

FIERY PASSION AND RELENTLESS COMMITMENT: THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN  
PRINCIPALS IN TURNAROUND  
MODEL SCHOOLS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to:

The memory of my little angel, Mia. You are always in my heart. Mami loves you!

The memory of my dad, Robert Gratten. Dad, thank you for teaching me the value of hard work and to be brave. The love, smiles, and encouragement you sent from heaven kept me going on this journey. You will always be an inspiration to me. I love you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Chronically low performing schools in the United States have required targeted support and interventions to increase student achievement. In recent years, the school turnaround model has emerged as a swift, dramatic, comprehensive approach to implementing interventions in the lowest performing schools (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007) where incremental school improvement efforts have failed. Such schools require school leaders who demonstrate a sense of urgency and address underperformance with immediacy and targeted actions (Fairchild & Demary, 2011).

African American female principals often lead chronically low performing schools that require turnaround efforts (Murtadha and Larson, 1999). However, documented accounts of their lived experiences are extremely limited in scholarly literature (Clemmons, 2012). This research seeks to close the gap in literature on the experiences of African American women principals. Situated in Black Feminism and Black Women's Standpoint Theory, this study redefines what it means to be a Black woman (Collins, 1998) school leader and assesses African American women's shared experiences, perceptions, and how social and oppressive constructs impact their lives and leadership. This research also critiques the educational system and the turnaround model through the lens of Black women leaders' experiences in order to spark new thinking and new approaches to address chronically low performing schools and bring awareness to

the potentially oppressive structures which African American women educators experience as leaders.

Furthermore, this research examines how Black women principals determine their identities, function as leaders, and overcome obstacles to be inspirational and successful school leaders of turnaround model schools. Turnaround principals in this study have courageously, selflessly, and voluntarily worked in grim educational situations, and they have all prevailed. This research reveals the women have focused on a growth mindset, relationship building, and ownership and accountability to drive school turnaround. However, at the core of their leadership is an endless passion and unwavering commitment to providing a quality education for all children. The results of this study have implications on education policy, policy-makers, and school turnaround practices.

*Keywords:* access, equity, Black Feminism, Black Women's Standpoint Theory, oppression, school improvement, turnaround, turnaround model

## I. INTRODUCTION

Who am I? The answer to this question has required deep, and sometimes unsettling, reflection to my very core on who I am. It has required examining my thoughts and perspectives, how my ideas are created, and how my decisions, lifestyle, and interactions with others are molded. It is about who I am when I am not consciously attempting to be a *who* or *what* for anyone. The answer exposes my flaws and perfections, my shame and pride, and my ugliness and beauty. The answer reveals the essence of me. I believe the truth of who I am is in the palms of God's hands. Each day, I discover a little more about who I am, who I am not, and who I want to be.

### **Dream of the Slave**

*Seized from her Jamaican family, chained and herded into the bottom of a sweltering, malodorous slave ship, a 14-year-old girl was transported over an immense, pitching ocean to America, "Land of the Free." Black, nude, grease-slicked, frightened, and plunked down on a soiled, unsteady auction block, she became property, a slave. That girl was my great-great grandmother.*

Who am I? I am a descendent of Black American slaves, slaves who were in both physical and mental bondage, stripped of human rights, prevented from learning to read and write. At an early age, I learned the value of reading—the knowledge it created, the freedom it gave me to explore, question, reflect, and make connections, and the opportunities it offered me to stretch my thinking. More than anything else, reading a variety of texts emancipated me and sparked the desire to create my own meanings. Like Frederick Douglass (1845), I understood that reading led to mental freedom, which meant the ability to consider other possibilities and ideas.

I remember the summer my mother gave me the biography of Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights activist during the Civil Rights Movement. As a young girl, my knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement consisted only of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, *I Have a Dream* speech, and Rosa Parks' actions. The story of Fannie Lou Hamer (Miles, 1993) provided an account of a Black woman's leadership in the Civil Rights Movement and explained how her involvement led to voting rights for minorities. While reading this book, I realized the Civil Rights Movement was multifaceted, something I do not recall my early education teachers sharing with me. This understanding provided a new perspective for me regarding suffrage, sacrifice, struggle, protest, equality, and rights.

A few years back, I read the Biblical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a way to strengthen my relationship with God. All my life I had been told how wonderful Jesus was; that He was a great man, healer, and teacher. While I had my own personal relationship with Him, I had never actually read His story. I assumed that what everyone else said about Him was true. It was not until I immersed myself in the scripture that I experienced His greatness for myself. A new love, understanding, and desire to be like Him was born. John 10:18 (New International Version) says, "No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." His compassion, obedience, and sacrifice enveloped me and fortified my faith and admiration for Him. No one else could have created that experience for me. I had to experience it for myself, and I believe it made a difference in who I am today as a woman, Christian, and leader.

The gift of literacy has empowered me and has allowed me to discover my own meanings, make personal connections to, and gives me new perspectives on, the world around me. I think of my enslaved great-great grandmother's and other ancestors' illiteracy, and know I am their dream. I know the ability to read and write has created opportunities for me, challenged my thinking, and created knowledge. Unlike them, I am able to sit with my fellow brothers and sisters of all races, ethnicities, and cultures to read text, learn in a classroom setting, and pave the way for future generations. I pay homage to every illiterate slave by being an educator and seizing opportunities to learn. Each time I pick up a book and learn a little something I did not know before, I know my ancestors are smiling down on me for "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (Angelou, 1978).

### **I Am NOT a Nigger!**

*It was the summer of 2009. I was invited to spend a relaxing weekend in a landmark, vacation home in a small Texas town. I accepted the gracious offer. After unpacking my bags and exploring the vacation home and grounds, I went to dinner in a lovely restaurant in town. During dinner, I began sneezing, excused myself from the table, and rushed into the first available women's restroom stall to blow my nose. I tossed the tissue in the toilet bowl, flushed, and shuffled out of the stall. An intoxicated, White woman, with shoulder-length curly, brown hair, rushed into the stall I had just left. As the hot water from the faucet rushed over my hands, I heard, "Goddamn it! That goddamn nigger! Ugh!" My body stiffened and I could feel chill bumps multiply over my body. "Nigger!" She spat the word out of her mouth. "Nigger!" She hissed. And the*

*word echoed through the restroom, “Nigger. Nigger! NIGGER!” Each time she said the word, my chest tightened.*

*She flung open the stall door and marched toward her friend. Her eyes were narrow and her body was tense. “That goddamn nigger pissed all over the toilet seat!” she proclaimed to her friend as she glared back at me. I attempted to explain it was not me who had committed the act. My mouth moved, but my explanation was unheard. She whirled around, stomped out of the restroom, and thrashed me once more with, “Nigger!” The door slammed.*

Ignorant. Pathetic. Ugly. Powerless. Hopeless. Worthless. These words represent what nigger means to me. The meaning I constructed for this word comes from my experience reading and hearing its usage and tone in history, literature and film, combined with the way I felt the day that woman used the word to brand me. Shock and disbelief had silenced my voice and prohibited me from uttering a single defense, leaving me to question, “Am I a nigger?”

She had spat nigger from her drunken mouth. It was hot, thick, and reeked of contempt as it slid down my black face and scorched my soul, leaving me in a boiling pool of shame. I managed to tightly fold that shame and tuck it into the deepest corner of my being where it burrowed itself in my subconscious. Despite attempts to hide the shame of being branded a nigger, shame continued to reveal itself in my insecurities, negative self-talk, and my determination to prove to others and myself that I was not a nigger. I had to remind myself that I am the only one who can determine my identity. That experience reminded me of how some people view Blacks and, if given the opportunity, how viciously they will demean us. I finally rejected being a nigger and

basked in who I truly believe myself to be: the dream of the slave, a strong Black woman, wife, mother, educator, leader, and Christian.

My heritage and life experiences have molded me into the Black woman leader I am today. This research proposal is influenced by my life experiences and perspectives. My personal experiences and identity have created a curiosity in me about the lived experiences of other African American female educators. I have wondered what makes us alike and what makes us different. How do our life experiences and perspectives influence who we are as Black women educators? The subject of this research provides an opportunity to answer questions, examine multiple perspectives, investigate personal and professional experiences of African American women principals, and determine who they believe themselves to be and how they maneuver through challenging and even oppressive systems and structures.

### **A Strong Black Woman**

*“There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in black women. It’s as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet” (Angelou, 1978).*

Who am I? I am a strong Black woman. I have never been able to help being Black and female. But, having strength was an expectation and a choice. My grandmothers, mother, and aunts have always demonstrated strength; holding their heads high despite illnesses, emotional or physical anguish, and poor treatment. There has always been a certain gracefulness in the way they carried themselves despite struggle. Even my father encouraged strength. Observing my elders is one way I learned strength. They showed me that Black women stand tall and that we can do it all. All? Just when I would question doing it *all*, my mother would remind me of Philippians 4:13 (King

James Version), “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” And then, suddenly, there I was...somehow doing it all.

This research study began with identifying who I am as a person, and then evolved into greater interest in the lives and experiences of other African American women, specifically African American female principals. Though I am not a principal, I am a Black female educational leader. In my current position, I provide technical assistance, support, and professional development to low-performing Texas districts and schools. My profession has provided an opportunity to understand the challenges of working in and supporting low-performing schools. It is my hope that this research helps to uncover who African American women principals are by exploring their core beliefs, their role as school leaders, their womanhood and Blackness, their other identities, and the actions they take to ensure success in under-achieving schools. I hope this research encourages deep reflection on the roles African American women have played, and continue to play, in leading what are often considered the most challenging schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The American educational system has been jolted multiple times over the past 60 years, beginning with the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and other more recent school reform efforts. These events in education have had a considerable impact on American education leading to significant change in how the nation thinks about, and responds to, the needs of children in educational settings, and how we prepare children for their futures. Each reform initiative has had a unique influence on the role of African American female educators.

The Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ended *de jure* segregation in American schools, resulting in an uproar in American schools and communities, and fueling the Civil Rights Movement. As the *Brown* decision was enforced and the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, racial tensions ran deep in many schools, riots tore through communities, and mobs awaited students of color who attempted to integrate White schools (Fairchild & Demary, 2011). Despite limited opportunity and authority in desegregated schools, many African American women educators served as activists, often advocating for the civil rights of Black children, and helping Black students understand and develop their personal social justice stance (Loder-Jackson, 2012). Walker (2015) states that during desegregation, Black educators worked to uplift Black children by instilling pride in their race, helped Black children realize they were a part of America's fabric, and encouraged Black children's positive contributions to American society. Black educators also worked to reverse injustice in schools and communities, and advocated for equity and access to resources and opportunities for Black children.

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the ESEA was signed, which provided grants and resources for economically disadvantaged and disabled students, and federal grants to state educational agencies to improve elementary and secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). This was another opportunity for Black educators to advocate for, and ensure equity and access to, students in their schools and communities. Years later, Black educators' demand for a fair and robust education and opportunities for all children were echoed in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a scathing report on the state of American education. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) declared,

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (para. 1)

Additionally, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) disclosed several reasons for urgent action regarding the nation's education such as international comparisons of achievement, illiteracy among adults, high school achievement, decrease in science achievement, and the need for remediation coursework. Although later critiqued and largely discredited by Carson, Huelskamp, and Woodall (1993) in the *Sandia Report*, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) nonetheless created perceptions that U.S. schools were failing, leading to additional school reform efforts. In an analysis of the *Sandia Report*, Stedman (1994) states that in broad outlines, it suggests

performance generally has been stable over the past two decades, there have been improvements in some areas, the United States is a world leader in high school and college graduation, and ethnic and racial groups need to be targeted for assistance because they continue to lag behind. (p. 144)

Despite the *Sandia Report's* contradiction of *A Nation at Risk's* gloomy portrayal of U.S. education, and the implementation of numerous school reforms, the United States continues to struggle with chronic achievement gaps and persistent under-performance in certain schools. As a result, a new reform model, known as school turnaround, has emerged and rapidly expanded. The premise behind school turnaround is

that swift, dramatic, comprehensive intervention will work in the lowest performing schools (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007) where previous incremental school improvement efforts have failed. According to the architects of the school turnaround model, chronically low-performing schools have a dire need for targeted support and interventions in order to increase achievement. Consequently, turnaround schools must have school leaders who demonstrate a sense of urgency and address underperformance with immediacy and targeted actions (Fairchild & Demary, 2011).

According to Murtadha and Larson (1999), African American female school leaders are often principals in chronically low-performing urban schools that require turnaround efforts. In fact, many African American principals move into positions of leadership where traditional educational practices are failing (Pollard, 1997), where there is a large minority population and major school challenges, or where the expectation is that Black principals will solve problems quickly (Jones, 1983).

African American educational leaders have worked to educate children by establishing schools, colleges, and universities as well as founding civic and community organizations that continue to exist today (McCluskey, 1997). In addition, Black female educational leaders educated children during the most perilous periods in American education reform (Collins, 1991). Unfortunately, “documented accounts of the lived experiences and historical accounts of African American female educational leaders are underrepresented, or lacking in the current body of scholarly literature” (Clemmons, 2012, p. 12). I am conducting this research to help close the gap in the literature around the lived experiences of Black female educators, particularly research around Black women principals in the United States’ lowest-performing schools.

Collins (2000a) indicates there has been mounting interest among researchers in recent years to understand the experiences of Black women from their own perspectives. Clemmons (2012) suggests that rather than focusing on individual experiences of African American women, studies on African American women have generally focused on topics such as the lack of career advancement opportunities, mentoring and role models, succession planning and pipeline problems, neglecting how African American women develop as leaders in academia and business. Most of the literature on female minority leaders deals with women who work in primary and secondary educational systems because minority female leaders, especially African American women leaders, are more visible, and have achieved greater career success in the K-12 educational fields (Clemmons, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The terms “African American” and “Black” will be used interchangeably in this research. By using the terms “African American” and “Black,” I am referring to any person of African descent who may or may not have a familial history of enslavement in the United States. Whether or not the women of this study are descendants of American slaves is not a requirement for this study. However, the women of this study must identify themselves as being African American or Black American.

This research seeks to capture the stories of African American women school principals in turnaround schools, assess the oppressive racial and gender barriers they experience, and examine how they have, and continue to, overcome racial and gender oppression to function as effective school administrators prior to, and during, school

turnarounds. The topics addressed in this study include the following overarching question and sub-questions:

- What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women principals of turnaround model schools?
  - What key/critical incidents or junctures do participants identify as significant?
  - How do participants understand the role that race and gender (or intersectionality) play in their personal and professional lives?
  - How do participants articulate the social and political structures that support and/or create barriers and challenges in their lives?
  - How do participants engage in their role(s) in turnaround model schools?

The growing levels of school accountability and the increased need to better understand and implement school turnaround initiatives have created a need to study African American women principals' leadership. Increasing our knowledge about their experiences can serve to prepare other African American women principals who want to take on the principalship, particularly in this era of focus on turnaround schools. It will also add to the literature a perspective on leadership presently absent. I believe that examining the experiences, perspectives, accomplishments, and trials of African American female principals will increase understanding of their identities, leadership, and passions. I hope this research will deepen awareness and serve as a call to action against bias and discrimination these women may experience in their personal and professional lives. Beyond that, I hope this dissertation inspires people to listen to, and learn from,

voices that often go unheard, and to work together to create an equitable, just society for everyone.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Black Feminism**

Black feminism will be used as one of the frameworks for this research to better understand the intricacies of what it means to be a Black woman principal. Furthermore, this study will examine how Black women principals construct their identities, utilize their roles in life and schools, and overcome barriers to function as powerful school leaders of turnaround schools. This research is informed by Black feminism, which outlines African American women's experiences with race and gender. This study seeks to validate the resilience demonstrated by African American women as they transcend oppressive social constructs to lead schools, and empower other Black women to be successful school leaders.

In researching Black women in educational leadership, it is important to explore the history of feminism, especially Black feminism, to understand and deconstruct the experiences of Black women in American history, including their perceptions, roles, plight, and successes. Conn (1991) defined feminism as "both a coordinated set of ideas and a practical plan of action, rooted in women's critical awareness of how a culture controlled in meaning and action by men, for their advantage, oppresses women and dehumanizes men" (p. 217). Conn's definition draws attention to problems associated with male superiority over women, societal and cultural stereotypes of women, and the rejection of biological determinism to assign roles, all of which impede women's healthy self-determination (Clifford, 2002).

Feminist research is “grounded [in] a set of theoretical traditions that privilege women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 3) and supports social justice and social transformation. One of the goals of feminism is to affect individual, organizational, and societal change (Allen, 1996). Scholarly research validates that many perspectives on feminism exist because of varying patriarchal and androcentric perceptions, and how those perceptions are examined, affected, and remedied. As noted by Clifford (2002), “The second wave of the women’s movement not only revived women’s political struggles for civil rights and equal pay, but also brought forth feminist studies as a new academic discipline” (p. 21). Yet, the second wave of feminism failed to capture the multifaceted differences experienced by a widely diverse population of women. Feminist theory failed to incorporate Black women’s experiences and realities. In fact, women of color have criticized the feminist movement for being racist, concentrating only on White middle class women’s issues (Collins, 1991). hooks (2015) states that in America, the social status of Black women and White women has never been equal. Black women are subjected to oppression that White women have not experienced with race and culture. In fact, as Giddings (1984) states,

It was through the Black struggle-, past, present, and future-, that white women could engage the kind of issue appropriate for their own struggle. But they failed to transcend their racism and classism to be able to grasp the significance of the Black women’s perspective, even as it related to their own cause. (p. 89)

The third wave of feminism acknowledges that White women’s experiences of discrimination are different from other racial and ethnic groups. It recognizes the struggles women faced in certain social locations. The third wave of feminism

recognizes the plight of women who have been historically overlooked and oppressed because of race and culture (Clifford, 2002). Black feminism emerges in the third wave. Collins (1998) proposed that Black feminism redefines what it means to be a Black woman in America, identifying it as a feministic-driven theory that views Black women as change agents. Collins (1998) suggests Black Feminism empowers communities, women in those communities, and women of color. Collins (2000) states,

Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of societal injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions. Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated, Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs. (p. 22)

Black Feminism asks these questions: (a) Who has the power to define what it means to be a woman and a Black woman in society? (b) Who should be able to make those determinations? (c) How do Black women's identities play out in society? (d) What are the social structures that need to be questioned when it comes to how women and Black women are defined, perceived, and treated? and, (e) How can social injustices toward women be remedied?

African American women must manage the impact of both racial and gender bias, such as sexual harassment, racial slurs, biased hiring and promotion practices, and negative cultural stereotypes (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). hooks (2015) states that at a time in American history when women might unite and demand social equality, Black women were silent. This silence is the silence of the oppressed. As a result of racist and sexist socialization, Black American women have been taught to devalue their gender and

regard race as the only relevant label of identification. Black women are afraid to acknowledge sexism was as oppressive as racism. There is hope that liberation from racial oppression would bring freedom. hooks (2015) argues,

The recent women's movement failed to adequately address the issue of sexist oppression, but that failure does not change the fact that it exists, that we are victimized by it to varying degrees, nor does it free any of us from assuming responsibility for change. Many black women are daily victimized by sexist oppression. More often than not, we bear our pain in silence, patiently waiting for change to come. But neither passive acceptance nor stoic endurance leads to change. Change occurs only when there is action, movement, and revolution. The 19<sup>th</sup> century black female was a woman of action. Her suffering, the harshness of her lot in a racist, sexist, worked, and the concern for the plight of others motivated her to join feminist struggle. (p. 193)

According to Hesse-Biber (2014), Black feminist researchers argue that for Black women, race and gender are intertwined; Black women's experiences are colored by gender (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Fernandes (2013) suggests since 1991 there has been a reconceptualization of unitary social structures. In fact, Collins (1990) states,

Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio-historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. (p. 222)

This interconnectedness of race, class, and gender is known as intersectionality.

Intersectionality “seeks to combine axes of difference [such as race, gender, and class] in order to reflect the complexity and transient nature of identity and of experience” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 61). Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) state that, intersectionality is important because it

...focus[es] attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics...

Intersectionality’s insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines. (p. 787)

Hesse-Biber (2014) suggests that Collins’ seminal work on intersectionality not only has created an understanding of identity construction through the intersections of race, class, and gender, but has also led to the examination of color-blindness, Black sexual politics, and oppression in America. Today, Black women continue to experience both racial and gender discrimination and are often left wondering which bias creates the larger disadvantage for them (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Collins (2004) states that recognizing racism still exists remains a challenge for Americans. Many believe that civil rights legislation eliminated racially discriminatory practices. While Blacks are more visible in positions of authority such as in schools, Black men and women are affected by racism in gender-specific ways. Collins (2004) explains,

For African Americans, the relationship between gender and race is intensified, producing a Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity and Black femininity. This Black gender ideology is not simply a benign set of ideas affecting individual African American women and men. Instead, it is used to justify patterns of opportunity and discrimination that African American women and men encounter in schools, jobs, government agencies, and other American social institutions. (p. 6)

Etter Lewis (1993) asserts that African American women are not an invisible group and cannot simply be combined with other groups. Despite resistance and barriers, Black women continue to play major roles in American culture. Like Black men, Black women were seen as profitable, full time labor-units, specifically as house servants, but more often in the Deep South, as agricultural workers during slavery. Black slave women were sexually and physically abused, exploited, and viewed as *breeders* that helped assure the growth of the slave labor force (Davis, 1981). Due to American social constructs of gender, race, and class African American females have been marginalized, and often excluded as agents of knowledge (Collins, 1991). As a result, Black women have continued to contend with the impact of racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) and have become intolerant of racism and sexism aimed at them (Evans & Herr, 1991).

Through synthesis of the literature on Black feminism, my experiences as an African American woman, and my observations of oppression, discrimination, and the social injustice experienced by Black women, I have defined Black feminism as the examination of the struggle of African American women, the oppressive, social and political structures that create barriers and challenges for Black women, and the powers

that hold these structures in place. For me, Black feminism seeks to understand the various identities and roles of Black women, how and why these identities and roles are created, and the perception others have of these identities and roles. Additionally, Black feminism is the way in which Black women empower one another, seek opportunities to understand the social and political constructs that oppress them, and how they tear down walls to seek and advocate for social justice for all. This research is grounded in Black feminism, which provides a lens to better understand African American women's history and experiences.

### **Black Women's Standpoint Theory**

I will use a combination of Black feminism and Black women's standpoint theory for this study's theoretical framework. I believe both Black feminism and Black women's standpoint theory are helpful and necessary in understanding the experiences of Black women.

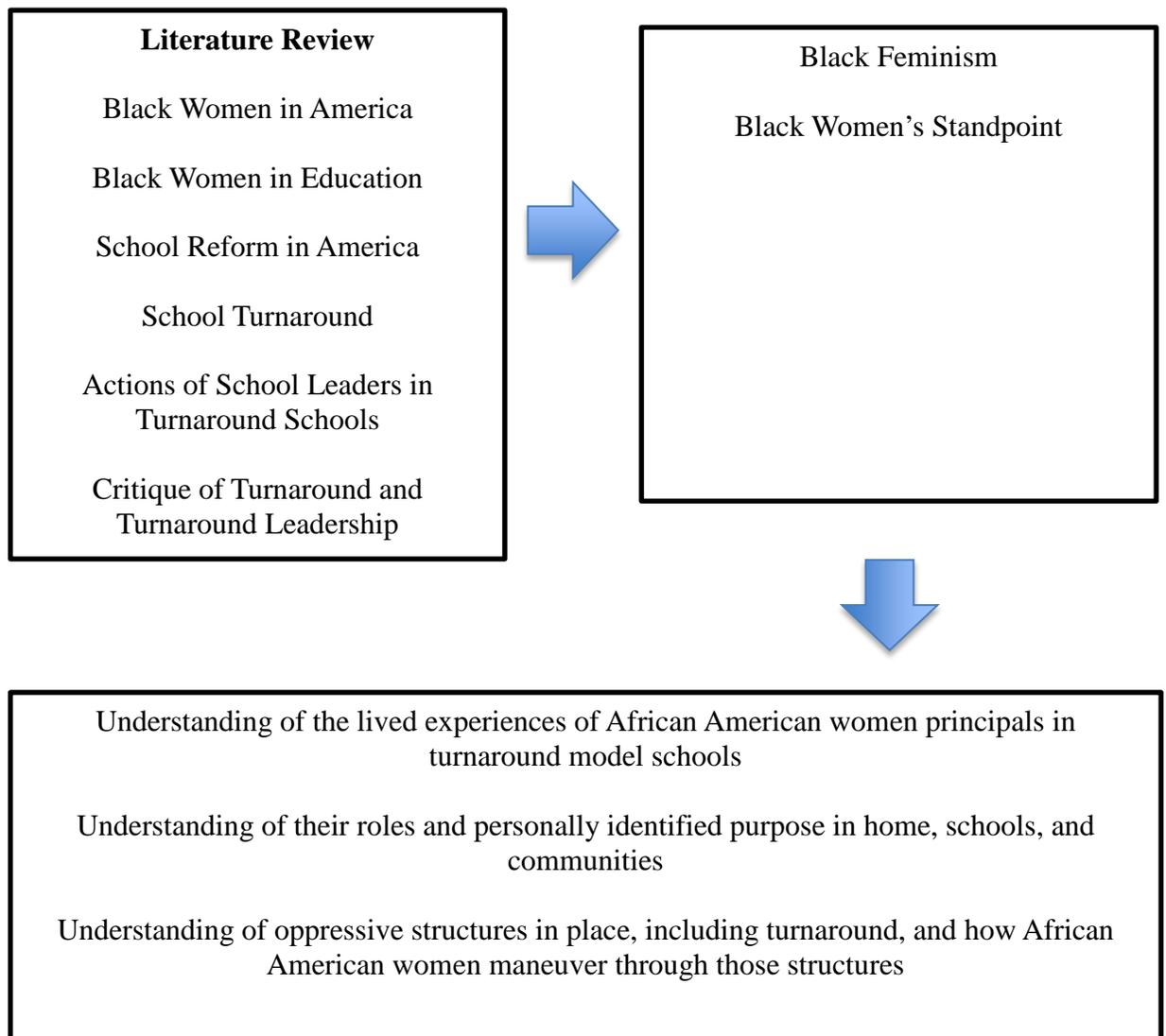
Harnois (2010) defines standpoint theory from the perspective of individuals who share a social status or social location. This commonality enables them to share meaningful experiences, which in turn generate shared knowledge about the social world. Since slavery, African American women have voiced their multifaceted and shared experiences with oppression. Black women's standpoint theory is the intersectional understanding of oppression. Black women's inferior racial and gender positions support their views of relationships among particular systems of oppression. The lived experiences of Black women foster the intersectional understanding of oppression based on race, class, and gender (Harnois, 2010). Race, gender and class are "social constructions predicated upon recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous

distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another” (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 253). Women of color, specifically Black women, provide perspectives and narratives on oppression and the resistance of oppression that differ from other women (Allen, 1998).

Collins (1991) defines Black women’s standpoint as “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). I will use Collins’s definition of Black women’s standpoint as I engage in this research. Black women’s standpoint theory will be helpful as the study examines Black women’s shared experiences, their views on social constructs, and how these constructs impact their lives and leadership. As the women in this study share their perspectives and lived experiences, I hope they will help current and future Black women principals improve and overcome similar challenges related to the roles of being Black, a woman, and a principal.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The following conceptual framework serves as a roadmap for this research and summarizes the connections to the literature review, theoretical framework, and possible outcomes of the research.



*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Guiding Literature Review*

The literature review focuses on Black women in America, Black women in education, school reform in America, school turnaround, actions of leaders in turnaround schools, and a critique of turnaround and turnaround leadership because I wanted to illustrate the roles and experiences of African American women in history and in low-performing schools. As I processed the literature and began to develop the literature review, themes of shared experiences, oppression, discrimination, and social injustice emerged. I naturally and unknowingly began to reflect upon and critique the experiences

of Black women through a Black feminism and Black women's standpoint perspective. As I engaged further in the literature and read about Black feminism and Black women's standpoint, I was able to connect and ground my personal reflections and insights with research on these theoretical frameworks. By doing this research on African American women principals in turnaround schools through the lens of Black feminism and Black women's standpoint theory, I hope to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American women principals in turnaround model schools, their roles and personally identified purpose in home, schools, and communities, and an understanding of oppressive structures in place, including turnaround, and how African American women maneuver through those structures. Still, I am open to what this research reveals. I do believe this study will allow us to hear the unheard voices of African American women principals.

### **Significance of the Study**

Black women continue to fight to define themselves apart from degrading narratives driven by race and gender biases (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black feminism and Black women's standpoint provide lenses to view and understand the lived experiences of African American women. This research seeks to critique the systems in place that may create opportunities for or oppress African American women, specifically those holding the position of principal in turnaround schools.

Furthermore, this research will provide a mosaic of both unique and similar junctures and experiences that impact Black women's perceptions, actions, and leadership in the schools and communities in which they work. Black feminism and Black Women's standpoint will be used to examine potentially oppressive political and

social structures that create barriers, challenges, opportunities, and ways of being for African American women school leaders. It will also investigate how they transcend and cope with oppressive systems to support schools and communities.

The harrowing history of Blacks in America, specifically African American women, has fostered the desire to fight against social injustice, instill pride, and empower our race, women, children, and communities. Black feminism and Black women's standpoint theories help us to understand why and how African American women principals lead low performing schools (Grant, 2014).

### **Scope of the Study**

Through narrative research, this study seeks to unveil the distinctive lived experiences of being Black, being a woman, and being a school leader in America by giving voice to the stories of the participants. Through purposeful sampling, five n former and/or current African American women principals of turnaround model schools will be identified to participate in the study. In-depth, semi-structured interviews uncovered the personal and professional experiences of these principals. Thematic and narrative analysis provided a better understanding of the lives and leadership of Black female principals.

### **Terminology**

This study focuses on African American women, specifically Black African American women. The preferred terminology to describe research participants is African American. However, to avoid repetition, the terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout the text.

## Definition of Terms

**African American** – “an American who has African and especially Black African ancestors” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

**Black** – “of or relating to any of various population groups having dark pigmentation of the skin <*black* Americans> (2) of or relating to the African-American people or their culture” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

**Black Feminism** - Collins (1998) proposed Black Feminism redefined what it means to be a Black woman in America, describing it as a feministic-driven theory, viewing Black women as change agents.

**Black Women’s Standpoint** - “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” (Collins, 1991, p. 22)

**Feminism** - “Both a coordinated set of ideas and a practical plan of action, rooted in women’s critical awareness of how a culture controlled in meaning and action by men, for their advantage, oppresses women and dehumanizes men” (Conn, 1991, p. 217).

**Gender** - The identity associated with varied experiences among men and women, focusing on the difference between masculinity, maleness, femininity, and femaleness (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986)

**Intersectionality** - “Seeks to combine axes of difference [such as race, gender, and class] in order to reflect the complexity and transient nature of identify and of experience” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 61).

**Oppression** - Living a life that is purposely restricted by powerful influences that “are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among

them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in..." (Frye, 1983, p. 12).

**Race** - "A human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent" (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, p. 24). According to Cornell and Hartmann, humans have a choice in determining which characteristics define the race.

**Social Construct** – "a social mechanism, phenomenon, or category created and developed by society; a perception of an individual, group, or idea that is 'constructed' through cultural or social practice" (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

**Turnaround** - "A systemic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively" (Miles, Elkholtz, & Vandenberghe, 1987, p. 3).

**Turnaround Model** – One of four School Improvement Grant (SIG) funded school intervention models authorized by the U. S. Department of Education. A school in which the local education agency (LEA) replaces the principal, rehires 50% of the staff, gives the principal greater autonomy, adopts a new governance structure, and implements prescribed and recommended strategies (Pappano, 2010; Zavadsky (2012).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The findings from this study will be based on data gathered at a particular point in time from a particular group of participants. Data collected will be limited to African American women principals in turnaround model schools to provide a better understanding of their personal and professional lives and leadership. A small sample of

five research participants were interviewed. While similar themes may emerge from the lived and told experiences of these women, not all African American women principals necessarily share the same experiences. The primary purpose of this study was to capture the stories and voices of African American women principals in turnaround schools. No attempt has been made to suggest the participants or their experiences are representative of other school leaders. Nonetheless, this research may have transferability to other principals, especially Black women principals, who may have experiences similar to those of the research participants. Additionally, the findings may inform policies and practices of state education agencies, districts, and schools experiencing low performance.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Documented lived experiences of African American female educational leaders is lacking in current scholarly literature (Clemons, 2012). Therefore, a social and historical context will be used to examine African American women as principals in the era of school turnaround. The following literature review is rooted in Black Feminism and Black Woman's Standpoint Theory. The theoretical framework provides a footing from which we can critique oppressive structures African American women have encountered in their struggle to survive and function in American society and as leaders in education.

The literature review provides a brief history of Black women in America, followed by a more specific history of Black women as school leaders and principals. As we consider these experiences, it is important to recall the increase in accountability, which has been a significant change and focus in modern education. Turnaround schools are the most challenging schools for reform because they demand clear expectations that affect both short and long term improvement in a school in order to produce increased student learning and achievement (Litfin, 2007). This literature review examines school reform and provides a deeper understanding of the turnaround model and African American women's leadership in turnaround schools.

### **History of Black Women in America**

*The image of the Black woman as a "rock" is a persistent image of African American women and represents strength and resiliency (Moss, 1995). Moreover, Bogle (1980) emphasizes that this image is "one of the staples of the culture: the dark all-knowing, all-seeing, all-understanding spiritual force that we can go to when all else fails us" (as cited in Moss, 1995). Moss (1995) explains that the belief of the "rock"*

*image of Black women is important because within this image African Americans have sought relief. Additionally, heredity, culture, resilience, and conditions have prepared the Black woman for her role as a “rock.” Being a “rock” is significant during American slavery because of the oppressive conditions of the time.*

## **Slavery**

Giddings (1984) reports that in the early 1600s, at the beginning of the African presence in America, Blacks had a higher status than other servants due to the circumstances of their capture, which put them under the protection of international law. The first Africans to arrive worked as servants for the colonial administrators and in later years worked alongside White servants. There was little distinction between Black and White women’s labor. Giddings (1984) states that as the need for more profitable labor increased, so did the exploitation of Africans over Whites, resulting in categories of class and color. Giddings (1984) continues,

It was a seventeenth-century mind that had been shaped by the Renaissance, with its cult of individualism and the ‘moral’ right to exploit those weaker than oneself; by the Protestant Reformation’s ethic and evangelical piety, which separated body from soul; by the Age of Discovery, which found a continent of people different from the explorers; and by the Commercial Revolution, with its vision of wealth on a global scale. The slow but inexorable change in the status of Blacks and women reflected all these developments. (p. 34)

As English administrators affirmed their role as civil, Christian, rational, sexually controlled Whites they exerted a tremendous impact on the history of women and Blacks in America. This need for affirmation led to the victimization and degradation of Blacks.

Giddings (1984) reports that by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the context of the church, laws of capitalism, and the psychological needs of Whites, a social, legal, and racial structure was in place. Women were categorized as whores, mistresses, or wives. White men could freely impregnate Black women without punishment, resulting in the birth of generations of chattel and a permanent labor force.

“African and African American women were not born degraded but rendered so by enslavement. The noun ‘slave’ suggests a state of mind and being that is absolute and unmediated by an enslaver” (White, 1999, p. 8). Enslaved describes the inhumane acts of White slave traders and owners; it compasses what *happened* to Black slaves as a result of slavery without describing who Black slaves were either as individuals or collectively. “‘Enslaved’ forces us to consider and remember that slaves were Africans and African-Americans before they were slaves or considered anything else that was denigrating” (White, 1999, p. 9). Slavery defined Black American slaves as part people and part property. White men in power decided that White people, with few exceptions, could not be enslaved.

Collins (1991) states that the vast majority of African American women were brought to the United States for slave labor from the years 1620 through 1865. African slave women in American were shackled, forced to bear back-breaking labor, endure unwanted sexual advances from White slavers, and create communities to sustain themselves despite desolate, oppressive living conditions (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). Slavery shaped subsequent relationships that Black women had with families, communities, and each other as a result of the system of social control designed to keep

Black women in a subordinate place. This system was structured along interdependent dimensions, which Collins (1991) claims were,

1. Exploiting Black women's labor. African American women slaves paid a high cost for survival. Their toil was viewed as *free* wage labor in the rural South and served to keep them impoverished.
2. Oppressing Black women politically by denying rights and privileges. These actions included forbidding them the right to vote, excluding them from public office, and treating them inequitably in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, denying literacy to slaves and relegating Black women to underfunded, segregated schools in the South disallowed for a quality education for Black women.
3. Creating stereotypical images of Black women during the slave era that were used to justify ongoing oppression.

Oppression intruded into all areas of the Black woman's life. Yet, she transcended it, refused it, fought back, and asserted herself against every obstacle (Davis, 1971). "The experience of slavery provided evidence of the Black woman's moral strength and resiliency" (Giddings, 1984, p. 87). Slave women have been characterized as self-reliant and self-sufficient. Without male protection, Black women had to find their own ways to resist and survive, cultivating strength with other slave women (White, 1999). Giddings (1984) states that Black women resisted slavery by many means and were harshly punished or executed if caught. Resistance included burning down slave-owners' homes and communities, killing Whites, suing for freedom, and leading the gathering of slaves primed for rebellion. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black women's rebellion

went from overt to more concealed through refusing to produce baby slaves. Giddings (1984) explains that some slave women did not produce slave children at all by using contraceptives and having abortions to resist and even destroy the oppressive system and gain control of their bodies. They began to reject the notions of being property and instilled the same values into subsequent generations.

According to Giddings (1984), around 1830, slavery became a domestic institution and the slave masters and slaves sometimes functioned as an extended family. Familial relationships discouraged slave rebellion and runaways and encouraged the sustainability of the slave labor force. Slave mothers often insisted on instilling values into their children, especially their daughters, to resist the compromising slave system to protect them from harm. These efforts were sometimes harsh and resulted in tension in the family and emotional anguish. For slave mothers, there was hardly room for compassion because there was little room for weakness (Giddings, 1984). These values would serve as a suit of armor against the oppressive system Black women lived in (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001).

Throughout slavery, Black women retained their authority over the domestic domain. In some cases, Black nursemaids who were able to extend their influence to the master's house became the liaison between the slave community and Whites, which increased their influence. Although this power derived from their functional slave roles, it was power nonetheless (Giddings, 1984). While there may have been a sense of power, Davis (1971) asserts, Black women slaves were not authoritarian figures due to their role as a slave, and the perception Whites had of them.

Giddings (1984) states that after emancipation, there was a call for men to reassert their role as head of the family. Attempts to establish traditional households often failed because of the economic impact that occurred when women stayed home. While many Black women did double duty, working in the fields and maintaining a strong influence in the home, there was a growing number of women who decided to dedicate their time to their homes and children. Giddings (1984) says that “throughout the social history of Black women, children are more important than marriage in determining the woman’s domestic role” (p. 63). However, this was not the case for all Black women of the time.

### **Post-Slavery Leadership**

Black women of earlier generations were strong, gentle, hard, soft, wise, unschooled, rational, and intuitive. They sensed the need for opposites and tensions to maintain order. They served and sacrificed themselves for their kin, working at all times for racial uplift. They led without the benefit of positional authority, and used their personal power to care for their communities and for themselves. They had a mission born out of the desire for freedom, personal and civic. Despite their lack of formal or legitimate roles, they were leaders.

(Serback, 2004, 72)

After Reconstruction, Black women were equipped to create organizations and institutions that mirrored their feminist concerns around economic, social, and political equality, including suffrage. Additionally, Black women were making extraordinary advances in education and in their professions. These gains resulted in the founding of sororities that often raised considerable revenue to support the education of children and teachers (Giddings, 1984). Giddings (1984) states that while Black women advanced in

society, many of them were still relegated to domestic and menial work. Black women were often excluded from jobs that were newly open to women because those jobs were often preferentially given to White women. Discrimination against Black women in the work place resulted in high numbers of menial occupations. As the country became more industrious and the economy shifted, Black women had to maneuver through a new rapacity of racism and classism as well (Giddings, 1984). Giddings (1984) claims,

Although they disagreed with the inherent racist assumption among Whites, Black women did share some of the attitudes of White women reformers. Black women activists believed that their efforts were essential for reform and progress, and that their moral standing was a steady rock upon which the race could lead. They believed that the Black community was at a crossroads. Abandoned by the federal government, subjected to increasing violence, and shorn of political power, it would either be pushed into oblivion or would mobilize its resources and survive. Standing on the brink of this racial precipice, convinced that they could save the race, Black women saw their roles in almost ecclesiastical terms. (p. 81)

Black women endured the severities of slavery and used their experience with oppression as a stepping stone to launch political movements and advocate for the rights of their race and sex (Giddings, 1984). As reported by Giddings (1984), despite their activism and commitment to support their families and communities, and uplift their race, society failed to see Black women as a political and social force, instead viewing them as immoral scourges. Society had tainted the image of Black women, excluded them from the mainstream labor force, and made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), Black women have been perceived through a distorted lens and have been defined as reductive, inaccurate, grotesque mythical caricatures. Mythical depictions remain today and include being loud and uncouth, indefatigable, and/or women who persevere and endure against great odds without being negatively impacted. The latter is a myth that even some Black women embrace. Consequently, they over-extend themselves, taking on additional roles and tasks and ignoring physical and emotional tension to fulfill the stereotype. Still, African American women have consistently exhibited exceptional courage and strength. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) conclude that no matter how intelligent and competent a Black American woman is, she cannot count on being embraced by mainstream White America.

For Black women, making their mark in the world still means working harder than anyone else and being better than anyone else. Being influential requires an extraordinary degree of determination and willingness to take risks, but fortunately that is a part of the legacy of Black women. Notwithstanding education and resources, Black women have become frustrated by the derogatory epithets used to label them and the prevailing structures that were used to oppress them (Giddings, 1984). Therefore, some Black women focus on defending their morality and the history of Black women, demanding justice for their race and themselves, nurturing purity and knowledge in children, and redefining the criteria of womanhood. Giddings (1984) says that color, class, or the experience of slavery did not invalidate Black women's womanhood. Indeed, as Black women defended their integrity, they were providing White feminists a

means of their own liberation by challenging the Victorian ideas that kept all women oppressed.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling upheld the *separate but equal* precedent. By the 1940s, the term *civil rights* defined the admonition to end segregation and discrimination. Separate was indeed the case, but it was not equal except inside of communities and in places the laws could not influence (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001). Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001) assert that before and after that decade, African American women worked at the local and national levels to advance the civil rights of Blacks in America.

Historians of American history define the years 1954 to 1965 as the Civil Rights Era due to the demands for social justice and activism to end legal segregation and discrimination in voting, housing, education, employment, and public accommodations. Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001) state that civil rights protests and demonstrations took place in all areas of the United States. Civil rights legislation passed during this time altered the social and political status of the majority of American citizens. Likewise, African American women civil rights leaders often worked at the local level to establish connections with grassroots organizations that provided mass support for civil rights goals and objectives. Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001) explain that poor and working-class African American women led, organized, and joined campaigns to end racial discrimination, to destroy social and political structures that oppressed Blacks, particularly Black women, and to advance the Black race and Black women. Undeniably, Black women were the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement, contributing their activism, fundraising, and organizing skills to advance the movement.

## **Black Women in Education**

African American educational leaders have historically viewed education as a route to a better life for individuals and to uplift Blacks (Pollard, 1997). Thus, education has been a priority for African American women. During American slavery, Black women formed underground schools to teach reading and writing. Although it was illegal in the South to teach Blacks how to read and write, some Black women managed to learn and taught reading and writing despite the risks of harsh punishment (Giddings, 1984).

The great desire for education and the status of teaching altered the societal perspective of women. Many Black women educators believed in the educational philosophy of self-help, mutual aid, racial pride, and industrial education. Others believed in encouraging Blacks to attain the highest academic level of education possible, which included channeling Black students into prestigious universities (Giddings, 1984). After *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) many Black teachers were fired and Black principals were terminated or demoted, while White principals in integrated schools remained employed.

Historically, the experiences of African American women leaders recorded in literature have been limited (Peters, 2003). According to hooks (2000), Black women are at the bottom of the occupational ladder and their social status is lower than any other group. Yet, from the emancipation of slavery through today, African Americans have been instrumental in establishing and leading schools for Black children. Additionally, African American educational leadership has embraced the view in the African American

community that education is the pathway to a better life, and uplifts people of African descent (Pollard, 1997).

“Historically, African Americans have been underrepresented in school administration. Prior to the 1954 *Brown* decision (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), the majority of African American students attended segregated public schools that were supervised by African American administrators” (Brown, 2005, p. 586). African American principals were committed to educating Black children, and established schools for Black children as the cultural symbol of the Black community. They worked in all Black schools, often in dismal conditions, and were considered the authority on social, emotional, and economic issues. In fact, teachers, principals, and parents were the most significant influences of Black children during this time (Tillman 2004).

Tillman (2004) states that after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, African American principals helped to implement desegregation in schools and continued to educate Black children, despite resistance. While one of the goals of the *Brown* decision was to remedy inequalities in the educational system, many African American principals in formerly segregated Southern and border schools, lost their positions. Consequently, African American principals often had limited opportunity or authority to support Black children during desegregation. In the United States, there has been a prevailing perception that African American leaders are inferior to White leaders. In fact, their talents have been deemed to be subpar and insignificant, defining them as lesser leaders (Foster, 1990; Sizemore, 1986). Today, these same principals are primarily employed in large, urban school districts and continue to support the social, emotional, and academic needs of Black students (Tillman, 2004).

Traditionally, many women of color are passionate about positively transforming the learning experiences and opportunities of children who have been inadequately served by current educational policies and practices (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This kind of leadership for social justice is often found in the narratives of Black women's leadership. Many Black women leaders believe that engaging family, church, neighborhood, and race creates a powerful force that can make a difference (Sanders-Lawson, Smith-Campbell, & Benham, 2006).

Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, and Ballenger (2007) write that while the numbers of women in educational administration are increasing, research on gender and equality have focused on women because the number of women in educational administration remains small compared to men, specifically White men. However, Alston (2000) states that although women are moving into powerful positions in education and other occupations and professions, African American women are still a minority. Bennett-Beckford (2009) notes that some attention is paid to gender and race when hiring African American principals. However, there is no systematic attempt to incorporate initiatives aimed at creating a diverse educational community.

Contributions of female leadership have been overshadowed by a patriarchal and oppressive system, specifically excluding African American female leaders (Williams, 2013). African American women who pursue educational leadership positions may experience challenges associated with their gender, race, and age (Jean-Marie, 2013). Dardaine-Rugguet, Russo, and Harris (1994) contend Black women face discrimination since their gender and race evoke negative responses from employers. Mullen and Robertson (2014) indicate that Black female principals often have the most challenging

schools. They are charged with improving schools, leading and empowering staff, and ensuring academic success. In fact, Black female leaders often encounter negative stereotypes around race and gender, resulting in the constant need to prove themselves and advocate for other Black women.

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1977), sex discrimination often has greater impact than race discrimination in urban education and administration. Jean-Marie (2013) reports:

Literature focus on African American... female principals depicts gender and race issues continuing to be prevalent despite such women's increased presence in positions of educational leadership (Echols, 2006; Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Though the ratio of female and male principals is almost equal at the elementary level (54% male, 46% female), secondary principals are still majority male (77% male, 23% female; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Furthermore, principals of color are only 15% of the total (Wirt et al., 2004). While these statistics do not specifically report on the percentage of African American female principals, according to Tillman (2004), 'the number of Black women in pre-K-12 educational leadership positions, while increasing gradually, is still small relative to the numbers of White men and women and Black men.' (p. 125)

Further, Peters (2012) reports:

The traditional path of African-American women to school leadership is unique and different from other groups. Typically, African-American women teach an average of 12–20 years, about 7–15 years longer than their white, male counterparts (Banks 2001; Doughty 1980; Pigford and Tonnsen 1993). They are

often between the ages of 40 and 50 (Doughty 1980; Shakeshaft 1987) when they assume their first administrative position. However, the experiences of Black female principals under 40 may be different from their Black female counterparts (and those of other races) who are typically over 40 when they assume the principalship. (p. 24)

Murtadha and Larson (1999) state that African American women principals often emerge as leaders of under-maintained and economically depleted urban schools, where they receive very little support and experience an array of challenges and difficulties to improve the school (Grant, 2014). Peters (2012) reports that urban schools often struggle with student learning and achievement. However, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) put measures into place that exposed achievement gaps among traditionally underserved children (i.e. minority students, special needs, and economically disadvantaged students; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b). As a result, expectations of these African American female principals to turn around failing urban schools are extremely high (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993).

### **Experiences of African American Female Principals**

Research suggests that African American female principals have similar life and professional experiences. As a result of the oppressive structures in societal and educational systems, Black women principals' journeys to educational leadership, perspectives, actions, behaviors, and skills all influence their leadership and impact turnaround schools (Loder, 2005a).

According to a study by Loder (2005a), African American female principals in the pre-civil rights era began working when employment options for females were limited to

occupations such as teaching, nursing, and social work. Black women principals who came of age in the post-civil rights era began their careers when employment options and role responsibilities had dramatically increased for African American women.

Loder (2005a) states that one pre-civil rights interview participant believed that she aspired to be a teacher because it was a highly respected profession in the African American community. The interview participant stated that she always wanted to be a teacher. Several of the interview subjects embraced a career in education as a calling. Other interview subjects aspired to be entrepreneurs, business professionals, and writers. However, they were dissuaded by family and friends who believed color barriers would not permit them to succeed in those careers.

In Loder's (2005a) study, Black female principals of the post-civil rights generation stated they were not confronted with as many professional limitations. Their aspirations of being educators were evidenced in childhood play in which they adopted the role of teacher. One interview participant felt that African American teachers and administrators played a larger role in the functioning of the school than the White male principal. Other interview subjects attributed their decision to become principals to encouragement from mentors, other principals expressing confidence in their abilities, or being groomed by other Black female school leaders and mentors. This generation did not recount structural barriers to their principalship, possibly because they were in the racial and gender majority.

Perhaps, some African American female principals who are a part of the pre-civil rights generation were influenced to be teachers and school leaders as a result of the profound social events experienced during that time. In Loder's (2005a) study, Black

female principal interview participants said overt and subtle racism, sexism, and inequality were a way of life. These women often connected these experiences to the larger society. However, interview participants who were a part of the post-civil rights generation, lacked a more global perspective and could only recall incidents in their own families and neighborhoods. Loder (2005a) describes the post-civil rights generation perspective as *generational privilege* because it resulted from being born in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. The post-civil rights generation of Black female principals did not perceive overt racism and sexism as a defining characteristic of their social reality because of being far removed from segregation. Still, their perceptions shape their journey in the education perception.

Both pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement generations of African American female principals have personal and professional experiences that have influenced their activism, othermothering, and shifting, sometimes as a result of inequality and oppressive structures. These constructs are discussed in the following sections.

**Activism.** Tillman (2006) described African American female principals as social justice leaders who are activist oriented because many of them seek freedom for all people and all types of work to remedy inequality (Gray, 2014). Social justice leaders are “principals who advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 5). Social justice school leaders are activists who ensure components of academic achievement, critical consciousness, and inclusivity work in harmony to create diverse, creative, and engaging learning communities (Gray, 2014).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Black women educators have assumed the role of activist in their schools and communities (Pollard, 1997). Many African American women educators have and continue to act as activists to turn around schools and communities. According to Collins (2000b),

It may be more useful to assess Black women's activism less by ideological content of individual Black women's belief systems-whether they hold conservative, reformist, progressive, or radical ideologies based on some predetermined criteria-and more by Black women's collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in these multifaceted domains. (p. 203)

Black women educators participate in subtle and clandestine activism to protect their families, livelihood, and their futures. In a study by Loder-Jackson (2012), Black female educators explained that prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement, their activism included: (a) refusing to mark students absent, (b) protecting students from expulsion who participated in activism during the school day, (c) providing students with an intellectual understanding and rationale about the Civil Rights Movement, (d) allowing students to make personal choices about their civil rights involvement, (e) permitting students to ask questions and fortify their own social justice stance, and (f) displaying Black heritage through art and attire. These practices exemplify Collins' (2000a) thoughts on Black women's struggle for group and professional survival while continuing to influence emancipating education and pedagogy. Yet, from the standpoint of Black women educators, these activist efforts are unnoticed in most American educational settings (Loder-Jackson, 2012). Dantley (2009) states, "Historically, African American leadership has been grounded in a critique of the status quo linked with an

agenda to reconstruct institutions and indeed, the entire society in such a way that democratic and equitable treatment of all citizens becomes the norm (p. 43).

According to Franklin (1990), despite the tradition of activism in African American educators in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some scholars cite a decline in this tradition. Perkins (1983) contends the decline is a result of sexism, prevalent in the dominant society. Giddings (1984) attributes the decline partly to White women suffragettes who discouraged Black women's political participation and White social scientists' opinion that Black women's activism is deviant. However, many African American female school leaders still use activism to make a difference in society and to influence student and communities and to turn around schools.

**Othermothering.** Mothering can be defined as the "attentiveness and emotional responsiveness to the other as an intrinsic, ongoing aspect of one's own experience" (Jordan, 1991, p. 36). Hence, African American female principals of school communities with drastic social and economic declines accept the responsibility of educating, caring for, and mothering the children in those communities (Loder, 2005b). As a result of the personal connections to the school and community, Black female principals take on a maternal role in schools. In a study by Loder (2005b) on African American women principals, one principal conveyed that her shared heritage and upbringing gave her the right to assume maternal authority of the school and community.

Collins (2000) asserts that Black female principals of low-performing schools in economically disadvantaged communities often identify themselves as othermothers who are called to rebuild communities through nurturing, teaching, and leading (Loder, 2005b). Collins (2000a) defines othermothers as women "who work on behalf of the

Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability, which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality” (p. 132). Othermothers sacrifice their personal needs for the needs of children (Davis-Jones, 2013). The tradition of othermothering continues today for principals in urban and turnaround schools. Pool (1997) proposes that nurturing and ensuring the development of children are essential to the roles of Black women principals in low performing and turnaround schools to increase student learning and to enhance the communities.

**Shifting.** African American women school leaders often shift behaviors in their personal and professional lives. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) assert,

Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us. And yet, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, Black women in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America. (p. 2)

As a result of Black women being viewed through a distorted lens by mainstream White America, Black women have had to cope with or challenge myths and stereotypes by shifting their behavior. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) state that enslaved women and Black women living during the Jim Crow era would *shift* by casting their eyes down, moving their bodies off of a sidewalk, or relinquishing their seat for a White passenger on a crowded bus. Today, shifting is more subtle. Yet, it still tends to be a silent and adopted as a behavior to appease others. While all leaders shift at times, shifting is more pronounced in African American leaders. According to Mullen and Robertson (2014),

shifting is “the act of altering or changing aspects of oneself (e.g., becoming self-conscious about the messages one sends as a leader), one’s position (e.g., job), or one’s configuration (e.g., work-related scheduled hours)” (p. 137). Mullen and Robertson (2014) state that shifting is pronounced in African American educators, particularly with Black women educators. Black women shift to navigate the politics at work, to prove themselves in the community and within the larger society to avoid negative stereotypes, to succeed, to navigate the politics at work, and to change perspectives and experiences for the better in accordance with their moral compass.

In a study by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), 333 Black females from varying personal and professional experiences were surveyed, and of these, 71 were interviewed. The research found that Black women shift because of prevailing myths and stereotypes defining Black women as inferior to other people, unshakable, physically and emotionally invulnerable to challenging circumstances, unfeminine, prone to criminal behavior, promiscuous, and irresponsible. African American women, including African American school leaders, cope with and challenge these myths and stereotypes by altering their behavior to disprove and transcend misconceptions. They closely monitor how they are perceived, downplay, ignore, or deny sexism and racism, seek spiritual and emotional support, and retreat to the Black community in the face of injustice.

In the age of accountability and school turnaround, there are pressures for school leaders to ensure success for all students. Future school leaders are entering a profession in which educational systems and communities will scrutinize them (Mullen and Robertson, 2014). Therefore, Mullen and Robertson (2014) suggest that leadership preparation programs provide future school administrators the opportunity to engage in

identity development, learn about identity issues, and reflect on how to navigate their identities in communities of practice. Mullen and Robertson (2014) state,

Black female principals navigate their identities as bicultural beings within work spaces that are traditionally geared to mono-cultural White males. For these females, identity development is a cultural act of creation and resistance that makes their shifts in identity more pronounced and challenges more intense. (p. xx)

### **African American Female Principals in Urban Schools**

African American female principals are often principals of urban schools (Murtadha & Larson, 1999). However, there is limited research on how these principals successfully turnaround such urban schools (Grant, 2014). According to Jacob (2007), “the term urban school evokes an image of a dilapidated school building in a poor inner-city neighborhood populated with African American or Hispanic children” (p. 1). Urban schools are located in large central cities often characterized by high poverty rates (Jacob, 2007). Limited support and resources can have negative implications on the leadership of African American female principals of urban turnaround schools. Urban school leadership requires principals to understand the effects of poverty, school funding procedures, lack of parental school involvement, and the contributing factors of community unemployment and crime rates (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). Moreover, African American female principals of urban turnaround schools are expected to “establish and carry out educational agendas that clash with what they and the community see as vital to the education... of children” (Grant, 2014, p. 146).

A report by the Council of the Great City Schools and the American Institutes for Research indicates that some urban school systems fail to successfully implement district wide reforms and need targeted interventions to create change. This report also looks at the nation's Great City Schools to implement turnaround strategies in these schools with the support of the school districts' School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds (Casserly et al., 2011). While some urban schools have received SIG funds to implement a turnaround model, not all urban schools are turnaround schools.

### **A Brief History of School Reform in America**

Miles, Elkholtz, and Vandenberghe (2002), define school improvement as “a systemic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively” (p. 3). Harris (2002) states that school improvement “is largely concerned with changing the internal practices of schools by influencing how people work together” (p. 11). Hence, teacher development, school leadership, understanding that school improvement approaches vary across districts and schools, improving teaching and learning at the student level, and the importance of transforming the school culture to promote collegiality, trust, and collaborative working relationships are all essential components of school improvement (Harris, 2002). Harris (2002) states that establishing a positive school culture and climate is a prerequisite for school improvement. For example, creating a trusting school culture links the learning community and allows teachers to work collaboratively. Trust is especially important when risks are high and large-scale change is needed.

Motivated by economic conditions, the rationale for school reform is to increase student performance by strengthening students' knowledge and skills (Schneider & Keesler, 2007). In the 1830s and 1840s the growth of the economy, due to increased manufacturing, transportation, and immigration, brought many changes to America. The challenges included a rise in social tensions as a result of poverty, slums, crime, and related issues. Consequently, reformers expressed concerns about the nation's social fabric and its unity. Reformers expected schools to teach children values, morals, and the outlook they believed was necessary for the future well being of the nation. The Common School Movement, led by Horace Mann, was born out of reformers' desires to support universal education, common values, and security of social stability (Ravitch, 2001). Today,

Globalization has changed our economy and made education a civic, social, and economic imperative. Young people who do not acquire the skills of literacy and numeracy and a solid education will find themselves locked out of all sorts of future opportunities. (Ravitch, 2001, p. 14)

Fritzberg (n.d.) states K-12 education continues to be at the top of American domestic concerns. American companies express concern regarding the readiness of high school graduates entering the workforce. Business and civic leaders express concern about the achievement gap that "disproportionately relegates low-income graduates and children from ethnic minority groups to a life of underemployment or unemployment" (Fritzberg, n.d., para. 1). However, the concern over America's educational system is not new. After Russia launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, rhetoric about national security spawned questions about the quality of American schools. Thus, significant

federal resources were allocated to produce more rigorous curricula and better serve gifted students who would later positively contribute to the national economy (Fritzberg n.d.).

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court ruling resulted in an uproar in American schools and communities. The Supreme Court decision ended *de jure* segregation in American schools. Meanwhile, Civil Rights Movement leaders and supporters worked to reinforce the *Brown* decision (Fairchild & DeMary, 2011). One goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to ensure a free and appropriate education for all students. In the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government enacted a variety of programs and policies to provide equitable educational opportunities. For example, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 eliminated race-discrimination laws, including school segregation in the southern states, and worked to remediate past discrimination (Jennings, 2012).

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the ESEA, a component of the War on Poverty movement (Rudalevige, 2003). ESEA provided grants for low-income students, resources, special education centers, created scholarships for low-income college students, and federal grants to state educational agencies to improve elementary and secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). The ESEA “has since been reauthorized every four to six years, usually under a catchy new banner. Its signature program, Title I, funnels nearly \$12 billion annually to schools to support the education of disadvantaged children” (Rudalevige, 2003, p. 1.) Title I introduced a program to supplement support for students from low-income families and later expanded to support other student groups (Jennings, 2012).

The seminal and alarming report released by the Reagan administration in 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, created awareness of poor school performance across the nation and influenced targeted action to improve low performing schools (Rudalevige, 2003). At the release of *A Nation at Risk*, approximately 13% of 17-year-olds were illiterate, SAT scores were plummeting, and students required increased remedial courses in college (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Partly due to economic urgency, the scathing report became a touchstone of school reform. Additionally, *A Nation at Risk* reported on extensive loss of manufacturing jobs, the need for computers, and rapid advances in technology. Further, international competitiveness was at stake (Fairchild and DeMary, 2011).

In response to a dire need for improvement in American public education and the national economy, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) declared,

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (para. 1)

Harris (2002) affirms that over the past 30 years, research on school improvement has impacted educational policy and practice significantly. In fact, school improvement programs and reform efforts have focused primarily on student performance and achievement. Miles, Elkhalm, and Vandenberghe (1987), define school improvement as “a systemic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related

internal conditions in one or more schools with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively” (p. 3). Harris (2002) states that school improvement “is largely concerned with changing the internal practices of schools by influencing how people work together” (p. 11). Therefore, it is vital to embrace factors that foster improvement. These factors can include, but are not limited to, developing teachers and leaders, transforming culture, promoting collegiality and trust, fostering collaborative relationships, and improving teaching and learning at the student level (Harris, 2002). These types of actions create bonds between schools and their local communities, generating trust, which is particularly important in the face of high risk and the need for large scale change.

According to Zavadsky (2012), there has been a relentless pursuit to find the right approach to educate all children, continually adjusting and readjusting targets and goals to focus on and create a movement of change in schools. Yet, school improvement has been slow and inconsistent. Orfield and Lee (2005) assert that children in racially and ethnically segregated schools, and schools with concentrated poverty (particularly Black and Latino students), under qualified teachers, and high teacher attrition, experience the greatest challenges with school improvement efforts. To address the nation’s continuous decline in academic achievement, Congress reauthorized ESEA in 2002 and President George W. Bush signed it into law. With this reauthorization, ESEA was also given a new name, No Child Left Behind (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b).

No Child Left Behind put measures into place that exposed achievement gaps among traditionally underserved children and low performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b). A major goal of NCLB was to bring all children to proficiency or

above by 2014. Fostering improvement requires utilizing evidence-based instructional practices and other school-wide activities empirically linked to states' accountability systems and high-stakes, standardized tests. By increasing state, district, and school accountability, and applying pressure on educators to use effective practices, the expectation is that schools will improve achievement (Jordan, 2010). NCLB sets standards for acceptable performance at the state level and imposes sanctions for those that miss the standards, including closing and reopening schools as charters, contracting with a private management company, replacing all or most school staff, state management of the school, or imposing other major governance restructuring that makes fundamental reforms (Zavadsky, 2012). For several years, the U.S. Department of Education (n.b.b), has sought to reauthorize NCLB in order to expand opportunities for all students, to support schools, to strengthen the educational system and national economy, and to build on progress made over the past several years.

On December 10, 2015, President Barak Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a bill to reauthorize the 50-year-old ESEA and replace NCLB. ESSA helps ensure success for students and schools. A few of the promises ESSA makes include advancing equity, teaching high academic standards to all students, communicating vital information to educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments, supporting and growing local innovations, and sustaining and expanding high-quality pre-schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.c). Zavadsky (2012) reports,

Between 2006 and 2007, the majority of the schools had selected the “other” category and used supported teams as their most common tool. When 2009

American Recovery Reinvestment Act funds became available through the SIG program, the unprecedented funding prompted districts to go back and better structure their plans for chronically failing schools. (p. 7)

The need for extensive school improvement in areas such as achievement gaps, dropout rates, and college completion signified a need for dramatic change. Harris (2000) affirms that in the United States, school restructuring has dominated school improvement efforts. In 2009-2010, over 5,000 schools were placed in the NCLB category of restructuring requiring schools to choose an intervention option to engage in comprehensive change (Fairchild & Demary, 2011). Further, according to Fairchild and DeMary, as an increasing number of schools were placed in the restructuring classification, and educational administrators worked to address the challenges of the lowest performing schools, the turnaround model was developed as an intervention strategy as part of the American Recovery Reinvestment Act (ARR). Pappano (2010) states,

The federal push for school turnaround-demonstrated with \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top funding, another \$3.5 billion in Title I funding specifically for turnaround, and \$650 million in i3 (Investing in Innovation) money-has been all about competitive grants... and \$100 billion [was] allotted to education through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act stimulus package. (p. 11)

As a result of the government's investment to improve schools, provincial achievement targets around state assessments were put into place and schools had access to technical and strategic assistance by turnaround teams (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

School reform also requires the right mindset, equity, and access to resources, support, and a quality education, as well as having ownership and accountability, and creating trusting relationships to build community.

### **Mindset**

Mindsets can energize or undermine school turnaround. Dress (2016) states that people with a growth perspective see challenges as opportunities to learn, are eager to develop their skills, and are passionate about their work. They take ownership and accountability for their work. People with a fixed perspective believe their abilities are largely fixed, do not believe they have control of their strengths or weaknesses, become easily frustrated when they experience challenges, give up easily, lack persistence, and avoid new ideas. Dweck (2008) explains that

the fixed mindset limits achievement. It fills people's minds with interfering thoughts, it makes efforts disagreeable, and it leads to inferior learning strategies... important achievements require a clear focus, all-out effort, and a bottomless trunk full of strategies. Plus, allies in learning. This is what the growth mindset gives people, and that's why it helps their abilities grow and bear fruit. (p. 67)

A significant predictor of success is grit. Grit is defined as "passions and persistence for long-term goals" (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 166), which can be developed by having a growth mindset. According to Duckworth (2009), educators must develop an environment that helps students persevere and prosper.

Huggins and Celio (2002) state that improving schools requires examining mindsets, including ways in which mindsets around societal factors, such as prejudice

and discrimination, can infiltrate the learning process. According to Huggins and Celio (2002),

Prejudice and discrimination operate at all levels of our system of public education and have long been significant sources of educational difference among racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Centuries of discrimination have left a “residue of belief” that low-income students and students of color cannot succeed to high levels. Teachers’ perceptions, expectations, and behaviors interact with students’ beliefs, behaviors, and work habits in ways that help perpetuate the achievement gap. (p. 9)

In order to lead a culture of change or to turn schools around, Fullan (2001) argues that there is convergence of various knowledge, ideas, and strategies to confront complex problems. This convergence creates, what Fullan (2001) calls a new “mind-set” to powerfully lead complex change in organizations. The mind-set for leading complex change, such as in school turnaround, requires leaders to have a moral purpose, which involves acting with the intention to make a positive difference in lives and in society. Second, leaders must understand the change process. Leaders must recognize that change is not about having the most innovation nor having the best ideas. Complex change requires embracing early challenges that come with implementing something new, redefining resistance as something that has potential to be positive, creating a new culture, and continuously engaging in the process. Third, leaders must foster relationships with diverse people and groups. Fourth, leaders must commit to constantly creating and increasing knowledge inside and outside of the organization. Throughout this complex change process, leaders must remain energetic, enthusiastic, and hopeful.

Leaders who have these characteristics have a greater moral purpose, proactively engage in the change process, and naturally build relationships and knowledge (Fullan, 2001).

### **Equity and Access**

It is helpful to distinguish between equity and equality. “Equity is being just, impartial, and fair. Equality is providing the same or equivalent of any resource to all people” (Love, Stiles, Mundry, & DiRanna, 2008, p. 107). Inequality has a significant influence on student performance. In fact, in the United States, socio-economic background greatly affects student outcomes (Darling- Hammond, 2011). In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court stated that segregated schools were "inherently unequal" and laid the legal foundation for constructing a more equitable education system. Still, low performing schools that are racially, ethnically, or socially segregated are often challenged with having access to equitable resources and support to increase student performance. “Equity in education is a necessary condition for national educational excellence” (Denbo, Grant, Jackson, & Williams, 1994, p. 1). Love, et al. (2008), argue:

It is the right of every student to achieve at high levels, a right many student still do not have. The persistent achievement gaps between African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, and White and Asian students and between children living in poverty and others provide overwhelming evidence that obstacles to equity---- in beliefs, policies, and practices---- still stand in the way of this basic right. (p. 107)

Love further states, “Reform that does not put equity center stage has not and will not bring high levels of... achievement for all” (p. 253). However, equity and access to

a quality education should not be about educating all students to the same high standard. Rather, in a global society, equity and access is about providing transformative learning experiences and the allocation of resources based on student and family needs (Noguera 2003; Rousseau & Tate, 2003). Furthermore, “to make an excellent education the birthright of all, systemic reform must be conceived and structured to align resources with needs. We must end the pattern of providing the least to those who need the most” (Denbo, et al., 1994, p. xi).

The lack of equity and access adversely affect the achievement gap in low performing schools, which often serve low-income and minority students. As a result, students do not receive access to resources required for them to be successful. According to a study by Huggins and Celio (2002), equity and access around funding, teacher talent, and academic rigor are key components in increasing student achievement. Huggins and Celio (2002) state that despite efforts to address financial inequalities in school funding systems, school districts are often funded at different rates. School districts with the highest enrollments of economically disadvantaged students and minority students have less funds to spend per student than districts where economically disadvantaged and minority students have the lowest enrollment. In fact, inequitable patterns of funding exist across and within districts. Huggins and Celio (2002) also state that inexperienced, under-trained, and out-of-field teachers frequently teach low-income students and students of color. Additionally, research shows that academic achievement directly relates to rigorous coursework. Yet, schools that serve low-income students and students of color are less academically rigorous overall. The students are also underrepresented in advanced classes, even in schools where advanced courses are offered.

Researchers provide various solutions to create an equitable educational system.

Huggins and Celio (2002) suggest the following:

1. Use data to increase awareness of low performance
2. Measure improvement and gaps in achievement over time
3. Ensure that proper conditions are present to increase instruction and student learning
4. Require equal opportunities for students to master high standards
5. Design a system that provides school specific, comprehensive support and that builds capacity among staff

Darling-Hammond (2011) stated that nations that have been successful in sustaining student achievement have expanded educational access to more people and have revised curricula, instruction, and assessments to support more complex knowledge and skills required for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Darling-Hammond (2007) contends, “The common presumption that schools currently provide a level playing field paralyzes necessary efforts to invest in schools attended primarily by students of color” (p. 329). Darling-Hammond (2007) continues that in order to increase student achievement of minority and low-income children, reforms must ensure equity and access to quality educational experiences. This would require equalization of financial resources and improvements in curriculum, testing policies and ensuring high quality teachers for all students. Finally, Jordan (2010) argues that the aim should be to nurture students socially and intellectually and provide opportunities to learn high-content, standards-based material in diverse educational settings. Jordan (2010) continues that “Equity then, could then be measured in terms of ‘quality of care’ and rigor, as well as via individual

achievement indicators” (p. 174). Such educational priorities can lead to an evolution of current accountability policies (Jordan, 2010).

### **Building Relationships**

Lewin and Regine (2000) state that successful organizations focus on people and relationships to get sustainable outcomes. Organizations require a commitment to results and a connection and deep regard for people inside and outside of the organization. For relationships to function, trust must be established. Trust among leadership, staff, students, families, and communities serves as a basic foundational element that can improve instructional practices to increase student achievement (McAllister, 2013).

In an interview with Umphrey (2013), an assistant principal stated that relationships and a plan are the keys to success in schools. Relationships must be genuine and inclusive and are the mechanisms that maximize relevance and rigor. When conflicts arise, restorative justice is a way to heal and reestablish relationships. It is a way to address discipline and conflict resolution while maintaining positive relationships. Individuals involved recognize the harm caused during conflict and work to reconcile that conflict.

McAllister (2013) states that family and community engagement is also an essential component for whole-school reform and ongoing mechanisms for family community engagement are a guiding principal in school turnaround. Henderson and Mapp (2002) contend that family and community engagement, relationships, and partnerships positively impact student achievement, course rigor, and behavior. Deliberate capacity building, professional development that builds cultural competency to help understand various cultures (Olvios, 2012), and inviting families and community

members to be involved in designing initiatives, decision-making, and continuous learning are all important factors in building relationships with families and communities (Blake, Melaville & Shah, 2003) to support turnaround efforts.

### **A Brief History of School Turnaround: Defining School Turnaround and School Improvement Models**

Leithwood et al. (2010) state, the concept of turnaround began in the corporate world and is associated with a high degree of intolerance for prolonged failure or decline. Every organization is vulnerable to decline. In fact, decline is part of the cycle of change, but successful businesses and schools constantly use data to evaluate their position in order to quickly and appropriately address areas of need.

Leithwood et al. (2010) argue that turnaround is different from school improvement in that school improvement is often viewed as a gradual and continuous process, while turnaround is restricted to a state's lowest-performing schools. Typically, these schools require additional resources, significant change in a short time frame, and are accompanied by sanctions as a result of failure. Turnaround is a strategy, not a prescribed solution, which can produce dramatic results (Fairchild & DeMary, 2011). Pappano (2010) defines school turnaround as rapid and dramatic change in test scores, culture, attitude, and student aspirations to get measurable and immeasurable results. It is about continuous improvement. Turnaround helps students to have an achievement mindset and offers concrete goals that fuel motivation. Pappano (2010) explains that school turnaround is about examining how and what students learn, "defining and managing school culture more carefully, rethinking how to hire and reward teachers, and managing community and non-profit partnerships more effectively, using data better, and

coming up with more commonsense approaches to school discipline and academic struggles” (p. 9-10). Kowal and Ableidinger (2011) contend that school turnaround is a strategy for rapid, dramatic improvement in chronically low performing schools. Zavadsky (2012) takes the definition of turnaround beyond the school and focuses on the districts attached to chronically low-performing schools, stating districts must implement systematic, customized, and strategic practices to create and sustain long-term improvements at the district level for there to be lasting improvement in schools.

Zavadsky (2012) states that large portions of turnaround funds are associated with the SIG program to support rapid improvement of states’ persistently lowest performing schools through four models. Pappano (2010) and Zavadsky (2012) explain these models as follows:

- *Transformation Model:* The LEA may replace the principal and will implement a rigorous staff evaluation and development system, increase learning time, engage families and communities, and provide operational flexibility and sustained support.
- *Turnaround Model:* The LEA replaces the principal and rehires 50% of the staff; the new principal receives greater autonomy, adopts a new governance structure, and implements prescribed and recommended strategies
- *Restart Model:* The LEA closes and reopens the school as a charter school, implements a charter management organization.
- *School Closure:* The school closes and students of that school attend a higher-achieving school in the LEA.

Pappano (2010) acknowledges that the transformation is the least dramatic while school closure is the most extreme form of turnaround. While the structure of the models is rigid (Zavadsky, 2012), the federal government allows districts and schools to choose a model that is best suited for varying degrees of failure and, in some cases, implements corrective actions before schools become the district's or state's lowest performing institutions (Pappano, 2010). Zavadsky (2012) explains states are given parameters on disseminating SIG funds to the lowest-performing schools. Districts receiving SIG funds are required to identify schools as Tier I, II, or III. Tier I includes schools identified by the state education agency (SEA) as the lowest-performing 5% in the state, or has a high school graduation rate below 60% for several years. Tier II schools are considered persistently low-achieving. Tier III schools are eligible for Title I funds and require intensive support, but do not meet the criteria for Tier I. Priorities for SIG funds are given to Tier I and Tier II schools (Zavadsky, 2012) because of their higher need for funds.

### **Actions of School Leaders in Turnaround Schools**

In a business setting, leadership and other personnel of a chronically underperforming company would be terminated. Replacing the underperforming leader may provide an opportunity for turnaround. In turnaround schools, the school leader is often replaced if student performance increases are not quickly visible or significant. In a school setting, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest that leadership effectiveness requires campus leadership to exhibit characteristics and skills to promote and implement positive educational change. Furthermore, school leadership has proven to have one of the greatest impacts on student achievement.

Burns (1978) first introduced transforming leadership in his research on political leaders. Today, this research extends to organizational psychology. Burns (1978) explored two types of leadership, transactional and transforming leadership in his research. “Transactional leaders concentrate on clarifying, explaining and implementing the status quo requirements, roles, and rewards of the tasks” (Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992, p. 304). According to Burns (1978), transforming leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other reach high levels of morale and motivation. Transforming leadership focuses on the development and enhanced performance of leaders and followers for the purpose of change. Bass’ (1985) research contends transformational leaders support intellectual stimulation, which means transformational leaders “challenge the status quo and take risks. Followers are supported for creativity and self-direction” (Kirby et al., 1992, p. 304).

Bass (1985) extended Burns’ (1978) work by explaining the psychological factors involved with transactional and transforming leadership. Burns also began using the term transformational rather than transforming. Transformational leaders have visions, “an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 105). House and Singh (1987) further defined transformational leadership as “articulating and focusing on vision and mission, creating and maintaining a positive image in the minds of followers, showing confidence in and respect for followers, and behaving in a matter that reinforces the vision and mission” (p. 684) while Kouzes and Posner (2007) believe it is “an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good” (p. 105).

Burns' (1978) study found that contingent reward and management-by-exception are transactional leadership factors. Contingent rewards are received once an objective has been met. Management-by-exception means that leaders do not interfere with work of organizational members unless problems arise (Kirby et al., 1992). The study also determined charisma, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspiration were components of transformational leadership. Several educational experts promote transformational leadership theory. Lewis, Goodman, and Fandt (1998) state that school administrators are expected to manage a rapidly changing world of work to be successful at their schools.

Murphy and Myers (2008) state "leadership is seen as the central variable in the equation of organizational success" (p. 138). Kanter (2003) contends, "Turnarounds are when leadership matters most" (p. 67). Leaders in turnaround schools must exhibit transformational leadership because turnarounds require differentiated leadership skills which work to successfully run healthy schools and improve struggling ones. In fact, leaders in turnaround schools must be change leaders (Fairchild & DeMary, 2011). Leithwood et al., (2010) assert strong leadership is essential to the success of school turnaround and sustainability. According to Kotter (2012),

leadership is a set of processes that creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles. (p. 28)

Kotter (2012) reports the biggest mistake change leaders make is tolerating complacency. When a sense of urgency is not established early in the turnaround

initiative, failure to meet objectives is likely. Leaders and their team must commit and actively support and guide change efforts. Kotter (2012) believes change leaders must have a sensible vision that directs, aligns, and inspires actions followed by ongoing, credible communication of that vision. Additionally, leaders must confront and remove barriers that disempower staff and undermine change. Furthermore, leaders must create short-term wins that provide evidence that turnaround efforts are producing results. However, whether it is short-term wins or evidence of change over a period of time, Kotter (2012) states that turnaround leaders should not declare victory too soon, for doing so may halt momentum. Instead, leaders must ensure changes are embedded deep within the culture, social norms, and shared values, which may take three to ten years, before declaring victory.

Leithwood et al. (2010) report that successful turnaround leaders engage in three stages of turnaround work. *Stage 1* focuses on halting the decline of student performance and improving conditions for learning, which may include external interventions and building trusting relationships between leadership and staff. *Stage 2* emphasizes survival of the school and early performance improvements by increasing teacher efficacy and confidence in their ability to increase student achievement. Therefore, professional development is a priority to improve teacher efficacy and to build capacity. *Stage 3* centers around achieving satisfactory performance and aspiring to much more. At this stage, turnaround leaders create conditions to sustain themselves, such as establishing a school culture of high expectations, having strong instructional leadership skills and distributing leadership. Leithwood et al. (2010) state turnaround leaders are responsible for what students learn, are aware of the long-term nature of the job, understand the

interdependence of elementary and secondary schools, and are mindful of the factors that contribute to continuous improvement of student performance.

According to Winters and Herman (2011), leaders in turnaround schools engage in three phases. The first phase is to *realign*. This requires leaders in turnaround schools to create systems and collaborative structures to engage all stakeholders in turnaround efforts. To accomplish this, leaders organize information needed to realign and improve programs and curriculum. The second phase is *redesign*. In this phase, the leader will determine a turnaround focus based on needs assessment data. Then a turnaround plan is developed and implemented so that students meet both short and long-term achievement goals. The final phase is *refine*. The *refine* phase involves monitoring, evaluating, reflecting on, and fine-tuning the turnaround plan.

The findings from each evaluation drive the next cycle of turnaround. Similarly, Kowal and Ableidinger (2011) state that successful turnaround requires school leaders to: identify a set of starting leading indicators based on known success factors in [schools] and the nature of the venture being monitored; zealously monitor those indicators for signs of impending success or failure; and then act on what the indicators reveal, using data to target assistance, modify [resources], or redirect their focus. (p. 1)

To ensure that long-term student achievement is sustainable, Harris (2002) contends leaders must understand the school culture and determine what norms and values need to be changed. There must be a change in view of professional practice. Collectively, the campus teams must have the flexibility to identify and implement solutions for their school's unique needs. As stated by Fairchild and DeMary (2011),

turnaround leadership requires a myriad of actions to increase student performance, including determining the causes and conditions contributing to declining performance. Leaders must study and utilize the latest research-based practices to structure meaningful instructional time and engage students. Turnaround leaders and teachers assess and ensure engagement of quality professional development that strengthens turnaround efforts and builds capacity for continuous improvement. Fullan (2005) states that building capacity requires the increase of collective power through gaining new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation, and additional resources such as time, money, and access to expertise. Turnaround leaders also develop a succession plan and a suitable successor. Finally, turnaround leaders must focus on execution and achieving results.

### **Critique of School Turnaround and Turnaround Leadership**

Researchers have criticized many school turnaround efforts. Zavadsky (2012) states the school improvement models (turnaround, transformation, restart, and closure) are not sufficiently flexible to adapt to varying contexts, restrictive in nature, inconsistently implemented statewide, lack clear expectations, and are built on weak evidence. Additionally, the models fail to acknowledge the district's role in supporting existing low performing schools, and preventing future ones. Fullan (2006) states the problem with turnaround is the outcome only moves schools from awful to adequate. They use external direction and control to temporarily and superficially address low performance, and are unable to implement deeper, promising practices that result in sustainable reform. There is incredible pressure on raising state accountability scores. Fullan (2005) explains that due to the pressure of accountability, principals and teachers

lack long-term commitment. Even when strong support is provided for principals, teachers, and schools, accountability pressure and lack of long-term commitment results in short-term gains.

According to Leithwood et al., (2010), evidence informing the turnaround process is limited. There has not been enough research in improving chronically performing schools to produce a definitive model that provides certainty about what works in addressing these schools' needs. Most research focuses on schools that need some improvement rather than radical intervention. Peck and Reitzug (2014) assert there is no evidence of widespread success in school turnaround, resulting in a lack of understanding of turnaround as a high priority in federal education policy. Therefore, further research into the efficacy of turnaround as an improvement strategy is needed. Additionally, Peck and Reitzug (2014) state turnaround policy may be a dehumanizing approach to education in that the sole focus is on defining school success through test scores. Harris (2002) agrees that concentration of reform efforts creates a perception that turnaround outcomes are more important than improving processes.

Furthermore, Bass and Steidlemeier (1999) cite ethical criticisms of the transformational leadership style of leaders in turnaround schools. They contend many of these leaders fail to encourage followers to go beyond self-interests to best interests, manipulate followers to embark on paths that result in more losses than gains, and often lack a checks and balances system to eliminate oppression. Despite these criticisms, turnaround leadership can be effective if the leader is ethical, and there are systems in place to ensure the leader is ethical.

Peck and Reitzug (2014) argue that turnaround leadership is paradoxical. While turnaround encourages distributive leadership, the principal is fundamentally responsible for the failure or success of the school. Peck and Reitzug (2014) state the school leader must not only compel staff to improve test scores, but must also require staff to educate the whole child. Additionally, school leaders must engage communities while offering refuge to students experiencing issues and a negative impact in the community. Consequently, turnaround leaders have the challenging task of balancing accountability demands with ensuring stakeholder socio-emotional welfare. Furthermore, many leaders take on greater pressure and lack the training needed to systematically impact turnaround schools. This lack of training, ultimately, results in roadblocks to change (Litfin, 2007).

### **Summary**

African American women have and continue to endure oppression and social injustice in their personal and professional lives. Despite these experiences, Black women often serve as leaders, activists, and othermothers in urban and turnaround school settings to instill pride, uplift, and to increase the educational and economic status of those in their schools and communities.

In response to NCLB, principals across the nation are expected to increase student achievement. However, there is a lack of literature on how to prepare African American female principals for urban turnaround schools (Grant, 2014) and on African American female principals who have currently, or previously, led turnaround schools. African American women principals are highly represented in urban school settings that lack resources and support. Bloom and Erlandson (2003) state that African American women

principals in urban turnaround school settings experience challenges, such as receiving limited support and resources, which inhibit their ability to be successful in their schools.

This study contributes to the literature on African American women principals by providing insight into their lived experiences, including potential opportunities, barriers, and challenges they faced as leaders in turnaround schools, and on how their experiences influenced their leadership and, ultimately, impacted turnaround schools.

### III. METHODOLOGY

*Dusk peeked through white mini blinds early one Sunday evening just as crickets began to chirp, cicadas hummed, and Black birds made their last calls. In the far distance, children could be heard splashing and squealing in a backyard swimming pool. Occasionally, mothers sternly corrected children's behavior. As the day transitioned to evening and children enjoyed their final romps for the weekend, Penelope Hemingway and I found ourselves tucked away in an upstairs family room. We sat comfortably on a plush, textured, bluish gray couch. Ms. Penelope Hemingway, my interview participant, sat with one leg tucked under the other and one arm sprawled on the top of the couch. Her braided hair, sprinkled with sparkling white strands, was pulled up, pinned in a bun on the top of her head, revealing a beautiful cappuccino colored skin tone. Even at 50 years of age, not one wrinkle interrupted her smooth skin. As I looked at her, it occurred to me that it was her skin and her smile that cast the heavenly glow in the room. I was mesmerized, intrigued, and eager to learn more about this Black woman, this educator, this school leader. She threw her head back, smiled, and with glimmering eyes, appeared ready for her first interview question.*

I had the opportunity to interview Penelope Hemingway during preliminary research on African American female principals. Her story wrapped me in its arms and her words enthralled me. Vivid images of her life experiences danced in my mind's eye. I was so drawn into her story, I felt like I had floated out of the room and into another time, another world, like getting lost in a great book. I cherished the feeling of being captured in a story. My interview experience with Penelope reminded me of my love for stories. I chose to engage in interviews with African American women principals to

connect with them, learn from them, and understand their experiences, passions, perspectives, approaches to leadership, and, of course, to get swept away in their stories.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study focused on the personal lives and educational leadership experiences of African American women principals and the influence and impact of turnaround school improvement efforts. Creswell (2013) described qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 42). For this research study, qualitative methods were used to explore the experiences of African American women principals in turnaround schools to hear voices which might otherwise have been silenced. During the interview, the research participants were asked to expand on specific points of the narrative and to theorize on their lives (Denzin, 1989). Talking directly with African American women principals and hearing their stories provided a better understanding of their identities, perspectives, and experiences, and deeper insight into how their leadership impacted school turnaround efforts. Furthermore, presenting qualitative research findings allowed for literary candor and a flexible writing style to more powerfully describe the narratives of African American women principals in turnaround schools.

This chapter describes the methodology for the study, including procedures utilized for data collection, sampling, instrumentation, data organization, and data analysis. The methods for this research addressed the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

- What are the personal and professional experiences of African American women principals of turnaround model schools?

- What key/critical incidents or junctures do participants identify as significant?
- How do participants understand the role that race and gender (or intersectionality) play in their personal and professional lives?
- How do participants articulate the social and political structures that support and/or create barriers and challenges in their lives?
- How do participants engage in their role(s) in turnaround model schools?

### **Narrative Research Method**

As a researcher, I am interested in life because “life *is* education” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xx). I believe life experiences teach us valuable lessons and shape and re-shape our thinking, perspectives, and understanding of others and the world. I am interested in the lived experiences of people, how their lives evolved, and their values, beliefs, and attitudes were shaped by those experiences. My interest in lived experiences has led me to select a narrative research method for this study. Gibbs (2007) defines narrative research as a data collection activity that focuses on an accessible individual’s distinctive story. Creswell (2013) states that narrative research begins with study participants’ lived and told stories. Researchers then analyze the stories for better understanding. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) assert that narrative combines the views from research participants and the researcher to create a collaborative narrative.

Gibbs (2007) emphasizes that narration or storytelling is a method used to organize one’s understanding of the world. Analysis of topics, content, style, context, and how narratives are told can reveal an understanding of significant life and community events, and cultural contexts. Narratives convey experiences and give insight to

important themes, designating ideas for further investigation. While there are multiple functions of narratives or storytelling, conveying news, information, and personal experiences are the most common uses.

Once individuals have described their lived experiences, researchers can use those stories for analysis (Creswell, 2013). Czarniawska (2004) defines narrative as an oral or written account of actions and events connected chronologically. Narrative research typically consists of studying a small number of participants, collecting data from their narratives, reporting their experiences, and making meaning of them. Clandinin & Connelley (1990) state that narrative research “involves storytelling and attempts at reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (p. 4).

### **Participant Selection**

**Purposeful sampling.** Collins (1998) states that Black Feminism redefines what it means to be a Black woman in America and asks us to reconsider Black women as change agents. This research sought knowledgeable participants who were willing to provide a deeper understanding of African American women’s experiences, perspectives, and leadership styles in turnaround schools. I used purposeful sampling in order to select participants whose stories combined to provide information-rich cases, and thereby create that deeper understanding. Patton (2002) states, “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 46). In a narrative study, purposeful sampling requires that the researcher reflect carefully on whom to sample (Creswell, 2013). I have spent quite a bit of time reflecting on my life experiences as an African

American woman and as a leader in education. This led me to wonder about the experiences of other African American women educational leaders. I believe African American women principals have stories to tell about their lived experiences. I also believe their voices should be heard because they have valuable information for us. I sought African American women who were current or former principals of turnaround schools who were willing and available to share their stories for this study.

**Research participation criteria.** Standpoint theory focuses on individuals who share social status, social location, or meaningful experiences, which can generate shared knowledge about the social world (Harnois, 2010). This research looked into the shared experiences of African American women principals in turnaround schools, and therefore used Black women's standpoint theory as its theoretical framework. In order to provide the greatest assurance of a body of common experiences, participants in this study had to self-identify as an African American woman, and had to be current or former principals of a SIG turnaround model school. For this study, the term former principals refers to principals whose school was, at one time during their tenure, a turnaround model school that received SIG funds. However, it was not necessary for the campus to be receiving SIG funds at the time of the study. A principal who has: (a) the experience of working through the turnaround model, (b) exerted leadership to guide and direct teachers and staff through the challenges posed by that set of circumstances, and (c) worked closely with parents and students through a potentially negative environment will have a rich story to tell that can provide many lessons to benefit others.

This research was a national study in which African American women of turnaround schools were invited to participate from multiple regions of the United States

to get a broad sense of their experiences. I interviewed five principals of different grade levels to compare and contrast turnaround efforts across grade levels. Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Have a minimum of one year of experience in a turnaround school. Participants with more than one year of turnaround school experience may be able to provide a clearer understanding of actions and consequences on the school's turnaround efforts overtime.
- Were currently serving, or had previously served, as a principal in a school that received, or was continuing to receive, SIG funds to implement the turnaround model. I was interested in both current and previous Black women principals of turnaround schools because I believe both have a story to tell about their experiences as leaders in turnaround models. The focus on the turnaround model is intentional, in order to contribute to extant knowledge of how African American female principals use their leadership skills to increase school achievement in a school that requires rapid, dramatic change.

While not a criterion for the study, I used research participants' potential experiences of personal and/or professional oppression, racism, sexism, or an intersection of multiple social injustices as a lens of analysis. I was interested in understanding how African American women articulate why these experiences have influenced who they are as individuals and as leaders in turnaround schools. The lived experiences of the Black women in this research has fostered a better understanding of intersectional oppression based on race, class, gender (Harnois, 2010), and even age. Through preliminary research on three African American women principals, only one attributed race, gender,

and oppressive social constructs as a personal and professional challenge. The other women in the preliminary research were able to speak to being Black, and to their womanhood and leadership in a way that, while it was not absent of challenges, they did not believe the sources of those challenges were rooted in oppressive social constructs.

Furthermore, this research sought to examine the breadth and depth of what it means to be an African American woman principal in a turnaround school to more fully understand what is unique about their experiences, individual perspectives, and distinctive leadership style of each participant. Purposeful sampling provided the opportunity to share the rich stories of these women's shared and varying experiences.

**Participant recruiting process.** According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.b), SIG funds are allocated to state educational agencies (SEAs) which in turn use the monies to create competitive sub-grants for local educational agencies (LEAs). LEAs, in turn, can use these funds to increase student achievement in their lowest-performing schools. In conjunction with Title I funds for school improvement, SIGs are used to improve student achievement in Title I schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring so as to enable those schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and exit improvement status. Additionally,

The Department of Education Appropriations Act, 2010, provided \$546 million for School Improvement Grants in fiscal year (FY) 2010. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) estimates that, collectively, States have carried over approximately \$825 million in FY 2009 SIG funds that will be combined with FY 2010 SIG funds, for a total of nearly \$1.4 billion that will be

awarded by States as part of their FY 2010 SIG competitions. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. ii)

A list of schools, which have been granted SIG funds, is available. I used this list to review district and school websites in order to identify turnaround model schools which have Black female principals. Identification of these principals was based on pictures posted on the district, school or other websites. After identifying Black female principals, I noted their names, school, cities, school telephone and fax numbers, and email addresses in empty cells on the SIG documentation, as well as in a personal dissertation journal. I also researched the school's history through internet searches, reading articles blogs, other websites, or any available historical information about the school available on the internet. Telephone calls to current or previous turnaround model schools were made to verify present or past SIG status, and to confirm the current principal's contact information and tenure on the campus.

The first step in contacting participants and requesting participation in the study was in the form of a personal email to all principals who seemed to meet the criteria based on preliminary research of the school and principal. I introduced myself, provided an overview of my study, shared the criteria for participation, and invited them to participate. If they were interested in participating, I sent them a formal email invitation. This invitation included a cutoff response date. Not all principals responded to my initial email invitation. Therefore, I made several telephone calls to seek interest in the study. One principal agreed to participate in the study through telephone conversation. The first five principals who accepted the invitation to participate comprised the study group, and were so notified through email within 24 hours of their response.

While I planned to use the purposeful sampling process discussed earlier to identify a complete set of participants, I had already had the opportunity to discuss my research with prospective participants. During casual conversations, at two different school improvement conferences, I shared my research interest with two African American women principals, both of whom met one or more of my participation criteria.

One of these women was the principal of a former turnaround model school. After discussing my study, she expressed an interest in being involved in it. I confirmed she has been a principal of a turnaround model school for one year or more. There have been very few turnaround model schools in her state, which made me want to know more about the school's story and how she potentially influenced change on the campus. The principal verbally agreed to participate in the study. I followed up with her after IRB approval was granted, to make formal interview arrangements.

The other individual was a former principal of a turnaround model school. After talking about my research, she asked to be a part of my study. I agreed because she served for six years as a principal in a turnaround model school. Additionally, she expressed her passion for turnaround schools. She spoke of her experiences as a principal in a turnaround school and the lessons she learned, which made me curious about her journey into a turnaround situation, and her reasons for leaving the school at the end of this tenure. I also followed up with her after IRB approval was granted to make formal interview arrangements.

Five participants were confirmed to be a part of this study: Dr. Annette Dupuy, Melanie Duncan, Tracy Newman, Jacqueline “Jackie” Brooks, and Dr. Alishia Peterson. Annette’s interview took place over the phone. I traveled to meet Melanie and Tracy,

and Jackie and Alishia and I spoke via FaceTime. I prepared a travel schedule for Melanie and Tracy, confirmed travel and interview dates with research participants, and made travel arrangements and hotel reservations. I also faxed or emailed consent forms and requested that the research participant sign and return it to me prior to the interview date.

### **Data Collection**

Interview questions were designed to encourage participants to share information-rich narratives about their lived experiences in order to provide a deeper understanding of how social injustice impacts the lives and leadership of African American women principals. All study participants agreed to be interviewed once with the caveat that a second interview might be requested after data review to provide clarity for particular responses. All but one of the five study participants were interviewed twice. The first interview for each participant lasted for two to three and a half hours. The second interview lasted 15 to 30 minutes. One participant was unavailable for a second interview.

Interviews were recorded to ensure accurate data collection. Interviewees had the opportunity to ask questions about the interview process and the research. I also explained that I might interrupt the story from time to time to ask clarifying and probing questions. In addition, I explained participants should feel free to refuse to answer any question that created any discomfort.

Semi-structured interviews were used for informal discourse that lent itself to storytelling. Interview questions were constructed based on topics and themes in the literature review, such as race, gender, lived experiences, perspectives, leadership,

potentially oppressive social constructs, and school turnaround situations or issues. I asked my broad research question and sub-questions and also prepared supplemental probing questions for clarity and to elicit deeper responses. Questions were posed so as to elicit specific information about personal and professional experiences, key/critical incidents/junctures that led to their leadership in turnaround schools, the role of race and gender in their personal and professional lives, political and educational systems and structures that supported or created personal and professional barriers and challenges, and their key actions and behaviors in turnaround schools.

Each interview lasted two to three and a half hours. That amount of time allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions as needed to gain additional data for a better understanding of the stories and to uncover themes. At the conclusion of each interview, interview participants were asked for any final thoughts. Before leaving, I thanked the participant for sharing her story and asked permission to contact her if other questions arose. Immediately after the interview, interview recordings were transferred to a secure, password protected online platform for safekeeping and data confidentiality.

I also wanted to share my experience and reflections as a researcher and educational leader in the findings for this research. Therefore, during the interview, I used a personal journal to record my impressions of the research participant and her story, her behaviors, actions, and expressions, words or phrases that resonated with me during the interview, and descriptions of the setting. I also took some time to reflect in the journal about the interview experience, the principal and her story, and any connection I made with my personal and professional experiences. The notes in my personal journal were later used to write descriptions of my experience as a researcher

while conducting the interviews and my personal and professional connections to the stories told.

### **Data Analysis**

The main goal of data analysis is to determine the deeper meaning of what has been revealed. Analysis is essentially about identifying emerging patterns and themes in the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Narrative analysis is part of the narrative research process. Reissman (2008) notes narrative analysis “refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p.11). Narrative analysis allows researchers to take a more literary approach (Creswell, 2013) and focuses on the story itself (Reissman, 1993). I used Reissman’s (1993) representation of research as a foundation for my data analysis along with coding, thematic and narrative analysis to examine first-person accounts of individual participants’ experiences. I used these methodical approaches to help me analyze how the stories were constructed and to determine what cultural resources each story drew upon.

**An overview of Reissman’s representation of research process.** I used Reissman’s representation of research process to support me in using multiple forms of data analysis, including coding, thematic and narrative analysis. Like Reissman (1993), my first representation attended to experiences in which I closely watched, listened, reflected, remembered, and recollected the interview experience with African American women principals. The second representation involved telling about the experience. During the interview, I listened, questioned, and urged research participants to share key personal and professional incidents. By talking and listening, research participants and I produced narratives together. I “actively construct[ed] reality in new ways...to myself,

by thinking.” As I crafted each narrative, I described settings and each participant. I unfolded and stitched together each of their stories to make my interpretation of their experiences clear. The third representation involved the transcribing experience. An audio recording captured the entire conversation between interview participants and me. A written transcription of each interview was provided by a professional transcriptionist. The next representation occurred during the process of analyzing the transcripts. “The challenge is to identify similarities across moments into an aggregate, a summation” (Reissman, 1993, p. 13). I specifically looked for themes within each participant’s narrative and then themes that cut across the narratives. The final representation, the reading experience, involved the written report in which I interpreted the stories and “create[d] a richly textured research text that represents the complex narratives of experience” (Reissman, 2000, p. 142) of African American women principals for others to read and create their own meanings.

**Thematic analysis.** “How we arrange and rearrange the [interview] text in light of our discoveries is a process of testing, clarifying and deepening our understanding of what is happening in the discourse” (Mischler, 1991, p. 277). For this research, I explored how women construct their identities, their leadership, and how personal and professional experiences influenced values, behaviors, attitudes, and actions. As a result, themes related to these topics emerged.

The most popular form of narrative analysis is what Reissman (2008) calls thematic analysis in which the researcher analyzes what is spoken or written during data collection, such as interview data. Thematic analysis was used for this research. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic analysis provides a “rich and detailed, yet

complex, account of the data” (p. 78). Interviewing participants allowed face-to-face interactions and helped us experience the participants’ surroundings, emotions, and body language. Narrative analysis was used to learn from, understand, and share stories of Black women as educational leaders and their roles and experiences in turnaround schools. The findings of this research highlight themes that are exemplified in the narratives.

After the interview, I took a few days to reflect on my interview experience and attempted to make connections and gain insights on what I learned from the interview participants. I also listened to the audio recording of the interview as many times as needed to get an idea of connections and themes. As I reflected on and listened to the data, I asked myself: What does this mean? What connections can I make to participant’s stories? What are the themes (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012)? My reflections were captured in my journal and helped me synthesize the information.

Each interview was transcribed by a transcriptionist and saved in a secure location for confidentiality of data. Once the transcription was returned from the transcriptionist, I gave the interview participant a pseudonym and replaced her real name with the pseudonym in the transcript to protect her anonymity. Then, I holistically studied each narrative before I looked at the details of the interview in order to get an overall idea of each interview and its distinctive messages. Next, I read each interview three to five times and listened to the audio recordings as many times as needed, focusing on detail such as descriptions, incidents, actions, behaviors, and motives. These close and repeated readings and listenings led to insights that shaped how I chose to represent the interview in the research (Reissman, 1993). As I read each transcript, I coded it.

A code in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data... It is a research-generated construct that symbolizes data. (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4)

Reissman (2008) states that coding can be combined with narrative techniques to get a firm basis of the interview content and the embedded stories. I coded the data for this purpose and provided a theoretical and contextual understanding of the study.

According to Reissman (1993), the challenge is to identify similarities across various moments of research participants into a summation. Therefore, after coding each transcript, it is helpful to synthesize the codes to identify themes and “build a comprehensive, contextualized, and integrated understanding... of what has been found that will establish the conclusions drawn” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 191). Themes connected to the literature review were identified as well as other themes and topics related to African American women’s experiences, perspectives, school leadership, and other topics relevant to the research topic. I used the codes to identify themes. Once themes were identified, I labeled chart paper with themes, entering only one theme per piece of chart paper. I pasted quotations on the theme-labeled chart paper, illustrated connections by drawing lines, highlighting, and making notes on the chart paper using quotations.

I referred to my personal journal and the data to type an analytic memo, which is “a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 95). Miles, et al. (2014) state that analytic memos go beyond descriptive summaries and provide a synthesis of the data into higher, analytic meanings. The process may begin by rapidly capturing thoughts that

occur through data collection, but will tie the pieces of the data in to bring a concept to the forefront. This process helped me see the patterns and themes and also helped me process my thinking so that I could clearly describe my findings. As a narrative analyst, I was able to create a descriptive story that represented what each narrative signified. To establish validity of the narrative analysis, I supported my themes and possible theoretical claims with evidence from research participants' accounts.

Axiology is the guiding philosophy behind this qualitative narrative research. Creswell (2013) described the axiological approach as an opportunity for the researcher to position himself or herself in the study, the integration of the researcher's personal values, and the interpretation of data. My experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are reflected in the analysis of the interview subjects' stories. I documented personal perspectives and reflections as an African American woman, educator, and leader when reporting the findings of the study. Therefore, both my voice and the voice of research participants are heard in this study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of African American women principals in turnaround schools. This study examined personal and professional experiences, key/critical incidences/junctures that led to their leadership in turnaround schools, the role of race and gender in their personal and professional lives, political and educational systems and structures that supported or created personal and professional barriers and challenges, and their key actions and behaviors in turnaround schools. Through interviews, I identified themes related to the lives of Black female

principals in turnaround schools. Through descriptive writing, I shared the stories of these women.

## IV. FINDINGS

### **Collection of Stories: Preliminary Research 2013-2014**

From 2013 through 2014, I engaged in research on African American women principals to fulfill course requirements in my school improvement Ph.D. program. I had chosen to research on Black women principals after examining my experience as an African American woman and my leadership while serving low performing districts and schools in the South. Wonderings about other Black women educational leaders' experiences whirled in my mind quite often and created a longing for me to hear and understand their lived experiences.

Indeed, that preliminary research was enlightening and provided insights on the lived experiences and perspectives of Black female principals. Those collections of stories inspired further inquiry into the experiences of African American women principals in low performing schools, specifically SIG turnaround model schools. While the principals of the 2013 and 2014 research were not principals of SIG turnaround model schools, I believe the findings of the preliminary research provided meaningful and relevant data to support this research on the experiences, motives, and beliefs of African American women school leaders. Therefore, I have chosen to include a collection of stories from three African American women principals from my preliminary research on Celeste Tramaine, Penelope Hemingway, and Priscilla Chapman. Each of these women have lived and spent all of their careers in the Southern part of the United States.

The data from the preliminary research represent major talking points for each interview participant, including direct quotations and summaries. Additionally, I have provided observation notes for one interview participant, Celeste Tramaine, because I

was provided an opportunity to see her in practice at a low- performing school. Some of the preliminary research data foreshadows the findings for my recent study on African American women principals in turnaround schools.

### **Celeste Tramaine**

*Celeste sat in the tattered, slate blue chair and dug her nails into its narrow, wooden arms. Her right elbow repeatedly slipped off of the arms and the cracked, faux leather scratched the back of her thighs each time she sifted in her seat. Lava rumbled in her lower abdomen, and she could taste the fire in her saliva. Her heart pounded, and on the downbeats, she took shallow breaths.*

*Feelings of disgust and disappointment were winning against her pride. A tepid tear was losing its grip on a bottom eyelash. Celeste squeezed her eyes tight to save it, refusing to surrender any evidence that she felt defeated. Celeste slowly opened her eyes as Ms. Sarandon spoke the words again, while interlocking her age-spotted hands, and forcing a smirk that caused her right cheek to tremble. “You are not college material.” Ms. Sarandon emphasized, “You” and Celeste knew it was not just her that was not college material. It was any Black student; any Black girl that sat in Ms. Sarandon’s cold, cavernous office. Ms. Sarandon’s words would have a lasting impact on Celeste’s life, her perceptions, and her career.*

For many years, Celeste was determined to prove to herself and others, including Ms. Sarandon that she, a Black girl, could go to college and do well in life. Celeste, stated,

“And so I went, you know. And so, I got there and in the back of my mind was [Ms. Sarandon], always. [Ms. Sarandon] stayed with me for years because I kept hearing her

say that I didn't belong there, and I wasn't sure if that was true." She went on to say that when she transferred to another college, "I just worked hard and studied hard, because I was afraid that I was going to fail because Sarandon said I was."

Celeste explained that when she became a teacher, Ms. Sarandon's words continued to plague her, and Celeste wanted to prove "that I was worthy, that you don't have to worry about this. You've entrusted me with this teaching position, and I'm going to do everything I can to live up to the expectations that you have of me...I'm going to show you."

After many years in education as a teacher and dean of instruction, Celeste was recommended to succeed her school principal who told her, "[Celeste], I've taken this school as far as I can. I know, I believe in everything in you that you can take it to the next step." Celeste accepted the position and became the first female principal to lead the school in making significant, positive changes by ensuring teamwork and connectedness with campus staff. As a result of her effective leadership, Celeste was asked to be the principal at a neighboring, challenging school that Celeste described as "a horrid place." With a notable record of improving schools, Celeste later served as a school district director and associate superintendent.

When asked about her passion for leading low performing schools, Celeste stated, "I stayed in public school in urban school education, because that's where the masses of our kids are always going to be, inner city, urban schools, and those are the kids that need to have a difference made for them, and I understand it because I was one of those kids".

The advice Celeste shares with future teachers and principals is that,

If you keep your focus on the kids, everything else will fall into place, because the kids are the, the needs of the kids will let you know what your teachers need to have, what you need to have, what you need to do in terms of setting things up as the later of that campus. If you keep your eye on the prize, and the prize is our children- that their needs will tell you what you need to do at every single level, and if you do that you will be successful.

As a principal who helped other educators develop their skills, Celeste would tell teachers, “I’m going to do everything I can to help you. I’m going to be there to support you, if it means that I stay with you until midnight, if I come in on Saturday, if I meet you on Sunday afternoon. I’m going to do everything that you ask me to do to support you to get you where we have agreed that you need to be.”

Celeste Johanna Tramaine, a 55-year-old retired principal now serves as an educational consultant who provides technical assistance to low performing districts and schools with required interventions to support school turnaround. As a consultant, she assists in building capacity in district and school leaders and teachers to support continuous improvement efforts. I was a school improvement case manager for one of the schools in which Celeste was the educational consultant, and I have been able to observe Celeste’s support of district and campus leadership teams which have led to significant increases in student performance.

Celeste and I met several years ago while visiting a rural school in the South. I was visiting the school for a required visit to access the implementation of school improvement efforts and to provide technical assistance and support, and Celeste was the consultant assigned to the campus. Celeste and I arrived at the school early to discuss the

school's progress alone and for her to provide insight on the leadership and district. She sat across from me in a starched, tan linen pants suit with a warm smile. As she spoke, she shifted her glasses back into place by wiggling her nose. Her voice often escalated when she shared approaches she believed the district and school should take to make improvements. I knew, immediately, that my role at the table had changed. I was now there to learn how to turn a school around, and Celeste was going to teach me.

Moments later, I sat there, right across from the principal, a district staff member, and two teacher leaders, and I listened intently. I was exhilarated by Celeste's ability to coach, encourage, and provide guidance to a new, self-conscious principal of one of this low performing school. Celeste was a mentor to this principal, providing guidance and encouraging words based on Celeste's own professional experience and training. The novice principal expressed her respect and admiration for Celeste. I observed that the principal was attentive; closely watching Celeste's every interaction with campus staff and listening to the way in which Celeste reinvigorated the staff to learn, support one another, and engage in promising turnaround strategies. I am a witness to how that principal's leadership, confidence, and her ability to make data-informed decisions strengthened over time. With Celeste's guidance and support, after several years, the school's leadership team's mindsets and actions positively transformed, resulting in increased school performance.

Throughout her career, Celeste worked tirelessly to be the best educator she believed she could be and supported other educators to do the same. Celeste's dedication and determination as a school leader resulted in school improvement, teacher growth, and various career opportunities. While Ms. Sarandon's words haunted Celeste for many

years, Celeste's school leadership, personal and professional growth, and determination finally and eternally hushed the haunting, destructive words of Ms. Sarandon. Today, Celeste says, "I've put Ms. Sarandon to rest."

Celeste's interview provides a story of her personal and professional drive, fearlessness, and passion for all children. Her narrative provides insights on what motivates her personal and professional decisions and school leadership. What struck me most about Celeste's story is how words can change the way one feels, thinks, and acts. Ms. Sarandon's words served their purpose, to poison the mind of a young Black girl, to question her abilities and her future. Many of us have had experiences that have stripped us of our innocence, altered our perceptions, and changed the trajectory of our lives. Celeste's story provides a lesson that even when we are struck by venomous words, we must depend on our passion and life's purpose to survive and thrive.

### **Penelope Hemingway**

*Two-year-old Penelope is in the arms of her six-year-old sister, Gale. Gale is holding Penelope tight against her chest as she walks Penelope over to the kitchen. Penelope is slipping from Gale's arms and her legs knock against Gale's knees each time Gale takes a step. The summer sun beams through the windows and the heat lays a heavy hand on the children. Gale's knees tremble from the weight of the heat, but she is able to hold on to her sister.*

*Gale manages to make it to Penelope's high chair and drops Penelope in her seat. Penelope chews on two fingers to sooth her teething gums while Gale prepares her lunch. She watches intently, slaps her slobbery hands against the high chair tray, and squeals, "Schricken!" Gale reaches to the back of the stove for a lone fried chicken wing*

*and a piece of corn bread that appears to have been pinched off of multiple times. "It's lunch time, Pookie," Gale says with a sweet mumble. As Penelope finger feeds herself, Gale opens her new "Dick and Jane" book and reads it aloud.*

*Years pass, Gale's books become more advanced, and Gale learns to read much more eloquently. Books... reading... this is how these sisters bonded. And these moments with books and Gale become the beginning of Penelope's love for literature, writing, and the English language. Perhaps this is the beginning of Penelope's love of learning and the journey to her becoming an educator.*

Penelope is the youngest of 11 children, born to an illiterate father and a mother with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. Both parents were required to leave school to work to support their families. Still, Penelope's parents instilled the value of education in their children and a compassion for others. In fact, Penelope describes herself as a compassionate educator, and states:

The root of me being compassionate is because of my upbringing. We were on free and reduced lunch, so that deemed us at-risk all of a sudden. Being African American on free and reduced lunch makes you at-risk. Being in one of the quote-on-quote labeled minority groups makes you at risk. So, I have a passion for working with at-risk students, because I think I can readily identify with them, because they pretty much had an upbringing the way I did. I was, thank God I didn't have to have to be in a single parent home, but at the same time we were in the lower socio-economic side, and I really do gravitate toward those minorities who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds because I can relate to them, and I can talk to them, and I can lead them down the right path saying that, you

know what? This is where I came from also. You can do the same thing...So I think I have an advantage of being able to jump on the bandwagon with these kids and building a relationship with them where some of my counterparts cannot, because it's where I came from and I know that they're going through. I know some of the obstacles that they're trying to, that they're facing, and some of the hurdles they have to jump over, and, you know, I can give them some advice and kind of steer them towards an area that's going to make it a little bit easier because I've lived it.

Penelope believes that being an educator is about continuous learning and teaching adults and children about discipline, academics, and how to engage emotionally and socially with the rest of the world. She believes it is her responsibility to continue to learn in order to teach others. She stated that when she was an English teacher, "I just wanted [students] to be educated. I wanted them to know they could do anything. I wanted them to love literature the way I did... because if they could read, they could do anything... pick up a book and learn anything." Penelope believes that for students to be successful they must, "Just try.... And don't give up. You can do anything you want to do." For Penelope, being an educator is about "teaching from the heart...that's what it is all about to me... and by any means necessary." Penelope also stated that, "as an educator, it is my responsibility to continue learning so that I can teach others."

Penelope's inspiration to become an educator began with her honors English teacher whom Penelope described as *tough*. Penelope discussed instances of not receiving a desired grade in this teacher's class and expressed frustration that when she spent more time on assignments in this one class, she received a lower grade than when

she completed the assignment the morning it was due. When confronted about this, the teacher replied, “What does that tell you? It means you can pick up a piece of paper and write like the good authors do. That’s what I need you to do...Write.” Penelope proclaims, “It was the highest compliment she ever paid me.” This English teacher’s response resonated with Hemingway because she believed that her teacher believed in her.

Though Penelope recognized her intrigue with the written word, she did not know at the time she would become a teacher. While in college, she switched her major several times. It was not until she had a conversation with her advisor, and reflected on the role of educators, that she decided to be an English teacher. Penelope thought of her high school honors English teacher who she asserts, “instilled in me, the gift of me. Literally. She had made me make promises to myself. She made me feel I could do things I didn’t think I could do. I could write and read in the way I didn’t think I could... You know what? I think I can do that for other people. I could do that for other people.”

Penelope explained being a woman in educational leadership is about being compassionate and being a mother to students. According to Penelope, compassion and mothering seems to just come out; it feels natural. She explained that her mother and older siblings taught her what it means to be a woman. Part of womanhood, she explained, is about listening without judgment, having a good listening ear, using one’s best judgment, and being more sensitive than men.

Penelope stated:

When I first came to education, even though I was a teacher of English, I was also a coach. And so, in the coaching world, athletic world, you are surrounded by

men. I mean, it's even everywhere. I would say in the coaching arena, when I was coaching at one of the high schools [there were] two women and everyone else were men. And so, since we are so few and far between right now and then, that's why I say I identify myself as a woman first and then as an educator because of how I first started in education being surrounded by so many males.

Christianity plays a major role in Penelope's school leadership. She said, "I'm a Christian first, and sometimes when the Holy Spirit tells you to do something, you've got to do it." Additionally, Penelope stated:

As a Christian woman, that dictates a lot of your decision-making and a lot of your thought process because it makes you step back and do what the Lord would have you to do...Sometimes you are the only Bible that people are going to read. So by that, you have to display the characteristics of a Christian in your walk on the job, off the job, because you never know who's watching... as a Christian leader, it makes it so much easier you are being fair and consistent in everything you do...if you're fair and consistent and you're listening to the Holy Spirit...It makes you make the right decision, you know, for all involved.

Penelope's career in education has spanned close to 30 years. She has served as an English teacher and assistant principal in secondary schools. I interviewed Penelope twice to capture stories about her childhood, education, and about being a Black woman, an educator, and a leader. Penelope's narrative is laced with wisdom and an abundance of reflections. This interview was an opportunity to learn more about Penelope and to understand her passions, her beliefs, and the essence of who she is as a woman, a Black woman, and an educational leader.

From the child sitting in a high chair before her older sister, eating and listening to stories, to the woman and educator she is today, Penelope has a story that reminds us that the love of education begins at an early age, sometimes with an older sister named Gale.

### **Priscilla Chapman**

*Just as the clouds made way for the lazy, diminishing sunrays on a warm summer evening, I pulled up to Priscilla Chapman's sprawling, red-bricked house. Priscilla greeted me with a long, heavy hug in the foyer of her home. Such a deep hug from a stranger was peculiar to me, but Priscilla's eagerness and openness reassured me that our time together would be worthwhile. Priscilla has served a secondary teacher and assistant principal for many years in both urban and suburban school districts. Within the two hours I spent with Priscilla, she discussed her philosophies, values, and beliefs, which are rooted in her family history, lessons from her parents, and lived experiences.*

*Priscilla hunched over a mahogany desk. Her silver hair swept her cheeks with her every move. A light bulb under a stained glass lampshade illuminated the room with a soft glow. I sunk into a plush, chocolate leather chair and listened intently to her narrative, engaged and intrigued by her presence and each word that departed her lips. Priscilla's lips moved, but it was her soul that sang a sweet song that was ripe with passion and wisdom.*

Being Black is about having pride. Priscilla stated, "Pride is everything. I represent a culture of people who are the most amazing and resilient people in the world. I get mad when everybody tries to parallel their plight to that of slaves, because nobody's plight is that of slaves. These people were the people who I can thank for allowing me to live in this house that I live in."

Priscilla continued by saying that her Blackness and womanhood could not be separated “because the first thing you are going to see when I walk into a room is that I’m Black and that I’m a woman.” According to Priscilla, Black people who speak and have an authoritative position intimidate White people. In fact, Priscilla shared that as a Black woman, she often has to “play the game” or shift her behavior to be respected as a leader in her school district and avoid threatening White counterparts by her leadership and personality. Priscilla also alluded to the personal difficulty of being hired as a principal in her school district because she is a Black woman. She believes that she is often being overlooked for principal positions for which she is qualified so that White women can be hired for those positions in the district. Despite such challenges, she continues to serve her school, takes pride in her leadership, and believes it is her duty to take care of the people at her school, make sure everyone is safe, and that children are being educated.

During our time together, Priscilla stated she is from a family of educators who believed, “teaching is what saved the Black race.” I have pondered over this declaration, and I wonder, “If teaching saved the Black race, then why do Black Americans continually experience social injustice ranging from mass incarceration (modern slavery) to dying at the hands of corrupt police officers (modern lynchings)?” I believe that teaching can serve to awaken us and allows us to better question, wonder, and create a pathway to positive social change. However, in order to “save” the Black race, Blacks cannot be the only ones being taught, we must have a culture that is accepting of, and respecting for, all. Or perhaps, we have never needed to be saved. As a whole, we have managed to overcome the most brutal situations century after century. We have always

been a strong people, and we have always been able to rise. Teaching has empowered us and has educated us. Teaching has made us stronger.

### **Summary of Collection of Stories: Preliminary Research 2013-2014**

It was an honor interviewing Celeste Tramaine, Penelope Hemingway, and Priscilla Chapman, all of whom have many years of experience as school leaders. Each woman beautifully articulated the values and beliefs that influence their leadership. During each interview and while reviewing interview data, I was intrigued by their personal and professional journeys and their viewpoints on learning, education and improvement. While their stories are unique, the prevalent theme common to each interview was their passion about making a difference in schools and serving their staff and students. Whether through mentorship, relationships and connectedness, or self-awareness and pride, each of the women in my preliminary research had a story worth hearing and sharing about making a personal difference in schools and the lives of their students. I believe their dedication to educating children and leading schools will have a positive and lasting impact in the schools and communities they have and continue to serve. Each narrative reiterates the personal connections these Black women have to their school leadership. Their remarkable narratives coupled with my work with schools in need of improvement, deepened my interest and, ultimately, led to a collection of stories of African American women principals in SIG turnaround model schools.

### **Collection of Stories: African American Women Principals in SIG**

#### **Turnaround Model Schools**

This research sought to capture the stories of African American women principals in SIG turnaround schools, assess potential oppressive racial and gender barriers African

American women experience, and examine how these women overcame potential barriers and oppression to effectively implement school turnaround strategies. Each woman also shared a passion for education, leadership, and positively impacting the lives of children. They all had a moral purpose and demonstrated it through understanding which strategies were needed to garner change for their unique schools. The participants actively built relationships with students, staff, families, and communities, and they ranked knowledge and coherence making high among multiple priorities (Fullan, 2001).

All of the women in this study were deeply and intensely passionate about and committed to improving the lives of students in their schools. Their passion was seen through their leadership, creating systems and processes to ensure sustainable improvement, building relationships, connecting with the school community, advocating for students, and providing safe, nurturing environments for learning to take place. Each woman made learning a focus on the campus. Hargreaves states, “The primary responsibility of all leaders is to sustain learning. Leaders of learning put learning at the center of everything they do” (p. 696). Based on the interviews, all of the women seemed to create a school culture conducive to learning and excellence through the implementation of sustainable systems and practices.

Despite their similarities, each principal brought her own distinctive experiences, perspectives, and leadership style to address low performance in her school. The findings focus on the stories of each principal, rather than their turnaround schools. Therefore, a profile of each principal, instead of school profiles, is provided. Principal profiles were created to uplift their individual narratives and voices, to share their stories so as to increase the understanding of their personal identities, motivations, passions, and

leadership as principals in SIG turnaround model schools. These stories create an understanding of the context in which they occurred (Smith, 2013). Through Riessman's (1993) representation of research process and narrative analysis, I will share the stories of the five African American women principals of SIG turnaround model schools who participated in this study. The introductions of each principal provide background information on their lives and an overview of their leadership, including systems and practices that were implemented during their tenure. I chose to focus on backgrounds and overview first in order that we become familiar with their leadership, as well as their life experiences, beliefs, and leadership styles. I believed this would help to help us better understand the principals' leadership. I have also identified similarities and differences amongst each interview participant and have identified themes that cut across their lived experiences.

While listening, reading, reviewing, interpreting, and coding the interviews, themes emerged from the interview data. Common themes across research participants are provided in the analysis as well as anomalous experiences. The themes are: race and gender, mindset, and fostering relationships to build community. The section on themes is separate because I wanted us to be able to focus on the collective experiences of the women and to build our case based on Black Women's Standpoint Theory.

Five principals were interviewed for this study, all of whom have served the majority or their entire careers in low performing schools. One principal is employed in the Southern part of the United States; three are principals lead schools in the Midwest, and one principal is in a school located on the East coast.

| <b>Demographics of African American Women Principals in SIG Turnaround Model Schools</b> |            |   |  |   |  |   |
|--|------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Name</b>  | <b>Age</b> | <b>Roles in Education</b>   | <b>Current SIG Turnaround Model School</b> | <b>Previous SIG Turnaround Model School</b> | <b>Amount of SIG Funds Awarded to School</b> | <b>Key Leadership Actions</b>   |
| Dr. Annette Dupuy  | 53         | Science Teacher, Dean of Instruction, Director, Principal           |  | X   | 5 million                                    | Othermother, Built Capacity, Encouraged Ownership and Accountability, Developed a Learning Lab for Extended Educational Opportunities, Implemented a Discipline Program that Eliminated Student Suspensions |
| Melanie Duncan   | 38         | Math Teacher, Assistant Principal, Principal                        |  | X   | 6 million                                    | Focused on Creating Order, Built a Care Team to Implement Restorative Justice Practices, Created Academic and Grief Counseling Programs, Created an Advocate Program, Implemented a Zero Policy Philosophy  |
| Tracy Newman   | 41         | Music Teacher, Assistant Principal, Interim Principal, Principal    |  | X   | Did Not Provide                              | Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and Action Planning Based on Students' Needs; Modeled Instructional Leadership, Implemented a Tiered Positive Behavior Initiative  |
| Jacqueline "Jackie" Brooks   | 47         |   | X  |   | Did Not Provide                              | Built Relationships and Provided Opportunities for Team Building  |
| Dr. Alishia Peterson   | 34         | English Teacher, Magnet Coordinator, Assistant Principal, Principal |  | X   | 6 million                                    | Focused on Creating a "Village," Developed Community Partnerships, Opened a Food Pantry   |

Figure 2: Demographics of African American Women Principals in SIG Turnaround Model Schools.

**Dr. Annette Dupuy**

*Afro-Latino heritage vibrates the white sand beaches and the crisp winds whirl to a soulful groove. Annette was born here, in a Latin American country where her father was stationed in the military. However, Annette would spend the majority of her childhood on a United States military base that bordered Mexico, surrounded by Mexican culture, and become fluent in Spanish.*

*I imagine the aroma of fresh flour tortillas dancing down the dirt neighborhood road. Though she just had breakfast, Annette closes her eyes and imagines tossing a hot tortilla back and forth in her hands to cool it off before taking bite. At that, her stomach churns and murmurs a quiet gurgle. She opens her eyes to the raspy sound of her neighbor's, "¡Buenos dias, hija!" It is La Doña, with her black Oaxacan dress adorned with intricate, gold metallic flowers. Annette waves and responds with a jovial, "¡Buenos dias!" Desert sand slaps the back of her legs with each step Annette takes, creating a layer of dust on the indigo, floral bottom of her ivory dress. She pulls her books close to her chest as she skips over tumbleweeds that wonder wildly into her path. Annette is on her way to school, and she is eager to learn.*

*At home, Annette nibbles on a thumbnail as she loses herself in the world of written words tucked between hard covers. Perhaps this zeal for learning is a result of her value of education, reading, and attending college.*

Annette stated that as a child, "We had the whole Encyclopedia Britannica. There was never any question in my mind that I wasn't going to college." Annette embraced education, losing herself in the world of written words tucked between book covers. She

gracefully shared her discoveries with other children when she played at school and tutored neighboring children in Spanish and other subjects.

Annette's parents also emphasized the importance of hard work. Annette declared, "For them, everything was about possibility. It was just about working hard. You know, all you have to do is work hard, and then you will be able to be successful. Working hard was not an option." As an educator, Annette's hard work in school districts and campuses was evident as she garnered a track record for turning around multiple urban low performing schools. When asked why she chose to lead low performing schools, she stated, "I think I was supposed to do that work because I believed that people are destined to do things that they are supposed to do. So I think I was supposed to be there at that time. That's where I was supposed to go do some work."

At 53 years old, Dr. Annette Dupuy has been in education, doing the work she believes she needs to do, for 32 years. She has devotedly served as a teacher, director, dean of instruction, and principal. Annette is currently the principal of a former SIG turnaround model high school. The school received five million dollars to engage in turnaround strategies. Annette accepted the principalship at the turnaround school because it would be an opportunity "to be a part of something I could help construct... I enjoy building things." She also believes that "education is the great equalizer" and has dedicated her career to making sure "kids had access to what they needed be able to be successful."

As principal of a turnaround model school, Annette's goal was to increase academic performance for all students. To address students' social emotional needs, Annette serves as an *othermother* to students by using personal funds to purchase food,

school supplies, and household items, including toiletries, for students. She has also established structures, solid systems, and promising, sustainable practices such as building leadership capacity for all teachers where she encouraged ownership and accountability of all students, developed a learning lab for extended educational opportunities, and implemented a discipline program that eliminated student suspensions through a required increase in student engagement and student and teacher relationships. Annette explained that one of the opportunities for growth was and continues to be some staff members' ownership of the school vision and the necessary mindset and practices to make the vision a reality. She challenges teacher complacency and mediocrity by questioning and supports them by using coaching strategies and enlisting staff members to support one another to build campus community and a culture of continuous improvement. As a result, Annette believes that the school has turned around because of the "prevailing belief by the majority of the people who are there that students deserve access to a high quality instructional program." Additionally, she believes teacher reflection has impacted turnaround. Annette stated, "if we have most people who are able to engage in some reflection on their practice, recognize that the [student data] is a reflection of what they did; not talk about it being a student issue, but their issue, then we're in a good place."

Annette also explained that the five million dollars in SIG funds for her school had both positive and negative consequences. She stated, "I know for sure that we didn't need that amount of money to turn the school. It's not about that. It's about the practices and through the beliefs that people are going to hold and that doesn't cost you money to

do that.” According to Annette, “You have to orient the people around how do you align money to need.”

Annette has learned incredible lessons about students, low performance, and her leadership in the years she has been in education, but what she says she knows for sure is that “we have the capacity to author kids’ identities” and their futures. The advice Annette would give all future principals, including Black women principals is “that you have a center and that you know what your purpose is; why you are doing what you’re doing.” She said that staying centered and having a moral compass is what has helped turnaround her school. Annette stated,

“You just really have to... have a center and an anchor so when things come your way and you’re making decisions...it’s like a moral compass, and you have to have one in order to have something to hang on to when you’re deciding things even though you’re deciding things that are in congruence with this plan...it’s the thing that lets you sleep at night.”

Annette hopes that the legacy she leaves at her turnaround school is the value of “effective use of data to make informed decisions about instruction.” The question she will continue to ask teachers to reflect upon to encourage implementation of effective strategies is, “What adjustments are we going to need to make while supporting your needs so that we can effectively help you be better so that your kids will be successful?”

Annette’s philosophy in knowing herself and being centered resonated with me and serves as a reminder that when we stay centered, perhaps decisions for our children are actually about our children rather than being engrossed in misaligned political agendas. By staying centered, Annette is doing what she believes to be the best for

students. Annette's story helped me to accept that our work in school improvement is personal, and I do not believe we can do this work successfully and be fulfilled while doing it without staying true to ourselves, our core values, our visions, and our personal "whys." To me, those are the things that keep us centered, so that at the end of the day, we trust that we did what we believe to be the right thing for our children.

### **Melanie Duncan**

*Melanie tied her hair in a low ponytail, slipped into weathered sneakers, and double knotted the dingy strings. She has walked miles in these shoes, down the halls and on gang-war-ravaged streets of the school community. She clutches the walkie-talkie, pulls it to her dry mouth, and requests security to get into position. She is preparing for war.*

*Hearts beat erratically. Eyes pierce through souls. The tension pounds fiercely against walls and causes trembles in the halls. Violence is fermenting in young minds, and their hands are equipped for brutal actions.*

*The bell rings, fiercely. And the halls erupt with students forcefully pressing themselves out exits doors. Vulgarities crack the tumultuous air. Melanie bellows requests for order. While balancing on tiptoes, she reaches for a student who is about to land a ferocious blow. With a handful of the student's white t-shirt in her hand, she roars, "Out! Out! Get out of my school! Security, get him out of my school!" Chaos! This is the kind of school Melanie Duncan entered before the sun came up every morning, and where she stayed until well after the sun went down, early in her principalship in her turnaround school. After months of intuitive and strategic actions, she was able to gain*

*order in her school and was then able to focus on increasing student performance. Her leadership resulted in remarkable turnaround of her inner-city school.*

Melanie Duncan was born in the Midwest where she lived in a small two-bedroom apartment, which, at one time, was infested with mice and cockroaches. Her mother believed in Catholic education and worked as a teacher and had other part-time jobs to send her two daughters to Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. Due to financial struggles, Melanie was not able to participate in extra-curricular activities during her grammar school years, which led to frustration and wondering about her inability to participate in such activities. In high school, and upon attaining employment, she saved money to play sports and engage in other school clubs and activities. While Melanie's mother provided for a strong education, Melanie stated that nothing was handed to her and she learned, at an early age, the value of hard work to get what she wanted.

Although she has always seen herself as a leader, Melanie did not plan to become a principal. She said, "I never wanted to be an educator... I didn't have some dream of being... a teacher or principal... I've always just gone to where I felt most drawn to the work and where I feel the most passionate about the work." Eventually, Melanie's passion led her to one of the most challenging schools in the country.

I met Melanie Duncan several months ago at an educational conference at which she was the opening keynote speaker. I was immediately inspired by her humility and her passion for children. She is active in seeking opportunities to learn and converse about the current state of the educational system and the lack of equity and access for many children, especially minority, economically disadvantaged children. Melanie

advocates for all children, she works hard, and she willingly sacrifices her time to make a difference in education and communities. Her dedication, drive, growth mindset, leadership, and her ability to effectively implement systems and processes that have positively turned a school around have resulted in national recognition. Today, Melanie is recognized for her turnaround leadership and for improving one of the most difficult schools in America.

Thirty-eight-year-old Melanie Duncan has served as a math teacher, an assistant principal, and a principal. Melanie is the former principal of a previous SIG turnaround model, inner city, high school that is surrounded by poverty, gang activity, and violence. Even though she was encouraged to lead a more affluent, magnet school, Melanie accepted the principalship for the turnaround school because she said, “Give me the real deal... those are the kids I want.” Melanie believed in the students’ potential and saw opportunities for the campus to grow, build, and for staff to be creative and make progress. Only a few days into her principalship, the school garnered global attention following the after-school beating of a student that resulted in death. During her tenure, Melanie became internationally recognized as a tough principal who passionately worked to turn the school around.

Melanie brought strength, a clear vision and philosophical belief, tenacity, accountability, and high expectations to her campus, which resulted in dramatic improvements. During her six-year tenure at the school, she focused on liberating her students and community. She said, “It’s our job to really support the liberation of others who are in bondage...in our own revolutionary way.” The award of SIG funds provided resources to aid in that liberation. Melanie explained that the six million dollars in SIG

funds her school received did not “level the playing field, but helped us provide what kids needed.”

Melanie stated that during her first year as principal of the school, the school “was a very chaotic environment.” There were 300 hundred arrests in the school that year and students often brought weapons to school. Melanie explained, “We had a student killed sixteen days into my principalship that made international news. So there wasn’t like there’s going to be a school year as usual... We had three hundred arrests that first year inside the building...So my main focus in that first year was establishing order and control in the building...my main priority: keep us off the news.”

Order was necessary for the school to properly function and Melanie created a sense of urgency around making the school a safe place. Therefore, prior to focusing solely on academic performance, Melanie provided a structured environment and set boundaries with students to create a safe learning environment. Students were not allowed to show gang signs and were immediately suspended for doing so. Melanie explained that her disciplinary actions were about “setting the tone... that [gang activity]... will not be tolerated.” Once there was order in the school, Melanie was able to put other systems in place to support school turnaround efforts.

As principal, Melanie created a care team to plan and implement restorative justice practices and to re-examine how the campus would handle discipline issues. Academic and grief counseling programs were established to increase student performance and to address students’ socio-emotional needs. These systems provided data for Melanie to analyze data and engage in needs assessments to determine root causes of discipline issues. Once the reasons for campus chaos were revealed, Melanie

and her team were able to plan and proactively address those issues before they occurred again in the future. Melanie also created a student advocate program to increase student attendance. The advocate program provided clean school uniforms, food, and bus passes to students in need. Additionally, Melanie convinced her staff to implement a zero policy philosophy to give students hope and to increase academic performance.

Melanie led her school in creating dynamic and dramatic measures to successfully implement sustainable systems and processes for continuous improvement. Though she admits the campus still has work to do to continue the turnaround, the school is in a much better place than prior to her principalship. While Melanie is no longer a school principal, her advice to future African America female turnaround principals is to pray, “because the responsibility you have to take on is great, and it’s not for the faint of heart, and it’s not going to be easy. So, you have to have strength that’s almost really outside of yourself.”

Melanie’s leadership story included harrowing experiences with gang violence in her school and in the school community. Following the beating death of a student who was an innocent bystander, Melanie knew she had to take strategic and sometimes immediate actions to keep her students and her school safe. I admire her tenacity and fearless leadership in the school and school community that warranted direct actions to save children’s lives from violence.

Of all the principals I interviewed, Melanie’s school safety issues seemed the direst. Melanie’s experience proves that the work of turnaround cannot be done alone. Furthermore, the work requires a mindset as leaders that we must do whatever is necessary for the sake of our students’ safety to ensure solid educational experiences

including providing socio-emotional support through strong systems and by being visible in the community. Moreover, violence in schools and communities can be controlled and even stopped when it is not tolerated and mindsets are changed.

As Melanie shared her story of the violence in her school, I knew that if given the opportunity to be in a similar situation, I would fear for my own life. Melanie transformed my thinking by sharing her story of fearless actions. In fact, it was her fearlessness that struck me the most. Maybe there is no time to be scared for ourselves in the toughest schools. Instead, we must focus on our children. To me, Melanie is a school and community champion who focuses her energy on her passion: children.

### **Tracy Newman**

*Tracy closes her eyes and tilts her head back. Her freshly pressed hair cascades down her back. She inhales, places her satin-gloved hands on her diaphragm, and releases a sound so sweet that the pastor turns around in his plush, red velvet pulpit chair to peek over the partition. Mrs. Anderson waves her right hand in the air, and then as if she has grabbed a blessing, tightly clinches her fist, rocks in the squeaky wooden pew, and lets out high pinched, "Thank Ya!" before throwing herself against the back of her seat. The whole pew sways. Tracey opens her chestnut eyes and they glow as the sun glimmers through the stained-glass windows. As she bolts the final, "And I know, He watches over me," the congregation gloriously erupts in amens and hallelujahs. Vintage Martin Luther King, Jr. paper fans swiftly move in the hands of ushers as they attempt to cool those who have caught the Spirit. God is using Tracy to share His word. Today, God continues to use Tracy promote positive learning experiences for children.*

Tracy was born and reared in the Midwest in a predominately African American community where she grew up playing the piano, singing, and performing in operas and musical theater. Her first leadership role was as a church choir director at 12 years of age.

Tracy attended an African American church that owned and operated an elementary school, where all of the teachers were Black and what Tracy describes as “highly qualified” because of their teaching experience and because they held graduate degrees. Tracy’s teachers emphasized pride and professionalism. Tracy’s years at the school were, “probably the most rich experience I’ve ever had... in my life because it really shaped me, and it was one of those experiences where every teacher, they see the potential in you, and they push you to the limit.” As a child, Tracy was profoundly influenced by her teachers’ belief in hard work and achievement for all children. These beliefs were instilled in Tracy at an early age and continue to drive her leadership today.

Tracy comes from a family of educators. Though she had not planned to follow her family’s education career path, she was swayed by an opportunity to participate in a teaching program to receive a teaching certificate. She has since spent her entire career as an educator, subsequently receiving a Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education.

Tracy’s first teaching position was as a music teacher in a newly established charter school. After several years of teaching, Tracy became an assistant principal of a secondary, SIG funded school that included both middle and high school students with a 60- 65% English Language Learner (ELL) population. After the principal had to take a

leave of absence, Tracy was asked to become the interim principal because she was “best suited” for the position.

As interim principal, Tracy led an initiative to train teachers to properly teach ELL students and to address all students’ needs. To determine the needs of students, Tracy relied on data. She stated, “You began to look at not just the numbers in the data, but why the data looks the way it does.” As data were analyzed, Tracy began to “research best practices for our demographics.” Additionally, Tracy began to create a school culture around high expectations and “no excuses.” When Tracy met teacher resistance and excuse making, she would say, “Our students can’t do anything with excuses” and worked with teachers to determine how to address students’ individual areas of growth in order to increase learning and achievement.

Tracy believes a calling and what she describes as a “gift” drive her leadership. She stated, “I know I am here to affect the lives of children, and every experience that I’ve had and my parents have had has shaped me into being able to do that...” Tracy hopes that by answering the call of teaching and leading in schools, she will be rewarded when God tells her, “Well done, my good and faithful servant!” Tracy stated, “I would love for Him to say, ‘You did exactly what I sent you here to do.’”

Tracy has been an educator for many years and has served as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. At the time of our interview, she was serving as the principal of a SIG turnaround school. Due to district zoning and a decline in student enrollment because of the increase in charter schools in the community, Tracy’s SIG turnaround school was scheduled to close. As a result of her strong leadership at the SIG turnaround

school, Tracy was recently named the principal in another low performing school in the district.

Principals are expected to be instructional leaders and the manager of a school (Reeves, 2009). As principal, Tracy was able to lead and manage her turnaround school. She was also the only interview participant who identified as an instructional leader. As an instructional leader of her SIG turnaround school, she observed teachers and modeled lessons and instructional practices. When teachers did not seem convinced the teaching practices Tracy encouraged would work, Tracy said, “I can show you that it works, and some administrators just don’t want to go into the classroom and teach a class. I’m an exception to the rule. That’s who I am.” In order to be a strong instructional leader, Tracy explained it is necessary to build trust and relationships, praise and encourage, and engage in reflective questioning. Through her instructional leadership, Tracy was able to make an impact on teacher mindsets about how students learn and that all students can learn. Consequently, her ELA state score increased significantly.

Tracy also hired tutors to help support differentiation during the school day with SIG funds. However, Tracy knew that she would need to increase teacher quality and sustain teachers’ ability to differentiate for continuous improvement, after grant funds were no longer available. Tracy said, “When [the teachers] had the daytime tutors, I never let the tutors take the lead. The teacher had to be the one to say, ‘These are the things I want my students to work on... This is how the students learn.’”

Overtime, teachers were able to create differentiated centers for students’ various learning abilities. When the school no longer received SIG funds, tutors were no longer available, but teachers were able to differentiate for their students. Tracy stated, “that’s

the one thing that we've done structurally, and I think that's one of the things my teachers say they feel real comfortable with, the differentiation.”

Another issue on Tracy's campus was low attendance. The school district's policy was that 90% of students are present 90% of the time, however, prior to SIG, her turnaround campus only had an attendance rate of 83%. Tracy stated, “In the first year, we had almost 10% increase.” The attendance rate continued to increase as systems and processes around attendance were established and effectively implemented.

To address discipline issues, Tracy implemented a tiered positive behavior initiative. This initiative required appropriate behavior to be consistently practiced. Students were rewarded for modeling positive behaviors such as being respectful, responsible, safe, and being focused on learning. She also devoted a whole school assembly morning to reiterate expectations. With SIG funds, Tracy hired a behavior interventionist. Tracy told the behavior interventionist to “develop a list of students that come in the morning with issues because of things at night. I need you to talk to the teachers and find out the ones that come in not ready to work.” Rather than suspending students, Tracy and the behavior interventionist worked to defuse challenging behavioral situations. She stated, “Our main objective is to get our students back into the classroom. They have to be here because they can't learn if they're not here, and so we reduced the referrals that lead to suspensions.” As a result, referrals decreased from 608 to 125 in one year.

As principal of the SIG turnaround model school, Tracy has been fulfilled by changing lives, and she has had a tremendous impact on the school's improvement. She hopes that her legacy "would be one where every student who walked through any school

that I lead would have had a first class education and would have had an experience where they were valued and loved... I would love for the adults to be able to say, 'I had a leader or a principal who inspired me to become the... best teacher.'" Tracy wants teachers to always have felt supported and encouraged to be the best they could have been for themselves and for all students.

The advice Tracy gives to principals in SIG turnaround schools is knowing that the principal cannot do the work alone, but must motivate staff to engage in turnaround as well. Tracy also emphasized the importance of involving everyone in the process of constructing the vision and mission. She said, "If you want to be a really good turnaround leader you have to have people to believe the same vision and mission and... you have to lead in a way where you can take ownership of it; where they trust you as a leader... The people on your staff have to believe that they're part of it, and it's more than buy-in. It's believe-in."

What struck me the most about Tracy was the way God walked with her and His presence illuminated around her. I could see Him in her smile, the way she spoke to children in the school, and the way her eyes sparkled. I was moved by her belief that God called her to serve in schools and her commitment to follow His calling. Additionally, as a leader, she continued to work in classrooms to support teachers in improving instruction, and she loved doing it. Tracy teaches us that no matter how difficult school turnaround may be, our callings and believing in our children can keep us focused and enthusiastic about our work.

## **Jacqueline “Jackie” Brooks**

*The collard greens were simmering in a large pot on the stove, and Granny was gently placing the buttermilk soaked chicken in the skillet. The sound of hot grease popping alerted the family that dinner would be ready soon. Jackie sat on the mustard colored, mid-century tweed couch with her knees curled under her. As the opening whistle of “The Andy Griffith Show” played in the background, Jackie closed her eyes, and deeply inhaled the antique smell of her library book. “I hope Heaven smells like this,” she thought.*

*“Jackie Faye?” Mama was now standing in front of her. “Mama is leaving. You’re going to be a good girl for Granny and Paw-Paw, right?” “Yes, ma’am,” Jackie mumble with her chin to her chest and her fawn eyes looking up to her mother. Mama leaned over and placed a tender kiss on Jackie’s forehead, right under her tightly curled, Blue Magic sparkling bangs. The kiss left a crimson lip mark, and Mama licked her thumb and attempted to rub it off. “I will be back this weekend to pick you up, and we’ll do something special. I love you, Baby.” And with a final farewell, Mama was gone. Jackie was accustomed to Mama’s frequent departures, but she knew that she was in good care with her grandparents, in a small, close-knit African American community where everyone knew one another.*

Jackie decided she wanted to be a teacher at a young age. She stated, “I’ve always had a passion for teaching and learning” and called herself the “neighborhood teacher.” Becoming the “neighborhood teacher” came about as a result of strict grandparents who did not allow Jackie to engage in many social activities. Instead, Jackie spent the majority of her time reading the World Book Encyclopedia. Neighbors

took notice of Jackie's reading and study habits and often sent their children to Jackie's grandparents' home so that Jackie could tutor them. Tutoring led to Jackie's desire to become a teacher. Jackie explained that she received great joy from teaching and stated, "It was just something that came natural." Her kindergarten teacher, who she said was "amazing," also inspired Jackie. She described her teacher as being nice, caring, and loving, and said every morning she greeted each student with a warm hug. Jackie said that it was her kindergarten teacher who fostered her love of learning. Jackie also believes the former teacher instilled the work ethic and professionalism that Jackie carries with her today.

In high school, Jackie joined a program designed to support students' pathways to college. The program created a community of learners who were supported and motivated to work hard and strive for excellence, and provided tutoring and access to an array of college campus visits. Jackie said that this program is what created her interest to attend college, specifically a historically Black college. Jackie decided to attend a historically Black college because of the safety, comfort, and nurturing environment it provided her and because the college felt similar to the community where she grew up. Community would be something that Jackie continued to establish as a school principal by building and nurturing relationships with students, staff, and families.

At 47 years of age, Jacqueline Brooks has served as a teacher, reading coach, assistant principal, and is currently the principal of a SIG turnaround model elementary school. Jackie said that she became a principal because she believes she is a natural leader with a strong work ethic and no-nonsense attitude. However, Jackie said she leads mostly with her heart, which she believes positively "brings people together, makes

people feel comfortable, and makes people want to do the work” of turnaround. She also stated, “I genuinely care about these kids and where they’re going... Not everybody can come in and do this job at this school... You have to have a certain kind of connection with the community, with the parents...” Jackie said that she fosters relationships with students, families, and the community by being visible, personable, and straightforward with parents. Jackie stated, “I try to give them options of different agencies and services. I try to meet them where they are...” in order to create partnerships with families. Without the positive relationships with families and community, Jackie said that as a leader, “you will not survive... they will eat you alive.” Since Jackie has continually worked to build relationships with parents, she has seen a tremendous growth in parent participation in the school. For example, a recent parent evening event was standing room only and teachers commented that they had never seen that many parents in attendance.

Jackie also had to build relationships with her staff in order to turn the school around. She said, “When I came here, the morale of the staff was in the dumpsters... It was something that I had never seen before, to be honest. So, that was my first mission... to get to know these people and figure out how to befriend them and make this a more family type atmosphere. So, I did a lot of team building.”

Additionally, Jackie explained that she was relaxed, personable, and relatable with staff. She stated, “Within a year, my bosses came in and they were like, ‘It literally feels different... when you walk through the door.’” It was at that point that Jackie believed her leadership around teambuilding and relationship building was working. In

fact, Jackie believes that the increase in positive relationships is the greatest celebration on her campus.

Jackie sacrifices her own money, time, and health because she believes in increasing student learning. Despite the sacrifices and working within a challenging environment Jackie's continued turnaround efforts are because of her students. She stated, "The kids drive me... I want them to be able to compete with the kids... in the high-falutin' neighborhoods... I believe they have the mind to do it... It's about... getting them to understand how important... their education is and wanting more... I just want them to be right up there with the best of them."

Jackie describes working in her turnaround model school as "tough" and said the environment "wears you down quite a bit." Jackie hesitantly admitted that the greatest challenge at the campus is student discipline, which she believes is partly attributed to some students' mental illness. According to Jackie, poor discipline is having a negative impact on student performance. To address discipline, Jackie visits classrooms daily and encourages teachers to redirect behavior as long as possible. If students have to be removed from the classroom, they are sent to the office where they continue to work on academic lessons.

Jackie is concerned about the negative perceptions people will have about her school discipline issues. In fact, she has not spoken with her superintendent, whom she describes as supportive, about feeling overwhelmed by the disciplinary issues on her campus. She is afraid she will get responses like, "You're not trying hard enough" or "What else have you tried?" Even though Jackie believes that discipline is negatively impacting learning and test scores, she has not discussed the discipline issues with the

superintendent because of her fear that it will appear that she is not doing her job.

However, Jackie does believe she is doing her job by advocating for her students. She said, “I fight for my kids all the time... I’m going to make sure that they have what they need.”

Throughout the school turnaround journey, Jackie said the one thing she knows for sure is “I’ve made a difference... I think I give it my all every single day... and I know for sure that my teachers are clear on my expectations, and so are the students.” She also believes that aspiring African American women principals should “remember to be personable, approachable, and accessible.” Finally, Jackie wants to be remembered as “a passionate school leader and someone who’s fair, someone who went above and beyond for the kids who are in this neighborhood... I want to be known as the doer... someone who really wanted to make a difference and change the lives of these kids.”

When I first began reading about school turnaround, relationship building was absent from the literature. Rather, the most important part was taking immediate action to rid the school of ineffective staff, and then implementing academic programs. What strikes me about Jackie’s story is the value she puts on building relationships with students and families in her turnaround school. For effective change, relationships that support a positive school climate are crucial.

The new learning that I took from this interview was that as leaders, it is important that we are honest with our supervisors and seek support as needed. We may not know everything there is to know about turning a school around; so, sharing our needs may benefit us. For example, one of Jackie’s challenges is discipline.

Unfortunately, she is afraid of sharing the continuous discipline issues with her superintendent for fear that she will be viewed as incompetent. Students are being sent to the office because of discipline issues rather than learning in the classroom. This makes me wonder how superintendents can be aware and supportive of the many challenges that occur throughout the district and how they can partner with principals to address school needs. This would require superintendents to be visible on campuses and actively involved in the turnaround efforts and for principals to be open about the opportunities for growth on their campuses.

**Dr. Alishia Peterson**

*Alishia shuffles down the steps of the saffron school bus, while clutching the straps of her plum Jansport backpack to release some of the weight from her shoulders. The backpack is stuffed with her history textbook and extensive notes in a 3-ring binder. The saffron bus pulls off, leaving the smell of exhaust lingering in the crisp spring air.*

*Alishia and her friends walk down the neighborhood road, while quizzing each other for tomorrow's history test and encouraging one another to study and to get enough rest tonight. They have expressed the expectation that they will all get A's on this test. No exceptions. The expectation is welcomed, for they all believe in doing their best, studying hard, and making exceptional grades. They have created a culture of high expectations amongst themselves to prepare for their futures, college, and life. These girls are partners and motivators for one another; they have made a pact to be each other's support system. This support system will represent the kind of community that is similar to the village in which Alishia grew up, a supportive community that played a*

*significant role in Alishia's upbringing. This kind of community or village is what Alishia would later replicate in her turnaround school.*

Dr. Alishia Peterson was born in Germany where her father was stationed in the military. At an early age, Alishia's family moved to the Southern part of the United States where she grew up in a close-knit community where "everyone knew everyone" and with a family of educators. Alishia stated, "They say it takes a village to raise a child. I am very much the product of a village." The village included family, friends, and community members who encouraged and supported Alishia throughout her life. Alishia said, "I was raised by my village. I was given the morals and the background and the foundation from my village." When Alishia struggled academically in elementary school, her aunt would reteach the curriculum. Overtime, Alishia began to excel in school, was identified as academically gifted, and became a straight A student. Alishia also had a group of friends who were a support network and motivated Alishia to stay focused and to strive for excellence. She stated, "For me, a friend group would be a group of people that you believe love you and push you to be better."

Attending college was always the expectation in her family. However, while in high school, Alishia was not sure how where she was going to attend college, nor how she was going to pay for it. Alishia prayed for a sign from God about where she should attend college and to provide a way financially for her to attend. Alishia received a teaching fellow's scholarship, which provided for a full scholarship to a college or university to become a teacher. She chose to attend a historically Black university. She stated, "I realized if God could make it happen, I had no choice, and so it turned out to be the best decision ever."

I asked Alishia if she felt like teaching was a calling for her and she replied, “It had NOT been in me. It was clearly a calling. I was avoiding it at all costs.” During a classroom observation, the principal told Alishia that she would be assigned to a room that lacked classroom management. Alishia stated, “I went in there and took control.” The relationships she built with students, and students’ appreciation of her teaching and leadership helped Alishia to realize her purpose, her calling. She said, “God led me into this field, and I have this gift and to not use [the gift] didn’t seem right.”

After college, Alishia became a high school English teacher. She said, “I happen to think that I am a phenomenal teacher and always felt like... I was supposed to be impacting more kids.” Alishia continued:

I believe that there are certain aspects of being a teacher that you can learn. I believe that there’s some things that are just God given, and from the second I stepped into a room, I’ve always been able to command the attention and the space of the room...I do believe that there are some things that are gifted, and then I also believe in just being covered and just praying over what you’re supposed to do and...how you’re supposed to used your gift. And I believe if you do that, there is no going wrong.

After teaching for several years, Alishia received a Master’s degree in school administration and later became a middle school assistant principal at a school that was highly impacted by poverty. Three and a half years later, Alishia received a call from the deputy superintendent of a district in the Midwest who offered Alishia a principal position at her current SIG turnaround model school.

At 34 years of age, Dr. Alishia Peterson is the youngest of my interview participants. Alishia has been an educator for over a decade and has served as a teacher, magnet coordinator, assistant principal, and principal. At the time of our interview, she was the current principal of a SIG turnaround model school that received six million dollars in federal funds. Alishia has recently left the position to begin an education consulting business. The deputy superintendent who offered Alishia the position as principal of the SIG turnaround model school, said, "It's crazy. It's pandemonium. It's unsafe." Alishia said she was chosen for the principal position because, "I do have a reputation for being able to take rough situations. I'm not afraid of a challenge. I like a challenge." According to Alishia, the school district's expectation for her was to create order on the campus, improve instruction, and raise both achievement and the school's graduation rate. Alishia accepted the position as principal because the school was "the most impacted school in the state... probably the roughest... I like a challenge, and so I'm here, and have loved it."

As principal of a turnaround school, Alishia continually expressed her passion for positively impacting her school community, and the community in which she grew up inspired this passion. She voiced:

To whom much is given, much is required... I have accomplished not on the strength of me, but on the backs of those who went before me. The women in my community, the older women who didn't work, who were just there to take care of us, and who did a phenomenal job in loving and nurturing us and making sure we were all confident. So I believe that if I could help that village for someone who didn't have it, then I could impact one, two, [or] hundreds of kids.

Alishia is disappointed in communities today and, therefore, focused her energy on creating a school community where individuals hold one another accountable to strong values and positive mindsets. She opened a food pantry at the school for students and their families; she developed partnerships with the local churches; she sits on multiple community boards, and she attended community meetings. Alishia was also vocal about the community's role in increasing student achievement, worked to connect the school to the community, and reiterated that school is a product of the community. Alishia said the community was open to her leadership, her support of the community, and ways in which she worked to create a stronger community that supports student learning. Alishia stated, "I've been very fortunate to be respected in this community."

Using SIG funds, Alishia invested in a program that she stated, "creates comrade amongst the staff, and then teaches the staff how to redirect the miscommunications or the inappropriate actions and behaviors of students." The program focused on relationships. Additionally, Alishia sent teachers to professional development conferences for them to not only learn about innovative classroom strategies but to also build relationships with one another. According to Alishia, the relationship building will lead to teachers working better alongside one another to increase student learning.

In retrospect, Alishia believes the campus would have benefited from the establishment of a strong school culture, creating a family structure, and providing professional development to staff. She would have liked to work more on building relationships, creating a familial atmosphere, designing programs for students whose achievement was increasing, investing in more student activities and field trips, building school pride, and changing mindsets. Alishia believes that by making these areas a

priority, student learning would increase. Furthermore, Alishia stated, “The key to a high risk student in school in relationship. If your staff doesn’t have relationships with each other, it’s hard to build relationships... You have to feel like the person next to you and the person next to them have your back no matter what.”

Alishia faced challenges as a turnaround principal. Alishia became principal of the turnaround school after the school had already begun to receive SIG funds and was not a part of the initial decision-making process around systems and practices the campus would need to engage in for turnaround efforts. As a result, the former leadership team implemented initiatives that Alishia did not believe were sustainable. Alishia believes that a flaw in the dissemination of SIG funds is not providing school districts and principals with guidance on how to spend millions of dollars. Alishia stated:

They buy stuff that would never improve instruction. They pay for stupid stuff. They buy everyone uniforms. They open up the building and say, ‘We’re going to do a graduation breakfast’ and there’s more people at the breakfast than there is at graduation... They pay for programs that are not sustainable past the SIG grant... They buy all these additional technologies, but they don’t actually wire the building to withstand the technology that they purchased. They don’t train the staff on how to use the technology... I think SIG funding is fantastic. The thing that went wrong here is that they never trained the principal on how to use it.

Additionally, Alishia believes that SIG funds should be spread out over ten to 12 years and should be partly used to increase teacher pay, especially in schools with high instances of crime and poor classroom discipline. This, she believes, will be an incentive for teacher longevity at the school and would “make people feel appreciated.” Another

challenge for the campus was providing highly qualified teachers. Alishia stated, “Now a challenge that I can actually control would be the qualifications of teachers. A lot of our teachers are alternative licensure teachers, and so they don’t know their content, let alone their pedagogy.” Alishia provides these teachers with targeted professional development to increase teacher instruction. Despite these challenges, Alishia believes the greatest success for her SIG turnaround model school is culture and climate. Students feel safe and they feel that the staff cares for them.

Throughout her time as principal of the SIG turnaround model school, Alishia has depended on her faith to keep her grounded. She explained, “I believe everything happens for a reason. I believe that everything is for my good. So even when a door closes, I always know another door is going to open, and it’s going to be a better door... You can’t have faith and fear. They don’t go together... I choose faith... When I have a failure, I have to look at it and see the success in it because there’s always some success in it.”

Alishia said that she is sure “that God has a plan for all of us, and as long as we stay in line with that plan, we’ll be okay. We’ll be better than what we could have imagined ourselves.”

The advice Alishia gives aspiring African American women principals is to:

Find a support system that is true. Find out who you are. Make sure you know who you are because in a professional world of education, you will encounter things that test you... You have to have a real you. Your career is not who you are. It’s what you do... Find a mentor. Find someone, a critical friend...

someone you can just talk to... You should always be reaching for what's next... Always look to progress.

Finally, Alishia stated that her legacy will be that she had high expectations. She stated, "It's not okay to be mediocre. It's okay to fail, but fail forward, and always strive to be the best."

Just as Alishia had a support system that held her accountable as a young girl, Alishia works to do the same for her school and community. She has high expectations for her staff and students. As a part of a village, Alishia seems to understand that it is not enough to have high expectations, but that we must work with one another and within our communities. Alishia's leadership is an example of how to create partnerships with the school and community and set a clear message that the two do not work separately, but rather help stakeholders understand that the school and community are one. Alishia has helped me to understand that perhaps it is not enough as a principal to reach out to the community. The principal must be active in the community to ensure that a strong village is raising children.

### **Themes**

The background information and overviews of each principal serve to understand the principals' leadership. The section on themes, helps to understand the similarities and differences of the principals in SIG turnaround model schools and their experiences. Through thematic analysis, I have identified themes that cut across each interview participant's personal and professional experiences. Keeping in mind Black Women's Standpoint Theory and the strength of the meta-narrative coming through their collective stories, I decided to organize the results of this study into three themes: race and gender,

mindset, and building community through relationships. As I analyzed the data, I wondered if race and gender would influence the women's mindsets and relationships. Upon analysis, that did not appear to be the case. Instead, their race and gender created awareness or served as a reminder that social injustice exists, but did not appear to halt or alter their leadership because of their vision and focus on successfully turning around their schools.

### **Race and Gender**

These are the individual principals' personal and unjust experiences with race and gender. All research participants discussed race and gender and the influence and impact they have had on their lives and careers. While Melanie, Tracy, and Alishia experienced blatant social injustice due to being a Black woman, Annette and Jackie said they have not had such experiences. None of the women stated that racism or sexism negatively impacted their leadership in turnaround model schools. Yet the educational system in which the study participants work represents an oppressive structure, in that Black women principals are specifically hired to lead in low performing schools where they endure challenges with learning and achievement (Peters, 2012) that other school principals do not experience.

The participants also discussed the beauty and strength of being a Black woman. Each woman had unique experiences and perspectives around Black womanhood, and therefore, I want each woman's thoughts and experiences with race and gender to resonate with individuals around the world because, I believe, that the challenge in America is the continued oppression of African American woman. While their voices will be uplifted individually, each woman's voice represents notes in the musical

composition representing Black women in America. Singular notes create a beautiful score and tell their individual and collective stories. May their voices sing a song that brings change, unity, and justice for Black women, everywhere!

Annette stated she is fortunate that she has not experienced oppression or challenges due to her race or gender because she is smart and articulate. However, when asked about shifting her behavior as a Black woman turnaround principal to avoid stereotypes of Black women, Annette explained, “I do recognize when I’m in circles, depending on the circle... diction, language, articulation...it matters...people judge you based on how you’re speaking. They make decisions about your intelligence. They make all sorts of decisions about you regarding race, gender, age, and class.” Although she is aware of potential judgment because of her race and gender, Annette believes, “People may have seen something and expected something different [from a Black woman], [but] I’m able to really navigate...multiple settings with ease, and so I think that has been a benefit...and people have recognized that and said, ‘She would be really good to be a part of that because she’s going to fit into...the expected... [the] structure.’”

The idea that Annette “fits in” a structure to avoid Black female stereotypes reiterates that oppressive, prejudicial structures exist. Annette believes she has been able to avoid stereotypes because she willingly shifts her behavior. While interviewing Annette, it did not appear that she was aware of the implications of her shifting or that she was shifting in an oppressive social structure. In fact, she emphasized that shifting was necessary to avoid judgment and negative perceptions of her.

Melanie explained that being a Black woman is about strength and resilience. According to Melanie, Black women have needed strength and resilience to survive and

thrive because “it’s not easy being Black in America... it’s not easy to be a woman.” She believes that Black women are “beautifully and wonderfully made” and they can get things done. We are caring, nurturing, and exude a natural brilliance. Melanie also stated that Black women are problem solvers, connectors, and overcomers. Despite, negative media attention and prevailing stereotypes of African American women, Melanie insists, “there is nothing wrong with us.”

Prior to accepting the position at the turnaround school, an African American male colleague shared that the turnaround school and community were not ready to accept Melanie’s leadership because she was a young, Black woman. Melanie disclosed that because the lowest performing schools are often led by men, it is difficult to be a Black woman principal of a turnaround model school, “It’s hard... it could be difficult for a staff or community to fully accept a woman, a Black woman in this role” because of negative perceptions of Black women being controlling or extremely difficult to work with. However, Melanie did not let these negative perceptions overshadow her drive to turn the school around.

Tracy’s Black elementary teachers understood the plight of Blacks in America. Tracy explained that her teachers stressed, “You have to work twice as hard and be twice as good... because you’re going to be judged a little bit differently.”

Tracy's first discriminatory experience occurred in her seventh grade math class with a White teacher. She said the teacher required all of the Black children to sit in the back of the classroom. Even though Tracy requested to sit in the front of the classroom because that is where she learned best, the teacher continuously declined Tracy's request. According to Tracy, "She let us know that we were Black, and she wasn't planning on

teaching us." Tracy also recalled making A's in the math class on all of her assignments, yet the teacher would only give Tracy B's on report cards. Another teacher intentionally allowed Tracy's gelatin science project to melt and refused to give Tracy credit for it. These unjust experiences made Tracy reflect on the lessons her Black elementary teachers taught her about the challenges of being Black in America. After this experience, Tracy finally understood what these lessons meant. Despite experiences with racial prejudice, Tracy said, "It didn't change me from wanting to do my best... I still felt like I'm supposed to do well."

Tracy also experienced sexism in her career. She stated that she was passed over for school leadership positions because she is a woman. Tracy claimed that the school district preferred male school leaders because "It doesn't matter if you're White or Black, but you need, in an urban district... a Black male figure, or White male figure... to maintain order." Today, Tracy believes that her race and gender do not play a factor in how district and school staff view her because of her ability to get results in schools. Tracy stated, "I think it takes you creating a track record." Tracy insists that Black women principals in her district must have a stellar track record. She said, "I've seen principals get eaten up by a couple of downfalls, especially African American females. Just last year, this district let go of three Black females... No White males, no Black males...No White females...no Hispanic females or males... They fired three Black female principals, and they weren't horrible."

When asked why she believes the three Black women were fired from their principalships in the district, she stated, "You have to figure out who to be the strong Black woman with... You can't fight everybody... Learn how to play 'the game.'" "The

game" refers to going along with the status quo. Tracy explained that all three of the Black female principals struggled with creating motivation around their vision, principles, and strategies. They all needed coaching, but did not receive it.

When I asked Tracy whether or not being Black and a woman has helped her in any way, she believes that it has helped her and responded, "These experiences have actually shaped the way that I see the world and the way that I see the students that I work with and even how I work with people. I'm conscious of what I do and in turn conscious of what they do so I can... navigate the relationship."

Jackie has always recognized that she is Black because the community in which she grew up was predominately Black. As a principal of an inner city, low performing school, Jackie believes that being Black helps her because "folk in this neighborhood will trust me before they would someone else of another race." According to Jackie, her White peers struggle to build relationships and lead in predominately Black schools. Jackie said that the district's inner city schools with high populations of Black children also mostly have African American school leaders. However, Jackie believes that having Black women in those schools allows for stronger school and community connections and relationships because Black children may relate better to Black women principals. There also seems to be pressure to be an African American woman in her field. As a Black woman, Jackie works not to make her superiors and family proud. She stated, "I do feel an obligation that I don't... cause shame..." She also stated that her students and teachers are looking to her to guide them.

While Jackie stated she does not recall a time that she experienced racism and sexism as a child, as an adult, or in her position as school leader, I think she has learned

to cope with an oppressive structure. The oppressive structure is the educational system in which she is a principal of an inner city, low performing school that requires significant federal funds to create programs and initiatives for school turnaround. According to Jackie, it is mostly African American women who are principals of these campuses in the school district. In fact, Jackie stated that her employment depends on whether or not she increases student performance on her campus, which Jackie stated, “worries me.” The oppressive structure, then, is one that puts excessive pressure on Black women leaders to turnaround schools or lose their jobs.

Alishia describes herself as a strong, Black woman. She said she is:

Strong in the sense that I know when to be vulnerable. I know when to submit.

And whatever comes my way, I can handle it. Not because of the strength of me, but because of my backing, because of my background, and because of my faith in God. And so, I believe in my strength... I’ve studied the art of being a Black woman and how the challenges and the misconceptions and the stereotypes and everything that comes along with that, and yet, I could not be more proud than to be a Black woman. I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Alishia also discussed perceptions that her peers have of her. She said, “One of my supervisors characterized me as a pit-bull in a skirt.” Initially, Alishia considered the name as a term of endearment, but later realized, “It’s a Black woman stereotype, the angry Black woman. I’m not angry.” An assistant superintendent stated that Alishia’s personality “just too strong.” Alishia said that as a Black woman, “Anything you do is scrutinized. If a White man had my personality, he would run the world.” Alishia is aware of negative perceptions of others and realizes she might intimidate people because

of her confidence, but she does not allow those perceptions to hinder her work ethic. Instead, she said, “I can maneuver around it or use it to my advantage.” In fact, Alishia said that being a Black woman benefited her. She said:

Statistics show that Black women exponentially are hired to come into underrepresented, underfunded, extremely challenging schools... I actually felt like it was a good fit. I felt like what they needed was someone who could come in and get invested in the community and get involved in the school... I’m not saying a White person can’t do it. I’m saying it’s going to take a different person. So, yes, my race benefited me here because it was what the community and what the school needed at the time.

Alishia believes that Black women leaders have a tendency to proactively address issues.

Alishia also stated:

We have always been the leaders. We are often leaders in almost every field... This is how we can make our communities better, and so we have a tendency to invest in our community and want to get our elbows dirty... There’s so many facets to what we do- the mothering piece, the community piece, the servant piece, the bringing equity, helping other people see that we can be successful.

Alishia continued by saying that being a Black woman is sometimes perceived as negative, but that, “Black women have to make sure that we celebrate each other, elevate each other, we have to mentor each other, and remind each other [negative perceptions are] not our detriment.” In conclusion, “Black women run the world, will continue to run

the world, will continue to keep the world moving, and will continue to take care of our communities and our families.”

### **Mindset**

Change can be difficult, but according to Dweck (2008) it allows a person to be vibrant, courageous, and open. Dweck (2008) states, “Keep the growth mindset in your thoughts. Then, when you bump up against obstacles, you can turn to it. It will always be there for you, showing you a path into the future” (p. 246).

Every woman in this study shared their perspectives and experiences with mindset as leaders of turnaround schools. All of the women demonstrated a growth mindset, were able to recognize when mindsets were fixed, worked to change the mindsets of the school and community to create a safe school culture that focused on developing skills, increasing learning, and creating high expectations. Some of the participants emphasized the importance of having a mindset that allowed for individuals to own their work, hold themselves and others accountable for student achievement, and provide equity and access to a quality education for all children. I believe their growth mindsets have helped to sustain their passion, drive, and enjoyment of leading low performing schools. The principals also discussed harrowing results of fixed mindsets where staff avoided challenges, gave up easily, and did not change their negative perceptions of students. The women of this study discussed their beliefs about negative mindsets, and ways in which they address such mindsets.

**Fixed mindset.** One of the barriers that Annette has experienced in her leadership is the perception that staff and community have about the children in her school. Annette realizes that the negative perceptions of minority, economically

disadvantaged children in low performing schools can have an adverse impact on her students. Annette said, “I recognize that people will limit them because of where they come from; because of what they look like... People just get these things in their head... about what kids are capable of.” For example, Annette shared an experience that she had while teaching at a low performing elementary school. She said:

I was at the end of the first year at that school, time to start thinking about the leadership team, the department chairs... one of the things that I had... all of the grade levels do is... make a top ten list. A top ten list was the top ten things that you want the students to be coming in with to your grade level, and then we shared those lists with the grade level below, but I got one from second grade that included that they wanted the students to be able to print their first and last names... When I saw that list I knew I needed a new department chair... because if those were the expectations... your expectations are low.

As principal, Annette also experienced a negative mindset about students’ parents. She shared a particular experience on the mindset of a school board member. The board member said to a parent, “I don’t know why I talk to Hispanics... you people don’t know English.” Annette realized that this type of mindset is damaging to building relationships and supporting student growth. The parent shared this disheartening statement with Annette. Annette stated, “It was a very disappointing time for me because I really had to work at the school in particular... to help people understand the majority population.” Annette later addressed the issue with the board member and said, “You’re an extension of me, and this is the way you are treating... parents? It’s just very disappointing.”

Melanie also recognized that fixed mindsets stifled growth in her school and school community. Melanie believes that an unjust educational system and the inability to see or want opportunities for one's self perpetuates a cycle of violence, lack of education, and poverty. I equate Melanie's thoughts on consciousness of mind as "mindset" because it aligns the thinking and beliefs that uplift or impede one's progression. Melanie explained:

I think some of the stuff we bring on ourselves... we think about stuff that's going on with our families and we think about what's happening in our communities with violence, some of that stuff we bring on ourselves. Granted, there are systems in place, historically, that have set this up... but in many ways we perpetuate it... It really goes back to education. It's like if people cannot truly be like uplifted and move in a positive direction until they're educated in a lot of ways. That doesn't necessarily mean a college degree... our children are set up to fail... it's [also] a consciousness of mind... [Consciousness of mind is] a sense of awareness about one's current state, and about trying to progress... there has to be a consciousness and a collective progress....

Melanie also discussed mindsets about the rampant violence in her school and community. Despite being threatened with violence, Melanie emphatically expressed that she never feared for her personal safety and seemed disgusted by the idea that school leaders would have perceptions that lead to fears about students in their schools. She said, "You can't be a leader and fear the people that you're leading... that wouldn't make sense. You shouldn't be leading... it's demonizing our children... portraying them as

monsters, which is feeding into the negative psychology that people have of our community.”

The negative mindset that Tracy had to address was the comfort of failure and where teachers referred to students as “these kids” rather than “our kids.” Since some teachers did not believe that all students could learn or deserved a high quality education, some teachers were not putting forth their best effort for students. Tracy described a time in which she observed a teacher giving some students worksheets and providing a lesson for other students. When asked why he was not teaching all students, the teacher exclaimed, “These students get a lesson because they’re ready to learn. These students get worksheets because they don’t listen. They will become a distraction to those that want to learn... it’s easier that way.” This same teacher told students, “I can’t teach you because you act your color.” Tracy fired the teacher for his refusal to change his mindset and create a learning environment where all students could learn.

Jackie did not talk about fixed mindsets, but she did say something that initially made me wonder about her mindset. She said, “I enjoy these kids. I enjoy trying to fix them... It just works for me.” It is interesting to me that Jackie said she tries to “fix” students. It made me wonder if it is the kids who need to be fixed or if it the educational system that has failed our students. As we continued our interview, I believe that Jackie does not have the mindset that anything is wrong with the students in her school, but what she is doing is supporting students to realize their potential, which is why she does whatever it takes to get teachers the resources needed to increase student learning and creates a nurturing environment.

One of the challenges that Alishia faced with mindset was what she described as hopelessness in her school community. Alishia wants her students to want more for themselves, believe in themselves, and to ultimately change the way the community views education. She wants her students to be able to model ways in which one can overcome poverty and better the community. She said, “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s like what’s the purpose of graduating when the people who graduate are doing the same thing as the people who didn’t graduate.” Alishia’s thoughts on the community’s mindset is that sometimes it’s hard to visualize success when you’ve never seen it... They haven’t seen anyone be successful that they know. So even when my kids get full rides to schools, they don’t know anyone who’s ever gone there, so they’re like, ‘What’s that like? I don’t want to go there.’ Alishia has poignant conversations with students and parents about ways in which education, opportunities, and traveling outside of the community combine to shift mindsets.

**Growth mindset.** Despite Annette’s students’ previous experiences with excessive low performance, Annette believes her that her students can and will continuously improve. Annette believes that her students must always be a priority for everyone on her staff, who must do and believe in whatever it takes for students to be fully supported and elevated. This is important to Annette because, as she stated, “the opposite of doing this is tragedy. It’s tragic for the student. It’s the thing that keeps them from doing what is possible for them.” To limit “tragedy” in students’ lives, Annette believes in working on students’ behalf to educate and elevate them. According to Annette, an ongoing effort from leadership and teachers is required for students to be successful. Annette stated, “I really believe that effort creates ability. So you just have

to work at it and you get better.” Annette explained, “You have to have a disposition that says everybody can be successful if you’re going to work in a school...” Through my discussions with her, it appears that Annette has this disposition.

Melanie also had the disposition that everyone can be successful, including her school. In fact, she accepted the principalship at her SIG turnaround model school because she saw its potential and stated that there was “a lot of room to grow and build and be really creative and have a lot of fun doing it... you can see progress... I thought it would be cool to do something that... has some meaning and impact.” However, the fact that her school had SIG funds did not create a growth mindset around all students being successful because she already had that mindset. She said, “We got some extra money that was good and helped us with the work, but there wasn’t a different mindset.”

While the money was helpful to buy tools, resources, and to engage in professional development and implement other turnaround initiatives, Melanie shared this philosophy with her students to encourage, motivate, and uplift them: “You have everything inside of you, you need to be successful. You’ve already got it. It’s already in you. We’re not giving it to you... You’re manifesting what’s already inside of you as a human being.” Through her leadership, teamwork, and the implementation of programs and initiatives on her campus, Melanie helped students to realize their potential and helped shift students’ mindsets around their personal success. Melanie even spoke of a student who had severe discipline issues, but through support from Melanie and her staff demonstrating a growth mindset, that student recently graduated from college and is now working in Hollywood as a filmmaker. While reflecting on her student’s success, Melanie smiled and said, “Those are the things I feel proud of.”

Tracy demonstrated a growth mindset and grit and believed in getting results, “no excuses, and high expectations... if you work hard enough, you can make it. You can change things. You can reach whatever goal your goal is.” Tracy shared:

I grew in terms of challenging people’s mindset... If you really want to change a school and build a school culture that is successful, you have to challenge mindsets because our teachers some from certain backgrounds where they know nothing about our students’ lives, and they come with preconceived notions about what students can do and achieve... it’s that idea of dealing with those stereotypes and dealing with those preconceived notions and having those very uncomfortable conversations about race and about class and about economics.

Tracy believes this mindset can transform students’ lives and “change the trajectory of their life.” She explained, “You have to believe if you’re going to lead a turnaround school, you have to believe... that every student can learn at a high level.” Tracy believes this mindset will change lives. Tracy has worked to create a belief in her school that “you can achieve, that you can push yourself further and work hard and it gets you a positive result.” In morning assemblies, she had her students and staff recite, “I am somebody. I was born somebody. I come to school to learn how to speak like somebody, think like somebody, behave like somebody, because I am somebody.” It is clear that the lessons Tracy’s childhood teachers taught her about pride and hard work continue to impact her life, for she has worked to share those same lessons with her school students and staff.

Jackie’s mindset about students’ learning helped make a difference on her campus as well. She stated, “I believe all kids can learn...everyone can maximize their

potential.” To help change fixed mindsets, Jackie hired teachers with drive and energy who created and taught engaging lessons. These teachers helped to train and influence other teachers, which ultimately resulted in a positive shift in teacher mindsets about students’ learning and what teachers can do in their classrooms to create an environment where all students will learn.

**Ownership and accountability.** Part of having a growth mindset for the principals was ensuring ownership and accountability for all on their campus. Ownership is a key factor in implanting sustainable change. Fullan (2001) states, “True ownership is not something that occurs magically but rather is something that comes out the other end of a successful change process” (p. 92). Kotter (2012) explains that people in an organization must have a sense of urgency, otherwise they won’t make the extra effort, will cling to the status quo, and resist initiatives. Annette, Melanie, and Alishia worked to establish ownership and accountability on their campuses because they believed in and worked toward making sustainable change on their campuses.

Annette said that the greatest barrier for her campus is some individual’s mindsets around the work in the school and the belief that it is not their personal responsibility to increase student achievement. Annette said, “In effective teams, that’s everybody’s responsibility.” Not only are we responsible for student growth, but everyone must hold one another accountable. While ownership and accountability continue to be an opportunity for growth at Annette’s turnaround school, she is constantly engaging in personal reflection and coaching with staff to own the vision and the turnaround efforts.

Melanie believed in holding her staff accountable. She said, “I brought some accountability... to lift people to their higher self.” While she held her staff accountable

and provided the support needed for staff to become stronger educators, she fired staff who were not serving students well. Melanie said, “I might like you, and you might be a phenomenal person, but I promise you, I will move you up out of this school if you’re not serving kids well... and that’s kind of a harsh reality that I think was hard for people to deal with, with me.”

Although Melanie stated that she provided multiple opportunities to encourage teacher growth and engaged in supportive conversations with struggling teachers, Melanie did not tolerate complacency and got rid of staff who were complacent. As a turnaround leader, she insisted that she have quality teachers and staff who had a sense of urgency and believed in serving students to create dramatic change on her campus.

Alishia addressed ownership of the turnaround work and accountability on her campus by saying, “Parents send us their best. They don’t keep their best at home, so we have to show up and give 100% every time... So if you see a coworker doing something that’s wrong, you need to say something.” Alishia said that her role as the turnaround leader was to hold herself and others accountable. She encouraged her staff to do the same. Alishia said, “I think if we all held ourselves and other people to a high standard, I think we’d all be in a different place.”

### **Equity and Access**

The schools that the women of this study serve have majority populations of Black and Latino children who are also economically disadvantaged and live in impoverished communities. Prior to SIG funding and the implementation of turnaround efforts the schools suffered from low performance and lack of resources and tools to increase student achievement.

It is unfair for children to have fewer educational and career opportunities due to their race, ethnicity, immigrant status, gender, or economic status—an idea conveyed by the term equity. But from a different point of view, our society as a whole has lost, and continues to lose, all of the social and economic benefits to be derived from a major pool of individual and collective talent. (Capraro, Capraro & Lewis, 2013, p. viii)

For Annette, Melanie, and Tracy, the mindset needed for school turnaround was believing all students should have equity and access to a quality education. When asked to describe what equity and access look like, Annette said that in her current role, “It looks like making sure that everybody has access to an AP class, not just a few kids... everybody has access... to that level of rigor.”

When Melanie reflected on her experience with access as a child, she said, “I had access to a great education.” As principal of a turnaround school, she recognized that the students in her school and in her school community did not have access to certain educational experiences. She said, “Our kids don’t have access. They don’t have opportunities in some places... it’s not a lack of potential...” Aside from Melanie’s belief that all children deserve a solid educational experience, I also believe that Melanie’s experience with education at a young age influences her to want the same thing for other children. Melanie believes it is the responsibility of each of us to ensure students have access to learning opportunities to help students “fully actualize every bit of potential that is God-given within them... and it’s incumbent upon us as adults.”

For Tracy, “Equity has to do with assessing need and providing support and interventions that meet those needs... it’s the idea of tailoring your support based on that need.” Tracy stated,

“Every student should have access to a quality education... When I think about equity and access, everybody needs support and they should have access to that support. Every student needs a quality education, and they should have access to it. It becomes important for the leader of an organization to adjust to that need.”

When I asked Jackie about her thoughts on equity and access for students, Jackie blurred the lines between equity and equality. She said everyone should have “the same tools and resources available to them... Everyone should have the latest technology and the latest textbooks so that kids are exposed to whatever it is that is new. I don’t think it’s fair for one school to still be writing on whiteboards and you’ve got a school that has [interactive] boards.”

### **Fostering Relationships to Build Community**

Building trusting relationships is a necessary component of school improvement (Harris, 2002). Tracy, Jackie, and Alishia, discussed growing up in influential and close knit communities. I believe the strong, childhood relationships with peers and elders and the solid community they had growing up inspired them to foster relationships in their turnaround schools and school communities. In fact, Alishia’s interview was primarily focused on fostering relationships and building community for school turnaround. As stated by Lewin and Regine (2000), “Most people want to be part of their organizations; they want to know the organization’s purpose; they want to make a difference. When the individual soul is connected to the organization, people become connected to something

deeper—the desire to contribute to a larger purpose, to feel they are part of a greater whole, a web of connection” (p. 27). I believe the women of this study believed in authentic relationships to create a community and to contribute to a larger purpose—actualizing their school vision and ensuring all students received a valuable education.

Annette did not describe her childhood community as close knit, but through her interview, it was clear that she valued fostering relationships to build community. When Annette interviewed for the principal position at her turnaround school, she spoke about the partnership with the school and parents. Annette stated that, “Parents have to be partners in school... I really hoped [the parents] would be a part of the story with us as we build [the school].” Annette also said that her ability to speak fluent Spanish, “allows [her] to connect with people through language.” She also encouraged her teachers to build their own personal relationships with parents to create community.

Tracy said that in order to lead change on her campus, she had to build trust with her teachers. She said, “First they have to trust that you’re not trying to get rid of them, but you really want them to grow, and then once you get there, they trust you. Then you can start really getting much more deep into what people think and challenge their belief system around the students that they work with and even to the point of making some people uncomfortable.”

Tracy believes that building trust and relationships was essential for her to be able challenge existing fixed mindsets on her campus, build consensus, and implement turnaround efforts. Overtime, Tracy was able to build trust and relationships with her staff, which resulted in stronger partnerships and a supportive working environment.

When Jackie became the assistant principal of a low performing school, she quickly realized that the principal “was so out of touch with the community... she didn’t want to connect to the parents.” To begin building relationships with parents, Jackie invited parents to the school’s first honor roll assembly. Invitations were crafted and sent to parents for the celebratory event. This was the beginning of creating strong relationships with parents and inviting parents to be visible on campus to support their children. Years later, Jackie would also make relationships and community a priority on her turnaround campus.

The majority of Alishia’s interview was focused on relationships and community. From her childhood through adulthood, it is clear that being a part of and creating a village has been essential to Alishia’s life and profession. On the first school day at her turnaround school, rumors were circulating about a student led riot because the school would have a new principal: Alishia. According to Fullan (2001), change can create fear, anxiety, and panic. Therefore, Alishia took action and visited every classroom, introduced herself to all students, and shared her vision for the campus. She wanted students to feel comfortable with her and eliminate any fears they may have had about her being the new principal of the school. I think Alishia understood that “change arouses emotions, and when emotions intensify, leadership is key” (Fullan, 2001, p.1). Because of that, she was able to talk with students and, ultimately, prevent the riot from happening on her campus. Alishia was genuine in her need to build relationships with students, but she also realized the importance of building relationships to create a safe school environment.

## Summary

This study shares the experiences and perspectives of African American women principals in SIG turnaround model schools. Through their stories, the principals explained the roles, responsibilities, and actions as leaders of chronically low performing schools. Through implementing sustainable systems and processes, having and encouraging growth mindsets, and building relationships, each woman worked to increase student achievement and create a culture of continuous improvement. Although their lives and leadership styles are unique, all of the women of this study believed and dedicated their lives and careers to changing the schools and communities in which they worked to ones that are supportive, motivating, and environments where all children can learn and achieve.

Furthermore, some of the interview participants described negative experiences due to their race and gender in both their personal and professional lives. While they are aware of racial and social injustice against Black women in America and even shift behavior in an attempt to change or avoid negative perceptions of themselves or Black women as a whole, none of the women seemed to allow these injustices to halt or alter their leadership. Instead, all of the women continued to do what they believed to be the best for students, which I attribute to their strength, determination, and true sense of their calling or purpose. I have been inspired by what each principal stands for, their devotion to fighting for children every day and their leadership.

I also believe this study uplifted the Black women's standpoint because despite the challenges and barriers we face in life as leaders and as Black women, we are resilient and have a moral purpose to impact the lives of children. The women of this study have

added to the understanding of how African American women principals of turnaround schools understand their purpose, their identities, oppression, and their leadership. The principals in this study want to turn schools around and they see their work as imperative in improving education for all students. What I have learned from each of these women is the power of a moral purpose and dedication to children and school communities. I believe their stories will inspire current and aspiring Black women principals and will provide ideas to lead and implement promising practice for sustainable change.

## V. REFLECTIONS

Who are the women of this study? They are all leaders, believers, and advocates for children. They work every day to dramatically improve schools in the United States of America by increasing student learning and uplifting school communities. They fight for equity, access, a quality education for all children. And they are all strong, intelligent Black Women Leaders! I salute them for their dedication to excellence in education, to positive change, and to improving the lives of children.

I started this study with my personal reflections; I will end it the same way for a cyclical effect. This chapter includes my personal reflections on each of my experiences with the research participants and the implications garnered from each woman's lived and shared experiences. The reflections shared are around pieces from each interview that resonated most with me or led me to new thinking or new wonderings.

First, I will share my reflections on the collection of stories of the participants in my preliminary research because I have been inspired by each of their stories. Then I will share my reflections on my recent study. The reflections from both the pilot and recent study are connected to interview discussions that particularly inspired me, stirred within me, or led to new wonderings.

### **The Power of Words**

Throughout her career, Celeste Tramaine worked tirelessly to be the best educator she could be as well as helping children to be their best selves. As a result, she proved to herself that hard work and dedication could lead to success and hushed the haunting, destructive words of her high school guidance counselor. As I watched Celeste share her story, her body movements, her intense tone, and her facial expressions captivated me as

she reminisced on her past and her undying determination to make a difference. I was inspired by her strength and her willingness to blaze forward and realized the impact words can have on one's life and mindset. And, while her former counselor's, Ms. Sarandon, words haunted Celeste for many years, it seemed that the more experience, knowledge, and confidence she gained from being a impactful educator, the less Ms. Sarandon's voice resonated within her. When asked about how Ms. Sarandon influenced her work today, Celeste proudly acknowledged that Ms. Sarandon's voice had been silenced. While Ms. Sarandon's words were discouraging, Celeste rose above them and has made a difference in the schools, students, and lives of other leaders.

As I reflected on Celeste's experience, Ms. Sarandon's words, and Ms. Sarandon's perceptions of a young Black girl, I wondered how I would initially react in Celeste's situation. My feelings may have been hurt, and I may have wondered if those words were true. Maybe I would have become so self-conscious that I would end up paying more attention to faults than I would have on celebrating my gifts and talents. Celeste's interview was a reminder that we are our own best ally to overcome harmful words and actions against us. We must have confidence in our abilities and knowledge. If we want to make a difference in our educational system, we must continue to strive, and stay determined to make a difference.

I have known Celeste, professionally, for several years now, and I continue to be enamored by her willingness and ability to motivate leaders and encourage them to believe in themselves and their own abilities to create positive and lasting change on their campuses. What I appreciate about Celeste is the way she mentors both novice and experienced principals. While the tone of her voice is firm, her words are honest and

motivational. I have learned from Celeste the power of believing in one's self, letting go of the negativity, and trusting one's self to lead and learn from all of our experiences.

Celeste's interview was the first one from the preliminary research and the first interview I had ever done with an African American woman principal. This experience created an eagerness to learn more about other Black women leaders.

### **The Power of Understanding the Complexity of Identity**

Penelope Hemingway's core values about advocacy and compassion were evident as she spoke of supporting at-risk students, and even teachers when needed. Her core values seem to be extensions of her Christianity. Her advocacy and compassion are a testament to her leadership.

As my interview concluded with Penelope, I realized she did not readily identify herself as Black. When I asked her why she did not mention being Black she said, "It's a given." Her response made me consider that how one identifies himself or herself is complex, and individuals get to choose who they want to be and what they want to acknowledge. I initially assumed that Penelope would naturally explore her Black heritage in the interview, but she did not. Penelope's response taught me the following: not to expect that just because I am interviewing Black women as educational leaders that each woman will identify herself as Black, female, educator, or leader. How each interviewer identifies herself will vary. Penelope felt that her leadership was more than about being Black because her race did not influence her leadership. This variance allowed me to connect with and examine the complexities of my other participants' lives, experiences, and perspectives based on their distinctive identifies and prepared me to be

open to whatever my recent study would find. Maybe the way in which leaders identify themselves is a lens through which they lead.

Penelope did, however, identify with being a woman. As Penelope spoke, I accepted her definition of what it means to be a woman because it was her personal definition, and I did not find it appropriate to verbally disagree with it. However, I did find myself pondering: What does it really mean to be a woman? Chaney (2011) reiterates what Mary McLeod Bethune asserts: being a woman, especially a Black woman, is about negotiating what is expected of them, what they expect from themselves, as well as what they expect from others. I think being a woman is multi-faceted. I believe that answers about what it means to be a woman will vary depending on who is asked. For me, being a woman is about how I see the world, engage with others, how I mother, and even the biological experiences that only women have. Being a woman is how I am at my proudest moments and how I am in moments of sorrow. All of my interactions, perceptions, and feelings change daily due to my feelings and the actions required or generated that day. I believe these changes are allowable. I think being a woman is about the consistency of being inconsistent. Maybe every woman will describe womanhood differently. Maybe there are multiple answers to what it means to be a woman. Perhaps there is not an answer at all.

Examining the multiple and exceptional identities is what fascinated me about this research. I believe this exploration created the magic in the research process. My next interview subject, Pricilla Chapman, did identify herself as being Black. Her definition of what it means to be Black and being a leader were intriguing.

## **The Power of Identity and Core Values**

Growing up as a Black American, it was instilled in me to have pride in my blackness and acknowledge my ancestors for their legacy and for creating a path for me. In school, church, and in my home, I was taught never to forget the sacrifices my ancestors made for freedom and for rights so I could have freedom and rights as well. It seems that Priscilla Chapman learned the same lessons. This is one of the commonalities that connected me to Priscilla, her story, and that made Priscilla's story even more fascinating to me. For me, a part of being Black is about remembering our ancestors and their plight, they worked hard to create opportunities for future generations, they were leaders and followers, and they were resilient. Priscilla described resilience as the ability to "withstand travesty, hard times, and good times, and still be strong." Each of the women in this study have demonstrated resilience as leaders in turnaround schools. Furthermore, for me, resilience is ever present in the history of slavery and the continuous struggle to be Black in America.

I think it is also important to note that Priscilla's, and even my own definition of Blackness, may not be the same for other Black Americans. Each of us has our own history and each of us will see the world differently. What I appreciate about Priscilla is her honesty and openness, and her ability and willingness to be unapologetic about who she is and what she believes. While some women shift their behavior to fit the status quo, Priscilla accepts who she is and stands up for what she believes. Although she realizes that there may be consequences to her outspokenness, she is willing to accept those consequences if she is doing what she believes aligns to her core values of authenticity, fairness, hard work, giving, and humility.

Besides Priscilla's descriptions of being a leader and being Black, her core values resounded throughout the interview. As each core value was described, I could not help but smile, for her core values are mine as well. It felt good to know that I am not alone in my beliefs and what I value most in my personal and professional life. Priscilla reminded me that leading with our core values helps us to stay true to ourselves and for her, is what drives her work in education. Perhaps it was a moral purpose that provided the framework or the drive for the women of my recent study to lead chronically low performing school, but it was the core values that kept them focused and centered and gave them the stamina to keep leading, empowering, and making a difference in their schools and school communities.

Throughout the interview, Priscilla spoke about what it meant to be a leader. Her message about leaders' willingness to be followers resonated with me because it reiterates what I have learned and experienced about leadership: we cannot do the work alone, we do not know everything, and there are times when we have to stop, listen, and learn from our peers. In fact, both Annette and Melanie briefly, but insistently, discussed the importance of teamwork. From my experience, there is power in modeling what it looks like for the follower, and for the leader to listen and learn from followers. When the leader acts as a follower, to me, it represents respect and trust for others; it acknowledges that the school cannot function without all stakeholders committed to the work. What I have learned is that one cannot lead without followers. The leader may spark a movement, but it is the followers who spread the movement.

## **The Power of Commitment**

I met Dr. Annette Dupuy several years ago, soon after her school had been awarded SIG funds to turn the school around. I observed her and her team as they collaboratively planned to implement practices for sustainable change. Annette was quiet, observant, and listened intently to her team's ideas about planning. When I began to search for interview participants, Annette came to mind. I was ecstatic when she accepted the offer to share her story because I was aware of how much her school had improved over the past several years.

One of the things that mesmerized me during my interview with Annette was that when given an option to lead either a magnet school or the turnaround school in her district, she chose the turnaround school. Annette said the reason she chose the turnaround school was because she liked to construct things. What I learned from Annette is that, when it comes to children, we must take on some of the most potentially challenging situations to nurture them and provide opportunities for them to have access to quality education. Perhaps, Annette felt more comfortable with new learning opportunities, for there were many instances in her career when she was recruited for and accepted such opportunities. Annette had the experience and according to Annette, she was able to get results. Still, Annette continues to be dedicated to the work of improving schools.

I have wondered why some leaders are drawn to chronically low performing schools and are able to lead those schools with confidence. For Annette, having a vision, being committed to that vision, and knowing herself were important factors in her leadership. Over the years, I have visited many schools and have talked with principals

from campus levels and with different levels of experience. Many of the principals have struggled to articulate their vision for their schools. Annette was very clear with me about her vision, which was to provide equity and access to an excellent educational experience for all of her students. And yet, Annette discussed a continued struggle with creating buy-in around that vision for some teachers. When I asked her why some teachers still struggled with the vision, she did not seem to understand why that was happening. There are many possible reasons why some of Annette's staff have not bought into the vision. Perhaps the vision has not been clear for everyone, maybe everyone does not believe in the vision, maybe more targeted professional development is needed, or maybe some staff need to be counseled out of their positions. Whatever the case, the vision and individuals' belief in vision and the connection between individual's core values and the vision are worth exploring.

As I spoke with Annette, I realized that getting everyone on board can potentially be a challenging task because of the various levels of experience and beliefs. It may take time for everyone to live the vision. I do not believe we can see whole school, sustainable change without a vision. Unlike Melanie, who eventually fired staff member who did not believe in the school vision, who was not improving instruction, or who was not doing what was best for students, Annette has continued to coach and support staff over time whose instructional and relational practices do not align with the vision, because of her belief and commitment to the vision. I wonder if Annette will choose between staff and student learning or if she will continue to do whatever is necessary to get staff on board with the vision. On the other hand, what I admire about Annette's leadership is that she does not seem to give up on her students or staff because she is

committed to them. She is guided by a moral purpose that does not allow her to do anything else but to keep working, supporting, and striving for excellence within herself and in her school with the people she has on her campus. As a result, I believe her school will continue to prosper.

I have also reflected on Annette's discipline system that did not allow students to be sent to either in school or out of school suspension. This policy required students to stay in learning environments and teachers to learn how to manage their classrooms and keep students engaged. I believe this discipline system sends a positive message about the value of learning and ownership around learning and doing whatever it takes to keep students in the classroom to learn. It also provides a powerful message about being dedicated to supporting our children no matter the circumstance. On one hand, I can see how challenging it may be to engage in a discipline system such as this because of the potential for disruption, but on the other hand, I can see that once relationships are built and there is a mindset shift around the value of learning, then utilizing a discipline system like this could be feasible because over time, fewer discipline issues may occur.

I often think about Annette's personal experiences with injustices around race and gender. According to Annette, she has not experienced any injustices. Based on my interviews with Annette, it did not seem that she believed that she worked in an oppressive educational system nor did she seem to realize that needing to shift her behavior was oppressive. This observation led to my wondering about how often Black women maneuver through oppressive structures without realizing it because it is a *normal* part of their lives. Recently, I had an awakening about the world in which I live. Through my personal experiences with injustice and through reading literature, I have come to

understand that, for me, when the world in which I live is unjust, it can sometimes be difficult to see the injustice for what it is. It becomes normal. It becomes *just the way life is* because it is safer or more comfortable that way. For some, starting or participating in a revolution for change is radical and involves risks. More than ever, I understand the power of my voice and the voices of others in advocating for justice. It can bring awareness to the oppressive structures in which we live and can help to tear those structures down if we commit to doing just that. My voice matters. Your voice matters. Our voices matter!

### **The Power of Priorities**

Melanie Duncan is credited with leading school turnaround for one of the most violent and chronically low performing schools in America. She is humble, focused, driven, and dedicated to the work of school and community improvement. What struck me most about Melanie's leadership is that for the first year of her principalship at her turnaround school, she was extremely action oriented. I asked her about initial plans for the school, and she explained that in a school as dangerous and chaotic as hers, sometimes taking action took precedent over planning.

What I finally was able to understand from Melanie's interview is that turnaround schools require situational leadership. Not all turnaround schools are the same, and each school requires different forms of leadership, different actions in different situations. Melanie's school was in dire need of immediate action to create order, where Annette's school, for example, underwent a more gradual or transformative change process. Once order was restored and maintained, Melanie was able to put systems and practices in place to increase student achievement. What I appreciate about Melanie's interview was

that she was able to quickly assess the school's situation and felt comfortable and confident with taking immediate action to address the campus's most urgent needs. I think her story can teach us about leadership and the need to assess and identify priorities and quickly determine how those priorities are handled. Melanie had a sense of urgency to ensure a safe environment so that learning could take place.

What struck me about Melanie's story is that, according to a colleague, the turnaround school and community were not ready for her leadership because she is a young, Black woman. Melanie did not let perceptions of her age, race, or gender deter her ability to successfully lead a chronically low-performing school. Instead, Melanie ignored negative perceptions because she believed in her abilities, had a vision for her school, and she stayed focused on her priorities. Melanie's interview reminded me that, as a leader, I must believe in and lead with my purpose in mind and have confidence in doing so. Perhaps people will act against our age, race, and gender, but I maintain that the greatest leaders hold their heads high and forge on.

In order to forge on within oppressive structures and within turnaround schools, I believe aspiring principals could use leadership coaching so that they have someone to confide in and provide guidance around leadership mindset, building confidence, and making difficult decisions with confidence. I would like to see more research on key behaviors, ways of being, and specific leadership actions that yield the highest impact on school turnaround.

## **The Power of Positive Childhood Educational Experiences and Instructional Leadership**

I met Tracy Newman at her school on a cool, spring afternoon in the Midwest. She had just returned from a meeting with the superintendent about future leadership options in the district. After a brief greeting, Tracy asked me to join her on a campus walk. She asked several students to meet her in the hall to discuss attendance and student progress and awarded incentives based on met goals. I watched Tracy as she connected with students, encouraged them, and reminded them of their goals. From my perspective, Tracy's interactions with her students showed that she adored her students and her students admired and respected her. She was gentle, kind, nurturing, and encouraging. Yet, her students understood her expectations around academic excellence and positive behavior because they were able to articulate those expectations.

As a child, I remember looking into my teachers' and principal's eyes and knowing that they believed in me and wanted the best for me. The confidence my teachers and principal had in me made a world of difference in my educational experience, and I believe that the relationship I had with my teachers and principals, and their encouragement, has played a significant role in my value for education, learning, and working to improve myself. Tracy's childhood teachers did the same for her, and I believe that has had a considerable impact on her leadership and her values. I think having a strong educational experience through childhood helps to create value for education that stays in the hearts and minds of educators for a lifetime. Therefore, I think it would be beneficial to have more research on how strong educational backgrounds impact the leadership and perceptions of Black women in education.

As an instructional leader, Tracy models promising instructional practices, and observes and coaches teachers to increase teacher quality. As I reviewed Tracy's discussion on her instructional leadership, I found myself reflecting on my personal teaching experience and how beneficial it would have been for me to have a principal who worked closely with me to increase my students learning. I think I would have enjoyed receiving feedback and working together to support students more effectively. Often, principals share with me that time is a factor in not being able to observe, coach, and model lessons for teachers. Other principals have shared that instruction is not their expertise, and, therefore, utilize instructional coaches.

I understand that building trusting relationships is necessary for some teachers to feel comfortable having the principal in the classroom and being instructional leaders. And yet, through my interview, it appeared that Tracy worked to build relationships with her staff. Though it took a while for her campus to appreciate her leadership, Tracy celebrated that her staff has publicly advocated for her, insisting that she remain the principal of her school. I believe it is because the staff believed that as principal, Tracy made it a priority to work closely with teachers to improve their practice so that every child would have an exceptional learning experience. For me, building trusting relationships is part of building a strong school culture. Building trusting relationships will allow for us to hold one another accountable and support one another in supporting students.

As Tracy shared her story about her life and leadership, her passion illuminated each word of her story. Multiple times in sharing her story, her passion came through the form of tears that tip toed down her right cheek. This is what I admired about Tracy. Her

passion. While she admitted that the turnaround work has its challenges, Tracy shows up and gives her all every day to her students, resulting in closer relationships with staff, students, and community, as well as increased staff accountability and student learning. I believe Tracy has worked diligently to turn her school around because of the pride she has in herself, her students, her school, and her school's community.

### **The Power of Reflection**

Prior to speaking with Jackie Brooks for the first time, I had secured four interview participants and I was desperately looking for a fifth one. I wanted a strong study, which is why having five participants was important for me. Emails to principals had been sent and telephone calls had been made to many principals. The day I called Jackie, I had made several telephone calls to principals who were either not on campus or could not take the call. I left message after message. Discouraged and a bit tired, I had decided that Jackie would be the last call I made for the day. I first spoke with her administrative assistant and explained my research. The administrative assistant put me on hold for several minutes. When she got back on the phone, I started to explain that I could call back another day, but she insisted that I stay on hold and that the principal talk with me soon. Yes! I felt a twinge of excitement because I felt that if I could just get on the phone with a principal, my passion for my research would be obvious, and she would agree to be a research participant. When Jackie got on the phone, I was elated. I started to share my research, and she stated that she had seen the emails that I had sent, but that due to her schedule, she had not been able to respond. After sharing information about the study, Jackie said, "Sure, I will help you out." I was relieved and am still grateful for her willingness to participate in the study, even though I could tell in her tone that she

was not as enthusiastic as I had hoped she would be. I explained that the interview could take up to three hours. Jackie emphatically stated that she would talk with me for only two hours. I agreed that two hours would work and we set a date and time to talk via Facetime. I thanked Jackie continuously for agreeing to participate in my study, and she dryly responded with “you’re welcome” and “no problem.”

On the day of the interview, Jackie was kind, but did not seem particularly enthused about doing the interview. However, the more we spoke and the more she reflected, she became more relaxed and eager to share her story. At the end of the interview Jackie admitted to not really wanting to participate in the interview, but that she wanted to help me in my research. She also explained that the interview resulted in her thinking about life experiences and provided a space for her to reflect on her leadership. In the end, Jackie said that she appreciated the opportunity to talk with me. Jackie’s expression of appreciation for reflection and sharing her story validated the need for this research.

Jackie’s appreciation for reflection led me to realize that as I interviewed the women of this study, they often began their answers with “I don’t know” or “I have not thought about that” as if they had never thought about the questions I asked them before. Perhaps the women had not intentionally thought about the various components of their leadership, identities, their mindset, and the deep-seated reasons behind their actions, behaviors, and perceptions on a practical and personal level. Maybe the women of this study had not had or made time to reflect. Perhaps no one has ever asked them about why they thought or acted the way they did in a given moment. Maybe they actually do reflect, but not on the questions I asked. Whatever the case, I wondered how much more

dynamic their leadership could be or would have been had each of the women regularly, and intentionally reflected on how their life and professional experiences influenced their perceptions and their leadership. How would their leadership change with frequent, conscious reflection? Perhaps more research is needed on the role of reflection in school turnaround. I hope that the time the women of this study and I spent together reiterated the power of reflection and influenced them to continuously reflect on how their personal stories interact with their current leadership and how reflection can impact their leadership and students.

### **The Power of a Village**

For Dr. Alishia Peterson, the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” has proven to be true. Growing up, Alishia was surrounded by a village, family and community members who provided support and guidance to her. This village has inspired her and motivated her to be her best self, to continually strive for excellence, and has been a support system that has influenced her leadership. As the principal in a turnaround school, Alishia has worked with stakeholders to create a school community that supports students and learning.

As a person raised by a village, I related to Alishia’s story about family, friends, and community members who encouraged, supported, and influenced her growth. Such a community provides love, advice, and direction. I have had othermothers, teachers, pastors, aunts, uncles, and so many others who have worked together to ensure that I had a strong education and security. This village is what Alishia has worked to develop for her students as a way to create sustainable change. Through Alishia’s description of her personal village and the work she was doing in her schools and community, she

illuminated that fact that villages require responsibility, ownership, and accountability of stakeholders. I believe true partnership is a component of sustaining continuous improvement efforts.

I do not believe the development and sustainability of the village is the sole responsibility of the principal. If we want students to have genuine, trusting relationships with a school and community that provide targeted, purposeful support, and equity and access to education, then I think we must first consider the district's role in creating the foundation for a village. The district must have ownership and accountability, high expectations, and a sense of urgency around turnaround. Furthermore, districts might consider how they provide principals with support to create or strengthen the village. Then, perhaps the campus can work on strengthening processes and procedures, the organizational structure, communications, capacity, and resources to maintain the village. What also may be considered are stakeholders' roles and partnerships to improve curricula, using data to drive instruction, leadership effectiveness, school climate, increased learning time, teacher quality, and family and community involvement. What I am saying is that the village requires committed individuals and a system to sustain it from the district and campus levels and into the school community. If students in turnaround schools have the village that Alishia and I experienced, maybe schools will have a greater impact on student learning and lifelong success.

### **The Power of Fiery Passion and Relentless Commitment**

The stories of the African American women leaders in this study have had an incredible impact on how I understand turnaround leadership and have further shaped who I am today. The turnaround principals in this study have courageously, selflessly,

and voluntarily worked in grim educational situations, and they have all prevailed. Their stories provided insights into their lives, leadership, behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions. I have a better understanding of who they are as leaders and why and how they have chosen to lead their schools. I am grateful for the opportunity to hear, first hand, about the value of a growth mindset, relationships, ownership, and accountability in leading schools.

Collectively, these five African American women leaders have taught me that turnaround leadership cannot be taught from a textbook because strategies implemented at one campus may not work at another for schools require specialized interventions based on need. The principals showed that leadership for turnaround is situational, deeply personal, and requires endurance. It requires a leadership founded in a fiery passion and relentless commitment to work toward change for each campus's distinctive needs.

Based on this study, I believe it is the principals' thirst and dedication to the work of improving schools that served as the catalyst for change. Yes, the turnaround model may require specific actions that can catapult change, but if not accompanied by the principal's mindset for change, persistence, building relationships, and holding themselves and others accountable, perhaps the strategies could not have been implemented effectively. Based on this research, I believe it is the passion and commitment of the principal that drives turnaround, rather than the model driving turnaround.

As a leader in education, I have had other educators share that no matter how many or how often school improvement efforts are applied, if leaders do not believe in

the work, most times the schools do not improve. Thus, school turnaround potentially begins with the principals pushing, motivating, and truly believing in all students' ability to learn, along with their willingness to ensure a quality education for all students. If that is the case, perhaps as we identify principals for turnaround model schools, we may need to determine how we measure the level of passion and commitment a principal has for leading the difficult work of turnaround. We might even consider determining how much a principal believes in the work. I am not sure how we measure those abstract pieces, or if *measure* is even the word to use. For me, it is really just about making sure we have principals who have the burning desire to change things for the better, and who possess intuitive insight to identify and implement strategic actions to ensure the school improves.

I believe the principals who have that passion, commitment, and even grit will take risks necessary for their students and turn schools around. For instance, Melanie often took courageous actions because she believed wholeheartedly that it was the right decision and the right time for her students, and she did not worry about what people would say or think about it because she believed she was doing the right thing.

I still believe turnaround strategies are crucial in implementing changes for turnaround model schools. In fact, the women of this study implemented turnaround strategies such as planning for and implementing effective systems for change. According to the findings of this research, such practices did result in increased student achievement. Therefore, I believe the strategies the principals' implemented validate the turnaround model, but I also believe the model suggests a false promise: If you implement *turnaround strategies* then the school is guaranteed to turn around.

First, I do believe the initiatives each principal implemented were effective in driving the turnaround effort on their campuses and, therefore, do not necessarily validate the turnaround model. I also believe the strategies had to be partnered with passion and commitment from the leaders because it was their passion that created the momentum for turnaround. Each woman unequivocally believed in ensuring that all of her students had a quality educational experience. Second, I no longer believe that there is such thing as a *turnaround model strategy* because each principal in this study implemented various strategies and developed numerous systems based on their particular school's needs. According to the turnaround model, a percentage of the staff must be terminated. However, rather than firing the staff at her school, Annette discussed coaching her teachers continuously. Annette continues to work with and through her team to provide professional development and coaching. However, Melanie was adamant that teachers had to be doing what she believed to be the best thing for students, and if teachers were not doing those things, she would fire them. Hence, I believe *turnaround model strategies* are really just continuous improvement efforts or promising practices that can be utilized based on a school's unique situation. Third, Annette, Melanie, and Alishia stated that their leadership actions were not about complying with the turnaround model. Instead, the strategies implemented on their campuses would have been strategies they could have implemented anyway, if data analysis and a needs assessment determined that such interventions were required. Finally, I believe what matters is a combination of turnaround leaders' unwavering passion and commitment, models or strategies that can address individual campuses' unique needs, and an education system that provides a quality education for all children. The overall education system and economic must

continually be examined to determine the root cause of why all children are not receiving equity and access to a quality education. We must also determine and implement strategies that address the oppressive nature of America's education and economic systems for a deeper and more comprehensive reform movement.

As an educational leader, I work with districts and schools throughout Texas and with our statewide partners to promote and assist in school improvement efforts. While I believe my job influences change, I do not directly interact with students and communities to accelerate educational and social change. My experience with the research participants and examination of their stories has helped me to realize the need for me to be in schools, working directly with districts and campuses to envision extraordinary possibilities, taking courageous actions, and motivating change. Otherwise, my work is based on theories grounded in others' experiences that may not align to the work of the various districts and schools that I support. While others' testimonials are beneficial to my learning and how I approach school improvement, I believe that I need to have first-hand experiences with schools to make what I believe are appropriate decisions to support them.

The findings of my research make me feel somewhat hopeful because I know there are so many educators, including Black women principals like the women in this study, who will continue to work ceaselessly to improve schools. I also feel deflated by this research because our educational system depends on models that are supposed to support chronically low performing schools. However, there is no solid research that corroborates the fact that models such as the turnaround model have widespread, lasting impact on school performance. This leads me to believe that our educational system is

flawed and is oppressive to poor, minority children and to principals who work in schools and communities that are physically unstable and low performing.

Perhaps, politicians and educators need to look at the larger education and economic systems that might interfere with the quality of education provided for all students as well as the safety of the schools. There are still schools, sometimes in the same school district, that have more resources than the lowest performing schools and SIG funded schools will ever have. I have experienced that in my own school district as a teacher, and I have seen it in the school districts I have visited. How do we consistently manage funds to ensure all students have equity and access to a quality education? Why must we depend on grants to ensure poor, minority students in the lowest performing schools get a fraction of the resources students in affluent communities receive? Why is there an imbalance in the quality of education based on economic status? How do we get to a place where we all believe that all children deserve the best education possible? These are some of the questions I currently ponder as a result of this research and hope that politicians not only answer, but take actions to ensure that all of our children have the finest educational experiences, not just in isolated pockets but nationwide. This research has motivated me to vocalize my belief in equity and access to quality resources and educational experiences for all students. We must ensure that our educational system does not continue to fail our children.

This research reiterates that our education system is defective and each day, the African American women principals in this research work to mend it. The SIG funds granted to their schools have helped provide access to resources that, in some cases, were not previously available. What is depressing to me is that as much as things seem to

change, nothing really changes. There have been state and federal mandated school improvement policies put into place that have not resulted in long-term change. Despite government attempts to change our education system, the United States still focuses on making the same educational changes that were introduced 60 years ago, such creating an equitable education system.

African American women principals continue to experience challenges in the schools in which they lead. Many of their schools are in crisis. Some work in dilapidated buildings, or in communities that have rampant violence, and student performance is often the lowest in their state. Black women school leaders also continue to experience, racism, sexism, classism, and ageism in their professions. In fact, Melanie, Tracy, and Alishia shared that they experienced some sort of social injustice as principals.

Though it was a choice for the principals to accept leadership positions in turnaround schools, I also feel that for Tracy, Jackie, and Alishia, there was an underlying expectation that they would accept the positions because they were asked or encouraged to lead their schools because of their experience with improving schools. Still, I trust that principals, like the women in this study, who are deeply devoted and zealous, will do whatever it takes to make the educational experience worthwhile for children.

Through answering the research questions, this study highlighted the value of personal experiences, including childhood experiences, and the impact those experiences have on leadership behaviors and perceptions. All of the women in this study spoke of early life experiences that connected to their leadership and their belief in equity and access to a superior education for all children. The women also shared their awareness of

racism, sexism, classism, and sexism that Black women and Black women principals experience. However, only Melanie, Tracy, and Alishia articulated specific experiences with oppression or social injustice. Even when the structures created barriers in their lives and leadership, the women of this study rose above those structures and engaged their roles as principals in turnaround schools with true passion and commitment.

What this research reiterated for me was the significance of passion and commitment, a growth mindset, ownership and accountability, equity and access, and building relationships and community improve schools and that all of those pieces are critical components of school improvement. I have learned that there are unique challenges that Black women principals experience such as shifting behavior to avoid negative and stereotypical perceptions of them. This research has taught me that African American women principals often act as othermothers as a way to nurture and support their students. I have also learned that these principals' passion and commitment is often deeply rooted in personal experiences that influence their leadership actions that can impact student outcomes.

It may be that the women of this study did not do anything that any other strong leader would have done in any a turnaround school. Nonetheless, this research did provide a space for these extraordinary African American women principals to share their stories, which may not have otherwise been shared. This research also provided a platform to critique the education system and the turnaround model through the lens of Black women leaders' experiences in order for us to spark new thinking and new approaches to address chronically performing schools. This research also encourages a continuous, productive conversation on how the experiences of African American

principals of low performing and turnaround schools may be different from others' experience as a result of oppressive social and political structures.

I believe aspiring Black women educational leaders should be aware of existing oppressive structures that impact their leadership and the schools and communities in which they lead. It is also important to remember that school turnaround work is difficult, requires a strong will, and can be emotionally draining. Therefore, along with focusing on the findings of this study, I also encourage aspiring African American women principals of turnaround schools to connect to their moral purpose, stay centered, make decisions with confidence, connect with other aspiring and veteran Black women educational leaders to create a network of support, consider having a mentor, ensure that they have steadfast passion and commitment to turnaround both schools and school communities, and share their stories. I believe these recommendations have potential to increase these women's effectiveness in their leadership and school turnaround, support them in overcoming barriers, and help them to have sustainability in their leadership roles.

Finally, I believe in the power of influence and my ability to influence. This research experience has changed the way I view turnaround and has influenced me to make new commitments. I am committed to sharing the stories of the women in the study. Additionally, as a Black woman leader, I am committed to encouraging other African American women leaders to share their own stories and helping to create a network of support. The intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism and ageism, along with the overwhelming number of African American women leading the most

challenging schools in the nation, makes the Black woman's experience and leadership in schools an exceptional one.

## VI. A LETTER TO BLACK WOMEN EDUCATORS

Dear Black Women Educators,

Thank you for your dedication, passion, and the sacrifices you have made to support our children. Your unwavering commitment to provide equity and access to a quality education for all children has and continues to positively impact schools and communities. I believe, over time, your love and sacrifice for minority children, children in poverty, and chronically underachieving schools will be recognized and seen as models for turnaround leadership. While recognition may not be a driving force behind your diligent work ethic and your commitment to our children, I believe it is time for the nation to take notice of your leadership actions and recognize how your leadership has considerable implications on educational policy and practice. I believe that the stories of Black women educators need to be heard and shared to better understand our histories, our moral purpose, our perceptions, and how others perceive and treat us as African American leaders.

Historically and presently, we encounter injustice and must maneuver through oppressive structures because of ageism, racism, and sexism. And yet, we have proven that we are resilient, strong, and inspiring despite injustice. We identify areas of need. We take action. We create movements. We revolutionize. We represent strength, knowledge, and empowerment. Even in our lowest moments, we continue to rise!

In a nation that depicts Black women as threats and irrelevant beings, we must come together to support one another. We must build strong, widespread networks that create a space for our unique and collective stories to be heard and shared. Let's create a space for us to build trusting relationships and engage in collaborative dialogue as a way

to strengthen our leadership and turn our schools around. Let us mentor, support, and prepare aspiring Black women principals in our communities, higher education, and in our school districts to rise above oppressive structures and injustice that are particular to Black women. Let us examine and reflect on our identities, our lives and experiences, our values, perceptions, and how our age, race, and gender impact our lives and leadership. Let us study ourselves and our moral imperative in order to better understand and share how and why we teach, lead, and support in chronically low -performing schools, to support the next generation of African American women educators. Our voices matter! Let us no longer be silenced by negative perceptions of us, or silenced by the lack of literature that conceals that we have, indeed, played an integral role in positively impacting schools and the lives of children across the nation. I admire each of you for working to revolutionize our educational system. Lead on!

Sincerely,

Adrienne L. Gratten Aldaco

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Interview Protocol

#### Background Information

1. Please share background information about yourself.
  - a. Name
  - b. Age
  - c. Hometown/Where you grew up
    - i. Describe your hometown/community/where you grew up
      1. Demographics
2. Talk to me about your childhood/ teenage years/ adulthood.
  - a. What life experiences stand out in your mind?
  - b. How did this experience shape your life and views?
3. Career
  - i. Years in education
  - ii. Roles
  - iii. Years in each role
4. How do you identify as a Black person? Woman? Educator? Leader? Principal? Black woman principal of a turnaround model school?

#### Childhood Education

1. Please provide an overview of your childhood educational experience
  - a. Classroom set up
    - i. Demographics
    - ii. Small or large classroom size
  - b. Segregated vs. Desegregated
  - c. What were your thoughts about this at the time?
    - i. The thoughts of your family and community
    - ii. Challenges
    - iii. Lessons learned about schools, teachers, school leaders, education at an early age
    - iv. How did this impact your ideas on education, teachers, and what “should” and “should not” happen in schools?
2. What childhood key incident(s) /juncture(s) stands out as significant in your mind?
  - a. Do you identify this experience(s) as a positive or negative experience(s)?
  - b. How did this experience(s) shape your life, leadership, and views?
3. Did you grow up around educators?
  - a. What educators did you know?

- b. How did these people influence you to become an educator?
- c. How did they influence your views on education?

### **Becoming an Educator and Leader**

1. Describe the moment you decided to become an educator.
  - a. What influenced your decision?
  - b. What did you envision yourself doing in education?
2. Talk to me about your roles in education.
  - a. How did each of these roles influence the system of education, children, the community, and school improvement?
3. Describe the moment you decided to become a principal.
  - a. What influenced your decision?
  - b. Thoughts/emotions?
  - c. Where you groomed/encouraged to be a school leader? By whom? Why?
  - d. How did you envision yourself as a school leader?
4. Describe the moment you were named the principal of a school.
  - a. Thoughts/emotions?
  - b. What were the expectations of this role? Why?
  - c. What expectations did you have for yourself? Why?
  - d. Did you feel any pressure? From whom? Why?
  - e. What was the first thing you wanted to do going into the school? Why?
5. Discuss the SIG Turnaround Model school and your experience leading the turnaround model school
  - a. How and why you ended up in a turnaround model school?
  - b. Were you groomed/encouraged to take on a turnaround model school?
  - c. Describe the turnaround model school before SIG funds.
  - d. What was the process for becoming a turnaround model school?
  - e. Did your role as a principal change? How?
  - f. Talk about how your school changed immediately and overtime with SIG funds. Culture? Climate? School values? Teacher and student performance?
  - g. What were the expectations for you as a principal in a turnaround model school?
  - h. How did you handle these expectations?

- i. How did you view your role in your turnaround model school?
- j. What immediate and long-term changes did you have to make as a principal in a turnaround school? How did you role the grant out?
- k. What was the ultimate change you wanted to make? What steps did you take to make that happen? Challenges? Barriers? Support? How did it all turnout?
- l. Did you experience any pressure as a principal in a turnaround model school? From whom? Why?
- m. Were there any barriers that you and/the school had that blocked progress or made progress more difficult? What were the barriers? Were you able to overcome the barriers? How? How should such barriers be eliminated? How should such barriers be addressed?
- n. What is the greatest challenge of leading a SIG turnaround model school? Why is this the greatest challenge? How did you handle this challenge? What are your thoughts on how this challenge should be addressed?
- m. Discuss any personal/professional experiences with race, gender, age, class, etc. (intersectionality) you've had as a Black woman principal in a turnaround model school (or any school). How did these experiences shape your perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, leadership and values? How did you address these issues? Why did you address the issues in this way? Who created these issues for you. Are you still experiencing these issues? Why? Why are these issues a problem? What challenges/barriers do they create?
- n. What other oppressive constructs have shaped your experience or inhibited you from making progress in your role as a turnaround leader? How do you handle these experiences?
- o. Have you ever had to be an activist in your role as a turnaround model principal? If so, describe incidences were you've served as an activist?
- p. Have you ever served as an othermother? Why? How?
- q. Have you ever had to shift your behavior? Explain.
- r. What celebrations did the school experience as a result of the SIG turnaround model school?
- s. Does the SIG turnaround model work? Why or why not? What should occur or what does this model need to make it work?

- t. In retrospect, what do you wish you would have known before leading a turnaround model school?
- u. What would have you done differently as a leader of a turnaround model school?
- v. How did your school change with your leadership of this model? Why? What has stayed the same? Why?
- w. What's next for this school? Your leadership of this school?
- x. Overall, how would you describe your experience leading a turnaround model school? How has your attitude, behavior, your perspectives, values, and beliefs changed as a result of this experience?
- y. What is your legacy at this turnaround model school?

### **The Educational System and Low-Performing Schools**

1. Would you change anything about the education system? How would you make that change?
  - a. What do you know you can change?
  - b. Is there anything you believe you cannot change? Why?
  - c. What is working in education? Not working? How do you know?
2. Discuss your thoughts on the lowest performing schools in the nation and how this issue is being addressed.
  - a. Discuss the impact it has on Black women principals leading these schools?
  - b. Discuss the impact on communities and in society.
  - c. Discuss the impact on children.
3. How has being a black woman in education impacted your life and career? Your leadership? Your relationships with colleagues/peers/students/ community?
  - a. How has being a black female educator impacted your personal life?
  - b. Talk to me about social and/or political structures that support and/or create barriers/challenges in your life and career.
  - c. Talk to me about oppressive experiences you had as a black person, as a woman, as a black woman principal. How do these influence/impact your perspectives, attitudes, values, behavior?
4. What key incident/junctures do you identify as most significant in your life/ career that impacted your life or career (perspectives, behavior, attitude, values on? What affect did it have on you and your leadership? Have you experienced any challenges because of being a black woman in education and/or in a leadership role? What?

- a. What incident stands out in your mind the most?
  - b. What about the role of race, gender, age, class (intersectionality) in your life and leadership of a school?
  - c. What did you learn?
  - d. How have these experiences shape you?
5. What advice would you give to educators in general? Other black women educators? Black women educators going into the lowest performing schools?
  6. What is your legacy in education?
  7. What's next for you?
  8. What is it that you know for sure?
  9. Is there anything else you would like to add? Final thoughts? Lessons Learned?

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