priorities now that you have successfully improved your student achievement

- e. Can you give an example of any differences between what you did to turn the school around and now to maintain the success? If so, how?
 - f. How have your roles changed over time?
8. Closing Questions
- a. In retrospect, is there anything that you wish you would have known before you entered leadership?
 - b. What would you have done differently as principal?
 - c. What advice would you give Black women leaders entering the principalship in schools? Schools in need of improvement?
 - d. Is there anything else that I have not asked you that you would like to share?