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We Don’t Need A Seat. We Need A New Table. A Systems Thinking Approach to Retaining Black Women Principals

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A Systems Thinking Approach to Retaining Black Women Principals

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Brianna Nicole Winn

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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A Systems Thinking Approach to Retaining Black Women Principals

by

Brianna Nicole Winn

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

Professor Robert Cooper, Co-Chair

Existing education research literature addresses problems and solutions concerning Black women teacher retention; however, few studies examine the issue of Black women administrator retention, specifically the retention of Black women principals. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, this phenomenological study of 22 current and former Black women principals aimed to uncover the perceived supports that contribute to the retention of Black women principals in K-12 California schools, along with the perceived barriers that hinder their success.

Current solutions to the problem of higher attrition rates amongst Black women administrators in K-12 schools have focused primarily on the superintendency role. However, the solutions offered - such as providing Black women superintendents with mentors (Brown, 2014;

Johnson, 2021) and networking opportunities (Johnson, 2021) - are limited in scope. To that end, this study sought to achieve two goals. First, using Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, this study explored the role of race and gender in the professional experiences and career decisions of Black women K-12 principals. Second, using Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework, this study critically examined the K-12 education system as a whole to better understand the underlying challenges and possible solutions to improving Black women principal retention from a systemic perspective.

Findings from this study highlighted three key reasons Black women principals leave (or would leave) their principalships: unsustainable working conditions, lack of supervisory protection and support, and exposure to race and gender-based microaggressions. According to the Black women principals in this study, systemic approaches to improving Black women principal retention could include: providing Black women principals with former Black women principal coaches, addressing the needs of Black women principals in K-12 administrative credentialing programs, and creating a clear career trajectory for Black women principals pre and post-principalship. Implications for K-12 systems leaders and recommendations for further research are offered to improve the retention of Black women principals in California's K-12 public and charter schools.

The dissertation of Brianna Winn is approved.

Christina Christie

Kristen Lee Rohanna, Committee Co-Chair

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2024

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Kathy Winn, and my father, Fentriss Winn. My mother died weeks before I graduated from UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) in 2014. Although she never saw me become a principal, her social justice values and advocacy work have inspired my leadership the past 10 years. My father has been a thought partner and supporter of my work in every role I've had - principal and beyond. He has been present at every milestone in my life including: basketball championships, college graduations, job promotions, and the birth of my daughter, Sienna. His support and wisdom, and my mother's teachings and passion, have instilled the courage, dedication, and confidence in me to complete this degree.

Finally, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my daughter, Sienna, who motivates me to keep pushing forward towards my dreams *every single day*. This degree is for us, Bubs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This phenomenological study of current and former Black women principals in K-12 schools investigated the problem of higher attrition rates amongst Black women administrators compared to their White and male counterparts. According to the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) and the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Black women principals make up approximately 6-7 percent of United States principals (Cheng et al., 2023; Nittle, 2022). Existing education research literature addresses problems and solutions concerning Black women teacher retention in K-12 schools; however, fewer studies examine the issue of Black women administrator retention, specifically the retention of Black women principals in K-12 schools. Black women administrators in the K-12 education system often experience the "glass cliff" effect in their roles as district and site-based leaders. Unlike the commonly known "glass ceiling" phenomenon, which is a barrier that prevents women from advancing beyond certain management levels, the "glass cliff" effect occurs when women are appointed to difficult leadership roles and are set up to fail (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). Using qualitative semi-structured interviews of current and former Black women principals, this study aimed to uncover the perceived supports that contribute to the retention of Black women principals in K-12 schools, along with the perceived barriers that hinder their success.

Current solutions to the problem of higher attrition rates amongst Black women administrators in the K-12 education system have focused primarily on the superintendency role. For example, pairing Black women superintendents with mentors (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021), and providing them with greater access to networking opportunities (Johnson, 2021), has helped some Black women superintendents navigate leadership challenges related to their gender and

racial identities. Although it is possible that these solutions may also support greater retention of Black women principals in K-12 schools, currently there is limited education research literature on the topic. Furthermore, these solutions - providing Black women superintendents with mentors and networking opportunities - are limited in scope. Both solutions require Black women superintendents to change their leadership approach to survive within the K-12 education system without addressing the systemic factors within the K-12 education system that may be adversely affecting their retention. To that end, using Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, the goal of this study was to deeply examine the experiences of Black women principals in K-12 schools from a *critical* systems thinking perspective to better understand what factors influence their decisions to stay or leave their principalships.

Statement of the Problem

The challenges facing Black women administrators in education are unique and complex. Black women administrators grapple with discrimination related to their intersecting racial and gender identities (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). From a gender perspective, Black women, like all women, are significantly underrepresented in education leadership roles (Brown, 2014; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). While 75% of teachers are women (Robinson et al., 2017), women are underrepresented in the highest administrative positions in education. For example, findings from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) 2015 Mid-Decade Survey show that men are four times more likely than women to become superintendents. In addition, findings from the 2015 AASA survey reveal that women and men of color are the most underrepresented subgroups in the

superintendency role (Robinson et al., 2017). In K-12 education, only 27% of superintendents are women and 8.6% of superintendents are Black (Coleman, 2022).

Research shows that although the number of Black women administrators in K-12 schools continues to grow, their growth does not compare to White women and men (Brown, 2014). The upward growth trajectory of Black women principals resembles that of Black women superintendents. And yet, Black women superintendents remain grossly underrepresented occupying less than 1% of superintendency positions nationwide (Coleman, 2022). Even though Black women principal representation far exceeds Black women superintendent representation, according to the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), during the 2015-16 school year, Black women principals comprised approximately 4.8% of all principals in public secondary schools (NCES, 2009) compared to 66% of male principals and 34% of female principals (Jang & Alexander, 2022). The issue of underrepresentation of Black women principals and superintendents is exacerbated by limited educational research literature on the topic (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021).

Despite the increase of Black women administrators in K-12 schools, the issue of retaining district and site-based Black women administrators persists. However, most studies related to Black educator retention focus on Black teachers, namely Black men teachers. These studies outline the challenges that lead to increased attrition rates amongst Black teachers, as well as the actions that support their retention. As most Black administrators begin their education careers as classroom teachers, research on Black teacher retention is critically important. Yet, key differences exist between the professional experiences of Black teachers and Black administrators, thereby necessitating further research on this topic.

Existing Gaps in Research

Beyond issues of representation, existing education research literature minimally addresses the experiences of Black women administrators in K-12 schools (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021). As noted, prior studies have shown that Black women are underrepresented in the highest administrative roles in K-12 education, especially in the superintendency role (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017). Prior studies have also explored the unique challenges that Black women superintendents face in K-12 education, and possible solutions to address these challenges (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021). This qualitative study of current and former Black women principals in K-12 California schools sought to build on existing empirical studies related to the underrepresentation of Black women administrators in K-12 education by focusing exclusively on the professional experiences, and retention decisions, of Black women principals.

Similar to the relationship between Black women teachers and principals, most Black women superintendents serve as principals before becoming superintendents. Considering this, it is useful to know what challenges and supports impact Black women superintendents' retention decisions. However, the role of school principal and superintendent are notably different. In a qualitative study of 39 Israeli principals, Shaked and Schechter (2019) cite Kelchtermans et al.'s (2011) research on the role of school principal in Flemish primary schools:

> Principals' decisions are made in domains where internal and external stakeholders often have different, and even incompatible, goals, desires, views, expectations and demands (Ewy, 2009). In this context, a school principal may be seen as standing at the school doorstep, between the extra- and intra-school worlds. The extra-school world includes the school board as the immediate formal authority and employer of both principal and

> school staff; the parents, either as individuals or in the form of a parents' committee as an organized actor; policymakers at the national and regional levels; and the local community. On the other hand, the intra-school world includes the school staff and the students (Kelchtermans, Pilot, & Ballet, 2011). The multiple conflicting loyalties of school principals make their decision making even more complex. (p. 575)

Although there are differences between the Israeli, Flemish, and American K-12 school systems, Kelchtermans et al.'s (2011) characterization of the school principal role resonates across systems. Kelchtermans et al. view schools as complex organizations (Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Nadav et al., 2021; Shaked & Schechter, 2019, 2020), comprised of extra- and intra-school worlds which make the principal role particularly challenging. The principal's intra-school world refers to the people, policies, systems, and structures within the K-12 school that impact the principal's work. Kelchtermans et al. define the intra-school world as the school staff and the students. The principal's extra-school world refers to the people, policies, systems, and structures outside of the K-12 school that impact the principal's work. Kelchtermans et al. define the extra-school world as the school board, parents, and policymakers.

Terosky et al.'s (2021) case study of four urban school principals from a northeastern city in the United States aligns with Kelchtermans et al.'s (2011) characterization of the school principal role. In their study, Terosky et al. identified three key themes that hindered their principal participants' vitality while acting as school leaders. These themes included: the illusion of control, the unsustainable nature of the career, and the challenges associated with adult people management. Terosky et al. point to numerous systemic challenges that impact principal retention:

> Through our participants' stories and wisdom of practice, we believe that in order to move beyond easy explanations for principal burnout and attrition (i.e., bad students, bad parents, inefficient principals), we need to dive into deeper issues around efficiency and order frameworks within unsustainable career contexts, inadequate hiring, evaluating, and firing processes, and reconnecting to priorities of schools and principals. (p. 17)

These "deeper issues around efficiency and order frameworks" referenced in the Terosky et al. study speak to the underlying systemic issues within *and* outside of K-12 schools that impact principal retention. Underlying systemic issues might include workload sustainability, human resource management (e.g., "inadequate hiring, evaluating, and firing processes" mentioned above), accountability pressures (Hamilton, 2007; Shaked and Schechter, 2019), policy mandates, and competing external priorities that often do not reflect the "priorities of schools and principals."

Many of these systemic issues were captured in a report from the Learning Policy Institute that reviewed findings from 35 major studies that addressed the topic of principal turnover. According to this report, the top five reasons principals leave their principalships include: inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability policies. A national study of public school principals found that, overall, the principal turnover rate in high-poverty schools was approximately 21% compared to 18% nationally. In California, from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2016-2017 school year, 22% of California principals left their positions, 7% moved to a different school, and 15% left the profession or the state (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

As varied and complex as these systemic issues are, they do not account for the even greater complexity tied to the issue of Black women principal retention. As noted, studies show that Black women administrators in K-12 schools face unique challenges related to their gender and racial identities (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). Therefore, while there are likely similarities between the professional experiences of Black women principals and their White and/or male counterparts, this study aimed to uncover the scope and significance of the differences that define the Black woman principal experience. Using systems thinking and intersectionality as conceptual frameworks, this study examined the various components of the K-12 school system including the intra-school world factors within K-12 schools and extra-school world factors outside of K-12 schools that impact the Black woman principal's work, and ultimately her decision to stay or leave her principalship.

Statement of Purpose

This phenomenological study intended to build on existing research by collecting first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of Black women principals in K-12 public and charter schools in California. While this study cannot produce fully generalizable results due to its small sample size of 23 principals, findings from this study could guide K-12 education organizations looking to improve the satisfaction, success, and retention of their Black women principals. Rather than focusing exclusively on connecting Black women K-12 administrators to mentors or professional networks, this study sought to find other supports that could address the systemic challenges faced by Black women principals in K-12 schools.

Research Questions

1) According to current and former Black women principals, what systemic challenges do Black women principals face in their work as school leaders?

a) What systemic challenges - if any - do Black women principals believe are related to their racial and/or gender identity?
b) To what extent do these systemic challenges influence their decision to remain a principal, or to leave that role?

2) According to current and former Black women principals, what policies, systems, structures, or supports would significantly improve the retention of Black women principals?

Research Design

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of current and former Black women principals in K-12 public and charter schools in California. Using a semi-structured interview format, I collected first-hand accounts from 23 Black women principals of their experiences navigating interpersonal, structural, and systemic challenges as site-based leaders in K-12 schools. A phenomenological study is appropriate because it allows the researcher to deeply examine "the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). Using a combination of deductive and inductive research methodologies, I grounded my analysis of the issue of Black women principal retention in the lived experiences of my study's participants. Unlike surveys, or other quantitative methods, my phenomenological study empowered participants to speak openly about their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, unlike the qualitative case study method which typically involves an in-depth analysis of *one* program, event, activity, or process over a sustained period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), a phenomenological qualitative approach allowed me to examine the same phenomenon across California schools and districts, identifying similarities and differences between the experiences of Black women principals from diverse

geographical regions (e.g., northern vs southern California), school types (e.g., public vs charter, elementary vs secondary), and career stages (e.g., new vs experienced principals).

Study Significance

Findings from this study may be used by K-12 schools, districts, and organizations across the country looking to effectively support and retain their Black teacher and administrator talent. Although this study focuses exclusively on Black women administrators in the K-12 principal role, the conclusions drawn from this study will likely have implications for Black male administrators, and other women administrators of color who face similar challenges tied to their gender and racial identities. Additionally, findings related to improving the retention of K-12 Black women principals will likely benefit organizations looking to retain Black women administrators in other leadership roles including (but not limited to): department chairs, assistant principals, district coordinators, directors, superintendents, Chief Executive Officers, and other C-level positions. Finally, this study may be instructive to K-12 education organizations looking to create transformative change within their systems. K-12 organizations that are willing to examine and reform their system at all levels, including the interpersonal, structural, and institutional level, will learn valuable insights from school leaders on the ground who are working hard to create transformative results for their student, family, and teacher communities.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Principals are the second most important school-level factor associated with student achievement – right after teachers" (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p. 7). Studies show that principals are vital to the success of K-12 schools. Effective principals help maintain a positive school culture, motivate school staff, and enhance teachers' practice. Principals are so important, in fact, that losing them can have catastrophic effects on a school. According to a report issued by the Learning Policy Institute, high principal turnover can result in lower teacher retention and student achievement and can derail school improvement efforts. In addition, it takes time and resources to replace principals which diverts funds away from the classroom (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Several studies show that principals of color – Black principals specifically – play a critical role in the success and achievement of K-12 teachers and students. For example, according to the Learning Policy Institute report, a study conducted in Illinois showed that the principal turnover rate was lower when the race of the principal matched the race of most of the students in the school (Levin & Bradley, 2019). This study supports others on the positive impact of Black principals, especially Black women principals, on teachers and students of color. For example, a 2019 study by Vanderbilt University found that in Tennessee and Missouri, Black principals increased the chances that Black teachers would be hired by 5-7%. Also, Black principals were more likely to retain Black teachers, boasting a turnover rate that was 2-3% lower. Finally, according to this study, Black principals generally attained higher student achievement for students of color which make up more than half of all public school students (Nittle, 2022).

Considering the transformative impact of Black women principals' leadership, this phenomenological study examined the experiences of 23 Black women principals to better understand how to overcome systemic challenges that may be hindering their success. To contextualize this issue, my literature review begins with a discussion of the historical impact of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision on Black educator retention. It explains how this landmark decision led to the current push factors that have exacerbated the issue of Black women teacher and administrator attrition. It also examines the current pull factors that support greater retention amongst Black women teachers and administrators in K-12 schools. Considering the myriad of challenges faced by K-12 principals, my literature review concludes with a discussion of Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality which offer holistic ways to examine complex organizational problems.

Brown v. Board: Historical Reasons for Attenuated Black Educator Pipeline

The problem of high attrition rates amongst Black administrators stems from the historic *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision nearly 70 years ago which resulted in the mass exodus of Black Americans from the field of education. Ever since that decision, Black teachers and administrators continue to be underrepresented in the K-12 education system. According to Foster (2004), a key factor that impacts the underrepresentation of Black administrators is the shortage of Black teachers in the leadership pipeline. For instance, while Black women teachers represent 78% of the Black teaching force, they only represent 5% of the entire teaching force (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017 as cited in Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). The underrepresentation of Black educators has been an ongoing and pervasive issue; however, it peaked in the mid-1950s following the landmark *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision in

1954 (Milner & Howard, 2004; Oakley et al., 2009; Rosenthal, 1957, as cited in Benson et al., 2020). This verdict required the integration of Black and White schools, particularly in the South. The legislation outlined in *Brown v. Board* called for the integration of students, facilities, faculty, staff, extracurricular activities, and transportation. Although *Brown v. Board* was decided in 1954, it was not until 1968 – 14 years later – that schools were mandated to take steps to guarantee school integration (Brown, 2008).

The *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision devastated the Black educator community. School desegregation led to the closure of Black schools and job loss for tens of thousands of Black educators (Alston, 2005; Tillman, 2004). According to Milner and Howard (2004), roughly 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in 17 states lost their jobs between 1954 and 1965. Brown (2005) notes that between 1967 and 1970, the number of Black principals in North Carolina declined from 670 to 170, in Alabama from 250 to 40, and in Louisiana from 1966 to 1971 the number of Black principals decreased from 512 to 363. The displacement of thousands of Black teachers and administrators in the form of contract nonrenewal, school closures, and forced resignations ultimately forced Black professionals out of the field of education (Farinde et al., 2016; Milner & Howard, 2004; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). Furthermore, desegregation took Black educators away from Black students. One outcome of desegregation was the transfer of effective Black teachers from all Black schools to all White schools. Because all White schools were considered superior to all Black schools, White students received instruction from the best Black educator talent previously employed at all Black schools (Milner & Howard, 2004).

After the *Brown v. Board* decision, the removal of Black teachers from Black schools was accompanied by the transfer of White administrators to Black schools. In large Black urban

school districts, intentional efforts to whiten the K-12 principal pipeline occurred. When White students were sent to majority Black schools, desegregation policy mandates required at least one White assistant principal to be hired on staff. This policy, however, was not applied in the reverse, ultimately leading to the demotion and displacement of Black school leaders (Butler, 1974). In Milner and Howard's 2004 study of the effects of *Brown v. Board* on Black educators, Barbara (a pseudonym), an expert participant on the topic, stated, "Then they took our best principals and leaders in our [the Black] communities and put them into these newly desegregated schools and called them assistant principals. And they were usually in charge of discipline for Black kids, particularly Black boys. So it was a devastating blow" (p. 290). The closure of Black schools, displacement of Black staff, demotion of Black leaders, and whitening of the K-12 principal pipeline all communicated the same message. Black teachers and leaders were not essential to the education of children, including Black children.

Not only did *Brown v. Board* result in school closures and job loss for thousands of Black educators, but it also led to new teacher certification policies that currently harm Black teachers. Prior to school desegregation in the 1950s, teacher certification exams were not required for Black teachers teaching in Black schools (Benson et al., 2020; Stennis-Williams, 1996 as cited in Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). When these exams became mandatory, they disadvantaged Black teachers who were instantly disqualified to teach in the classroom. Due to "elimination by examination" which stemmed from *Brown v. Board*, many potential Black women teachers today never enter, or are denied access, to the education profession (Mosely, 2018; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). In light of the myriad of consequences of the *Brown v. Board* decision, Irvine and Irvine (1983) explained the desegregation process as a form of "iatrogenesis" (p. 294). Iatrogenesis is a medical concept that describes interventions that are intended to cure a

particular ailment but instead turn out to have a more detrimental impact than the initial problem. Despite its intended purpose to uplift the Black community through access to a more equitable education system, the school desegregation process has had a profoundly destructive impact on Black educators, students, and the Black community at large.

Black Teacher Retention: Push and Pull Factors That Influence Black Teachers' Career Decisions

Since the *Brown v. Board* decision, Black teachers, specifically Black women teachers, represent a marginalized subset of teachers who are pushed out of education each year. Young and Easton-Brooks (2020) refer to this phenomenon as the process of "involuntary exodus" (p. 392). Involuntary exodus occurs when Black women enter the teaching profession through alternative routes, choose to work in hard to staff schools, and are then pushed out due to circumstances beyond their control. The notion of involuntary exodus is similar to the push factors described in Coetzee and Moosa's (2020) quantitative study of 311 female employees at a higher education institution in South Africa. In this study, Coetzee and Moosa defined push factors as conditions that force women leaders out of organizations including gender discrimination, lack of support, lack of advancement opportunities, domination, biases, and abuse. While Coetzee and Moosa's study examined the retention of women leaders from all racial backgrounds in higher education, their definition of push factors can be applied when examining challenges related to Black teacher retention in K-12 schools.

Findings from two qualitative studies on Black teacher retention reveal key push factors that drive Black educators out of the teaching profession. The first study from Benson et al. (2020) is a 10-year qualitative study of one Black woman's experience in K-12 public schools. The sole participant in this study, Noelle Ballard (a pseudonym), was one of a handful of self-

identified Black women who earned Initial and Advanced Licensure in the TESOL program (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at an unnamed university in Charlotte, North Carolina between 2007 and 2017. This study examined the initial reasons Ballard chose to be a teacher, and the subsequent reasons she repeatedly decided to exit and re-enter the profession over a ten-year time span. The second study from Mosely (2018) was a mixed methods study of Black men and women teachers conducted by an organization called The Black Teacher Project. In this pilot study of San Francisco Bay Area and New York City K-12 teachers, researchers examined the role of racial affinity-based professional development in retaining and sustaining Black teachers. Using a participatory action research (PAR) approach, researchers collected survey data from 63 Black teachers and conducted interviews with 11 of them to determine the effectiveness of various racial affinity-based professional development strategies.

Push Factors: Causes that Contribute to Black Teacher Attrition

Key push factors from Benson et al.'s and Mosely's studies include: dealing with racial microaggressions, navigating White supremacy culture, and experiencing racial battle fatigue. Racial microaggressions are subtle racial slights made against people of color. White supremacy culture supports the idea that white thought, ideas, beliefs, and actions are superior to those of people of color. Finally, racial battle fatigue refers to the psychological, mental, and emotional stress experienced by people of color when being subject to or addressing incidents of racism (Benson et al., 2020). Ballard, the sole participant in Benson et al.'s study, described several examples of racial microaggressions that diminished her overall job satisfaction and ultimately caused her to leave the K-12 classroom.

Racial Microaggressions from Non-Black Staff in K-12 Schools

Ballard recalled an incident with racial microaggressions that she experienced working as a second grade teacher assistant in Charlotte. When walking past the teacher's lounge one day, she overheard one of her colleagues state, "And you know how Black women are. Once they start talking, they don't shut up" (Benson et al., 2020, p. 671). Offended by the comment, Ballard confronted the teacher who made the comment. An argument ensued. When the school administration attempted to resolve the issue through mediation, Ballard felt her concerns were dismissed. Following the mediation, Ballard received anonymous notes in her mailbox criticizing her efforts to address racist comments in the workplace. The harassment worsened to the point where cameras were put inside the room to identify the person (s) who were leaving the notes. At the end of that school year, Ballard lost her job due to a Reduction in Force (RIF). This incident involving a racially insensitive comment, followed by an ineffective mediation attempt, and finally a job termination, represents Ballard's first involuntary exodus from the K-12 classroom.

Ballard's experience with racial microaggressions in K-12 public schools mirrors the experiences of most Black teachers in Mosely's study. Several participants in Mosely's study described instances of racial microaggressions from non-Black adults. For example, some Black teachers discussed times when White parents questioned their competence upon learning their student received less than an "A" on an assignment. Other Black teachers described anti-Blackness within Latinx communities. They recalled moments when Latinx parents refused to speak with them and asked that their children be removed from their classes. Although these interactions did not involve the use of racial slurs or explicitly racist comments, Black teacher participants in Mosely's study characterized these microaggressions as key contributors to their racial battle fatigue.

Racial Microaggressions lead to Racial Battle Fatigue for Black Teachers

Mosely's study participants described other instances of racial battle fatigue. For example, many Black teachers in Mosely's study discussed their colleagues' and supervisors' tendency to only acknowledge their positive relationships with Black students, never mentioning their pedagogical skills and content expertise. They also discussed never receiving public acknowledgement or financial compensation for their time and skills related to connecting with Black families and serving as liaisons for the school. Mosely (2018) commented:

> One teacher reported being asked to sit in on a parent conference with a Black student that they didn't know. The principal argued that the family 'might feel more comfortable' with the Black teacher present. These teachers were never publicly acknowledged or compensated for their time or skill in being an advocate for families and/or a liaison for the school. (p. 278)

These instances of racial microaggressions caused psychological, mental, and emotional stress for these teachers who felt devalued by their non-Black colleagues and supervisors. Feeling racial battle fatigue, the Black teachers in Mosely's study, like Noelle Ballard in Benson et al.'s study, described their working environment as racially hostile. Ultimately, these Black teachers attributed high Black teacher turnover and low retention rates to the presence of racial microaggressions, White supremacy culture, and racial battle fatigue in the K-12 school system.

Limitations from Benson et al.'s and Mosely's studies require analyses of other studies that examine the issue of Black teacher attrition. The limitations of Benson et al.'s study were the one participant sample size and the geographical location of the study in the southern United States. Both of these factors make this study ungeneralizable to all Black teachers. Although Mosely's study was a mixed methods study that included a larger participant sample size, the

fact that it was a pilot study presents limitations. It is important to avoid making assumptions and generalizations about the entire Black teacher community based solely on one study.

Acknowledging the limitations of Benson et al.'s and Mosely's studies, this literature review also examined findings from Farinde et al.'s (2016) study to determine additional push factors that lead to higher Black teacher attrition rates. Farinde et al.'s study was a phenomenological study of 12 Black women teachers. It provided further insight into the reasons why Black teachers may decide to leave the K-12 classroom. These reasons included: low teacher salaries, lack of administrative support, unsupportive and oppressive work environments, heavy workloads, and poor school conditions. Findings from Farinde et al.'s study were also not generalizable due to the small participant sample size; however, they offer new perspectives that could explain why Black teachers leave the classroom at higher rates than their White teacher counterparts (Benson et. al, 2020).

Pull Factors: Strategies to Increase Black Teacher Retention

Black teachers' decisions to stay or leave the field of education are influenced by push *and* pull factors. Unlike push factors which represent various influences that cause a person to leave her profession, pull factors are considerations that attract a person to a profession (Coetzee and Moosa, 2020). According to education research literature, three key pull factors positively impact Black teacher retention: increased pay (Bueno & Sass, 2018; Farinde et al., 2016), improved teacher certification programs (Benson et al., 2020; Mosely, 2018), and racial affinity-based professional development (Mosely, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Regarding the first pull factor, increased pay, findings from Farinde et al.'s (2016) study suggest that significant incremental pay increases positively impact Black teacher retention. The second pull factor,

improved teacher certification programs, is frequently cited as an impactful retention tool for Black teachers.

Improving Teacher Certification Programs

Mosely (2018), founder of the Black Teacher Project, contends that teacher certification programs are responsible for teaching educators about the structural, systemic, and interpersonal ways racism operates in school environments. To support pre-service teachers of color in particular, Benson et al. (2020) maintains that university-based teacher preparation programs should consider the unique challenges these teachers face and design learning experiences that meet their needs. Ultimately, university-based teacher preparation programs must shift their focus from raising awareness and consciousness amongst White female pre-service teachers. Instead, they must train and empower Black women teachers specifically to effectively navigate race-specific K-12 challenges.

Black women teachers, like Noelle Ballard in Benson et al.'s study, require support and training to develop the mindset necessary to combat racial microaggressions embedded in the White supremacy culture of K-12 schools. Because Ballard did not receive this support, she ultimately left the teaching profession after 10 years of exiting and re-entering the profession. Ballard is not alone. According to Benson et al., Black educators comprise a smaller percentage of all teachers in K-12 schools, and yet, they experience higher rates of attrition than their non-Black colleagues. This discrepancy suggests that the critical consciousness, cultural responsiveness, and social justice frameworks studied in teacher certification programs do not protect or liberate Black women teachers from the racially hostile K-12 schooling environment.

Benson et al. propose an alternative approach to the traditional frameworks taught in teacher certification programs. They suggest that "[e]mbedding critical praxis in pre-service

teacher education programs may provide Black teachers with the mindsets to absorb racialized incidents in the schoolhouse and transform such incidents into moments of liberation and change" (p. 676). Critical praxis is the process of using dialogue and sustained critical reflection to understand one's social reality and to transform it (Freire, 1989). Critical praxis helps bridge consciousness and action in ways that allow Black teachers to explore the duality of the dilemma they face – "simultaneously serving and being of an oppressed community" (Benson et al., 2020, p. 675). Using critical praxis pedagogy in K-12 teacher certification programs is not only an effective strategy for retaining Black women teachers, but it also may be a useful approach to retaining the subjects of this phenomenological study - Black women principals.

Providing Racial Affinity-Based Professional Development

Along with strengthening teacher certification programs, education research literature on Black teacher attrition also points to racial affinity-based professional development as an effective way to increase Black teacher retention (Mosely, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Racial affinity-based professional development creates a space of support, learning, and career development that is culturally responsive to the needs of a specific racialized group. Findings from Mosely's (2018) pilot study of 63 Black teachers revealed that racial affinity-based professional development decreased isolation and increased the retention of Black teachers. Key aspects of the racial affinity-based professional development described in Mosely's study included liberatory consciousness and Critical Professional Development (CPD). Liberatory consciousness contains four crucial elements: awareness, analysis, action, and accountable/ally-ship. CPD also contains four essential components. CPD is dialogical. It honors relationality/collectivity. It strengthens racial literacy. Finally, it recognizes critical consciousness and transformation as an ongoing process.

Similar to Mosely's study, Pour-Khorshid's (2018) three-year ethnographic study examined the impact of grassroots racial affinity-based groups on teachers of color. Twelve teachers of color from the H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color Group participated in this study. Along with CPD, facilitators of the H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color Group used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and fugitivity to foster a culture of healing, empowerment, love, liberation, and action (H.E.L.L.A.) amongst their teacher of color participants. CRT challenges the dominant discourses in education that normalize the subordination of marginalized people (K. D. Brown, 2014). Through storytelling and counter-narratives, CRT examines the historical and modern-day struggles of marginalized educators (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Fugitivity is a way of learning which refutes capitalist logics and societal control mechanisms by creating spaces and modalities existing outside of the logical or logistical ways of being. This way of learning helped participants in Pour-Khorshid's study process the complexities of creating liberatory spaces within inherently oppressive education institutions (Harney & Moten, 2013 as cited in Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Although Pour-Khorshid's study included all teachers of color, not just Black teachers, like Mosely's (2018) study, it revealed that racial affinity-based professional development, through its use of healing and critical praxes, positively impacted Black teacher retention, and may positively impact Black administrator retention.

Black Administrator Retention: Push and Pull Factors That Influence Black Administrators' Career Decisions

There are similarities and differences between the push and pull factors that impact Black teacher retention and Black administrator retention. Regarding the issue of underrepresentation, Black women administrators, like Black women teachers, are significantly underrepresented in education leadership roles. Besides underrepresentation, Black women administrators face other

challenges related to retention. For example, two qualitative studies highlight key push factors that impact Black women superintendent retention. The first study was Brown's (2014) phenomenological study of eight Black women who were currently serving, or who had recently served, as district superintendents. Out of the eight study participants, five were current superintendents and three were retired superintendents. All eight participants were the first Black women to hold the position of superintendent in their district and state. All eight participants were also from the southeastern region of the United States. While the ages of the superintendents were not mentioned, most of them had attended segregated schools until they reached high school. The second study was Johnson's (2021) qualitative study of six Black women superintendents who had served as superintendents in at least two school districts. The topic of Brown's and Johnson's studies was the adversity and resiliency experienced by Black women district superintendents.

Push Factors: Causes that Contribute to Black Administrator Attrition

Black women superintendents in Brown's and Johnson's studies characterized the first push factor as leading under unjust and unsustainable working conditions. One participant in Brown's study, Superintendent Reed, commented:

> I think people have a mental mind-set about who Black women are. . . They think of us as being pack mules and so they they'll throw the work on us, and expect it to be done miraculously. . . However, in my first superintendency I remember thinking that they think I am a machine and I'm not human, cause you know we're animals – we're not human animals – we're to be used and what not. (p. 577)

A participant in Johnson's study, Superintendent Myles, shared almost identical views. She stated, "Some of them felt that 'Black women are sapphires[1],' if you understand the term. Some

people think we're like pack mules – we're just going to carry everything and if you say you're not going to do it, we're going to do it and see that it gets done" (p. 23). According to Superintendent Reed, Myles, and others, Black women superintendents were held to a much higher standard than their White women and men counterparts. Not only did Black women superintendents shoulder unsustainable personal workloads, but they were also expected to perform others' responsibilities if or when needed.

Another push factor noted in Brown's and Johnson's studies related to others' perceptions of Black women superintendents. Black women superintendents in both studies felt others did not view them as capable leaders. Negative assumptions about their intelligence (Brown, 2014), along with other negative beliefs, required them to constantly prove themselves capable of doing their jobs (Johnson, 2021). In Brown's (2014) study, one participant, Superintendent Reed, described the resistance she faced from White men who refused to take direction from her:

> I still have the issues of White men who want to challenge me and they never do it overtly but the challenge is always there. They would rather see a White man in front of them talking than a Black woman and I understand that and I'm not going to make it my problem. (p. 580)

Superintendent Reed's reflection captured the thoughts of many Black women superintendents in Brown's and Johnson's studies who felt their competency was consistently challenged despite their qualifications and job performance.

The push factors experienced by Black women superintendents in Brown's and Johnson's studies are examples of the aforementioned "glass cliff" phenomenon. In short, these Black women were hired to lead, but set up to fail. Black women superintendents were expected to

thrive under unsustainable working conditions. They were expected to constantly prove their competence to White male colleagues or other stakeholders. These expectations eventually caused them to devolve into "Sisterellas." According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), a "Sisterella" is a Black woman who loses herself in the process of trying to comply with the demands of the dominant culture. She often forgets her self-worth, strengths, and talents until she is able to access supports that allow her to self-actualize and succeed in her life. Using a semi-structured interview format, the Black women principals in this study were able to openly discuss their experience with the "Sisterella" phenomenon and other push factors.

Pull Factors: Strategies to Increase Black Administrator Retention

Similar to Black women teachers, Black women administrators experience push *and* pull factors that impact their career decisions. Looking specifically at Black women superintendents, Brown (2014) and Johnson (2021) identified three key pull factors that positively impact their retention: networking, mentorship, and their relationship with the school board. Brown (2014) stated, "It is not that African American women are not prepared formally, but the lack of informal preparation such as developing interpersonal skills to read situations, networking, and mentors presents themselves as larger problems related to recruitment and retention" (p. 586). One of the most important retention factors, even more than the personal traits of the superintendent, or the quality of her professional training, is having access to strong professional networks.

Brown and Johnson also identified mentors as key figures in the Black woman superintendent's professional network. Having a mentor helped Black women superintendents deal with the isolation of the role (Brown, 2014). It also provided access to culturally relevant and practical on-the-job training from other Black women superintendents. Unlike most

superintendent certification programs which center the White male superintendent experience (Johnson, 2021), veteran or retired Black women mentors could provide new Black women superintendents with the mindsets and strategies to tackle the unique challenges they will inevitably face as Black women in the superintendency role.

Along with networking and mentoring, existing education research literature claims that having a positive relationship with the school board supports the retention of Black women superintendents. Johnson (2021) stated, "Several superintendents expressed the need to not ignore the school board in the stakeholder group. One superintendent identified continuous communication with the board and keeping the board informed about major issues as central to her work" (p. 21-22). Even with strong professional networks and mentors, a Black woman superintendent will not be retained if the school board is not on her side. As her supervisor, boss, and evaluator, Black women superintendents must respect the school board even at times when the respect is not reciprocated (Brown, 2014). Given that Black women principals also navigate relationships with school boards and other external stakeholder groups, participants in this study were asked about non school-based factors that helped or hindered their success and retention as k-12 principals.

While Brown's and Johnson's studies provided useful insight into the push and pull factors that impact Black women superintendent retention, they did not address the unique push and pull factors that impact Black women *principal* retention. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, this phenomenological study of current and former Black women principals aimed to fill the existing knowledge gap in education research literature on the individual and institutional factors that affect Black women principal retention in K-12 school systems. Building off of existing studies on Black women teacher retention, and Black women superintendent retention,

findings from this study explored factors beyond representation that influence the long-term desirability and sustainability of the K-12 principalship for Black women educators.

Theoretical Framework

In most cases, the principal role comes after classroom teaching and before the superintendency. Consequently, there is much to learn about Black women principal retention from existing education research literature on Black women teacher and superintendent retention. However, despite the similarities between each level of an educator's career trajectory (e.g., from teacher to principal to superintendent), the principal role is unique. Unlike teachers who are firmly positioned inside of K-12 schools, and superintendents who primarily function outside of K-12 schools, principals sit squarely in the middle, navigating challenges inside *and* outside of K-12 schools. Therefore, this phenomenological study used a systems thinking approach to explore the push and pull factors inside *and* outside of K-12 schools that influence Black women principals' retention decisions.

Systems thinking is an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that applies to many fields. It is a model for thinking and learning about systems of all sorts - scientific, organizational, personal, and public (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2015; Nadav et al., 2021). Unlike Newtonian thinkers who strive to solve systemic problems by breaking down the system into its component parts, and examining each part separately, systems thinkers focus on the dynamics between the parts, viewing these dynamics as a network of interactions that taken together help us understand the problem as a whole (Hammond, 2005; Senge, 2006; Shaked & Schechter, 2019, 2020).

Donella Meadows (2008), author of *Thinking In Systems: A Primer*, was a prominent systems thinker, writer, teacher, and scholar. Like other notable systems thinkers, Meadows

claimed that "a system is more than the sum of its parts." (p. 12). According to Meadows, "A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something" (Meadows, 2008, p. 11). In Meadows' systems thinking framework, there are three components to every system including: elements, interconnections, and purpose. In the K-12 education system, which is the focus of this study, the *elements* are usually the visible and tangible parts of the system such as the teachers, students, parents, principals, district administrators, policies, curriculum, instruction, and student discipline. The *interconnections* are the relationships that hold the elements together highlighting how the various system elements impact each other. Finally, a system's *purpose* describes the goal/s of the system, or what the system is designed to do.

Meadows (2008) described a system's *purpose* as "not necessarily spoken, written, or expressed explicitly, except through the operation of the system" (p. 14). She asserts that, "The best way to deduce the system's purpose is to watch for a while to see how the system behaves" (p. 14). When exploring ways to change or redesign systems, as was the goal of this study, Meadows contends that focusing on changing the interconnections and purposes of systems, as opposed to its elements, is the best way to achieve impactful systems-level change in complex organizations. For this reason, using Donella Meadows' systems thinking framework and Iceberg Model Concept Map (see Appendix G), I later explore the role of various interconnections and purposes within the K-12 school system that either support or impede the success and retention of Black women principals.

To address the role of race and gender in the systemic challenges described by Black women principals, I applied Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as another conceptual framework in this study. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at Columbia and

UCLA, introduced the concept of intersectionality over 30 years ago. She defines it as a lens for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. While it is common to discuss race as separate from other forms of inequality, she reminds us that some people, like Black women, are subject to multiple forms of inequality at once and that the experience is not just the sum of its parts (Crenshaw, 1989; Steinmetz, 2020). She states:

> I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender … Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140)

Crenshaw developed the theory of intersectionality because existing feminist and antiracist frameworks did not sufficiently capture the duality and nuances of the marginalization experienced by Black women. Like Meadows and other systems thinkers, Crenshaw asserts that the intersectional experience, similar to systems thinking analysis, is greater than the sum of its parts. Consequently, the discrimination experienced by Black women "cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Like systems thinking which applies to many fields and types of systems, the theory of intersectionality is expansive. It does not only apply to Black women. Many people who hold multiple marginalized identities experience intersectionality. For example, intersectionality can be used as a conceptual framework to analyze the discrimination of people of color within the LGBTQ+ community, or women within the immigrant community, or trans women within

feminist movements. However, despite the relevancy of intersectionality to multiple identities, Crenshaw (2015) claims that "intersectionality is not just about identities but about the institutions that use identity to exclude and privilege." Therefore, examining the ways in which identity and power work together within systems and institutions is the best way to change them.

In this study, issues of race and gender were discussed explicitly in a semi-structured interview format, allowing participants to speak freely about the role of race *and* gender in their careers. Interview questions for current, former, and principal coaches (see Appendices B-D) asked participants to discuss their racial and gender identities with regard to the personal and systemic challenges they faced, the training, professional development, and support they received, and the advice they would give to prospective K-12 principals who share their intersecting racial and gender identities. The experiences of the interviewees in this study align with Crenshaw's comment concerning the difficulty of discussing one's intersecting identities separately. Crenshaw (1991) stated, "[T]he intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). For the Black women principals in this study, their negative professional experiences were intimately tied to their womanness and their Blackness.

Nearly every time the Black women principals in this study described a microaggression they experienced, or a challenge they faced, they would tie these incidents to being *Black women*. For example, from their perspectives, others questioned their competency and skills because they were *Black women*, not just because they were Black, or just because they were women. Others went behind their backs to complain to their supervisors because they were *Black women*, not just because they were Black, or just because they were women. Crenshaw (1989)

described this type of "double-discrimination" in her seminal text on intersectionality titled, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." She stated:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination - the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women - not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (p. 149)

Regardless of the topic, the Black women principals in this study rarely talked about their racial identity as separate from their gender identity. In fact, one of the *only* times the Black women principals in this study discussed race and gender separately was when they discussed their experiences as mothers. The role of motherhood in the lives of the Black women principals in this study is later discussed in chapter 5.

Conclusion

Education research literature on Black women teacher and superintendent retention contextualizes the problem explored in this study – Black women principal attrition. Findings from current education research suggest that Black women teachers and administrators face similar challenges related to others' perceptions of their professional skills and competence, inequitable professional expectations, and unsustainable working conditions. Regarding support, current education research indicates that the best ways to retain Black women teachers, as noted earlier, include: increasing their pay, improving teacher certification programs, and providing access to racial affinity-based professional development. On the contrary, the best ways to retain

Black women administrators, namely district superintendents, include: providing them with professional networking opportunities, pairing them with current or retired Black women superintendent mentors, and helping them establish positive relationships with school boards.

Given that the problem of Black women teacher and administrator attrition persists despite these solutions, K-12 education organizations must think more broadly about how to address this problem. Metaphorically speaking, it is no longer enough for K-12 education organizations to offer Black women administrators "a seat at the table." Many Black women who are given positional power through district and site-based administrative roles continue to leave education at alarming rates. Therefore, while improving certification programs may help Black women teachers and administrators navigate racial microaggressions, White supremacy culture, and racial battle fatigue in K-12 schools (Benson et al., 2020), that approach alone will likely *not* resolve the problem of higher Black educator attrition rates. Similarly, having greater access to professional networks and mentors may help reduce feelings of isolation, especially amongst Black women administrators (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021). However, these approaches alone will likely *not* adequately address the myriad of factors at play within K-12 education organizations that ultimately drive Black women administrators out of their jobs. For these reasons, K-12 education organizations must adopt a *critical* systems thinking approach to effectively confront the retention challenges faced by Black women principals.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Using Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, this study examined the problem of Black women principal attrition from a *critical* systems thinking perspective, focusing on systemic problems and solutions that may influence Black women's decisions to stay or leave their principalships. This study sought to examine the following research questions:

Research Questions

1) According to current and former Black women principals, what systemic challenges do Black women principals face in their work as school leaders?
    a) What systemic challenges - if any - do Black women principals believe are related to their racial and/or gender identity?
    b) To what extent do these systemic challenges influence their decision to remain a principal, or to leave that role?
2) According to current and former Black women principals, what policies, systems, structures, or supports would significantly improve the retention of Black women principals?

Research Design Overview

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of current and former Black women principals in K-12 California schools. Current education research literature acknowledges the issue of poor retention across all principal demographic groups. According to DeMatthews et al. (2022), approximately one in five principals leave their school each year, and turnover is higher in schools that serve low-income students of color. Absent from current education research

literature are studies that focus exclusively on the experiences of Black women principals. Most studies on Black women retention in education address Black women teachers and superintendents. Thus, using data collected from 23 semi-structured interviews, this phenomenological study investigated the challenges that might contribute to the problem of higher attrition rates amongst Black women principals in K-12 schools.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a qualitative research study is appropriate when there is a limited amount of research on a given topic, which is the case for the topic of Black women principal retention. A qualitative research approach allows participants to share in detail about *their* perceptions of their experiences, and the experiences of others. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), semi-structured interviews give researchers the flexibility to ask open-ended questions and probes (p. 122) based on the way each interviewee chooses to respond. They state, "This format (i.e., semi-structured interviews) allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 111). Ultimately, findings from this study not only offer more robust accounts of the varied lived experiences of Black women principals in K-12 schools, but hopefully incite organizational leaders to think more holistically about interpersonal, structural, and systemic ways to retain *all* women teachers and leaders of color within their organizations, including but not limited to Black women K-12 principals.

Data Collection

Using a semi-structured interview format, I collected first-hand accounts from 23 Black women principals of their experiences navigating interpersonal, structural, and systemic challenges as site-based leaders in K-12 schools. To hone my interview skills, I began by conducting one practice interview with a current principal of a charter high school in Los

Angeles, California. This principal was not eligible to participate in my study as he is not a Black woman. Conducting one practice interview with a current White male principal helped me refine my interview questions to best reflect a current principal's lived experience, and helped me anticipate how my practice interviewee's responses might compare to those of my Black women principal interviewees.

After completing one practice interview, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews over Zoom with Black women principals. The interviews lasted between 1-2.5 hours. With each participant's permission, I recorded the interviews on Zoom to support with transcription later. Before arriving at the interview, I asked participants to complete a "Black Woman Principal Questionnaire" (see Appendix A) to determine their eligibility for the study. For those who were eligible, I then moved forward with scheduling a Zoom interview. At the start of each interview, I read a brief "Interview Introduction and Informed Consent" script to cover the topic of confidentiality in the study, and to obtain permission to contact interviewees again if I had additional questions following the interview.

My first research question focused on Black women principals' perceptions of the systemic challenges they experience (or have experienced) in their work as school leaders. Principals reflected on the ways in which these challenges impact (or have impacted) their decision to remain in the principal role, or to leave that position. My second research question focused on policies, systems, structures, or supports that could significantly improve the retention of Black women principals. These policies, systems, structures, and supports could come from all levels of the K-12 school system, including within *and* outside of the principal's school site or organization.

Themes from both research questions are present in all three versions of my interview questions. One set of interview questions applied to current principals (see Appendix B). Another set of interview questions applied to former principals (see Appendix C). A third set of interview questions applied to former principals in new leadership roles who currently coach, mentor, or directly support K-12 principals (see Appendix D).

Although all three sets of interview questions required participants to situate their personal experiences as principals within the larger K-12 education context, they did not explicitly mention the term "systems thinking." This choice was intentional. By excluding the term "systems thinking" from my interview questions, I intended to create space for principals to describe their perceptions of their professional experiences in their own words without feeling pressure to integrate my study's conceptual framework into their responses. Asking questions in this way strengthened the validity of my findings as it prevented me from being biased in soliciting and selecting data that fit neatly into my conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013).

Participant and Site Selection

The participants in this study were current and former principals who self-identify as Black women. To meet the study's criteria, participants must serve (or have served) as a principal for at least one year in a K-12 California charter or public school. One exception to this was the interviewee, Donna Kim, who served as a charter school principal for five years in Washington, D.C. Donna Kim was included in this study because she currently serves as a principal coach in the San Francisco Bay Area. Two of her coachees, one current principal and one former principal, were interviewed for this study.

Regarding site selection for this study, participants included current and former principals from K-12 charter and public schools across the state of California. Since this study aimed to

examine the lived experiences of Black women principals who are knowledgeable about leading in public and charter school contexts, the principal's specific school site was not a key factor in determining their eligibility for this study.

Pertinent information that was collected in this study is captured below in Table 1. The following information was collected from each interviewee: their current principal status (e.g., current, former, or principal coach), their years of experience, their school's or schools' grade levels (e.g., elementary, middle, or high school/s), their school's or schools' affiliation (e.g., public or charter school/s), their school's or schools' location/s, and whether or not they attended a Tier I Administrative Services Credential program. (Note: The names mentioned below are pseudonyms for the principal participants in this study.)

Table 3.1

Sample Description

Pseudonym	Principal Status	Years of Experience	School Level/s	School Affiliation/s	School Location/s	Completed Admin Credential Program
Sundry-Sailors, Sasha	Coach	4-5	Elementary	Public	Bay Area	Yes
Kim, Donna	Coach	4-5	High	Charter	Washington, D.C.	Yes
Oaks, Toni	Coach	1-3	Elementary/ Middle	Charter	Los Angeles	Yes
Levitt, Jamisha	Coach	5+	Elementary/ Middle	Public	Bay Area	Yes
Rider, Yanessa	Coach	5+	Elementary	Public	San Diego	Yes
Albertson, Evelyn	Current	4-5	Elementary	Public	Bay Area	Yes
Green, Natasha	Current	1-3	Elementary	Public	Bay Area	Yes

Baker, Larissa	Current	1-3	Middle/High	Charter	Bay Area	No
Brown, Sam	Current	5+	Elementary	Public	San Diego	Yes
Lamb, Camryn	Current	5+	High	Public	San Diego	Yes
Frank, Elise	Current	5+	High	Public	San Diego	Yes
Dudley, Faren	Current	5+	Middle	Charter	Los Angeles	Yes
Bradley, Diana	Current	5+	Middle/High	Charter	Bay Area	Yes
Jones, Pam	Current	5+	Middle	Public	San Diego	Yes
Arnold, Erika	Former	4-5	Elementary	Public	Los Angeles	Yes
James, Madison	Former	1-3	Elementary/ Middle	Charter	Bay Area	No
Price, Latoya	Former	1-3	Elementary	Public	Bay Area	Yes
Willis, Stephanie	Former	1-3	High	Charter	Bay Area	No
Erickson, Jackie	Former	1-3	Middle/High	Charter	Bay Area	Yes
Dodd, Tonya	Former	1-3	Middle/High	Charter	Bay Area	Yes
Johnson, Nesha	Former	5+	Elementary	Charter	Central Valley	No
Harrison, Amy	Former	5+	Elementary/ Middle	Public	Bay Area	Yes
Kane, Lisa	Former	5+	Middle/High	Public	San Diego	Yes

Site Access

Site and sample accessibility did not present a challenge in this study. First, during the time of this study, I did not work for any of the schools or districts from which I recruited my principal interviewees. Thus, my principal interviewees did not express doubt or worry about my intentions for the study, and were more willing to openly share their experiences with me. Second, I had access to several professional schools and networks that focus specifically on

training K-12 administrators, including but not limited to Black women principals. As a current and former student of some of these professional schools, and affiliate of these professional organizations, I had long standing relationships with district leaders, program founders, directors, and former colleagues who were willing to participate in my study, or to connect me to Black women principals in their networks who were interested in participating. Through purposive sampling, I was able to access current Black women principals who were tied to these professional schools and organizations, *and* former Black women principals who were once tied to these professional schools and organizations, but had since left their principalships (Maxwell, 2013).

My professional schools and networks were primarily located in the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California. They consisted of public and charter school organizations I used to work for, along with Graduate Schools of Education located in Northern and Southern California. Through my connections to these K-12 education organizations and Graduate Schools of Education, I developed professional relationships with the leaders of K-12 education programs that were designed to support administrators working in urban public and charter school districts. In addition, two of the professional networks I am affiliated with focus specifically on mentoring and supporting Black women education leaders. Because of my prior relationships with various California-based professional schools and networks, it was easier to gain physical and emotional access to prospective Black women principal interviewees.

Another factor that made access to my study's sites and participants easier was the study design itself. Unlike a qualitative case study of a K-12 school which requires the researcher to engage with many different stakeholders at a specific school site, my study's sites were spread out across California. In fact, the maximum number of principals I interviewed from any given

school district or charter management organization was seven principals total. Seeing as the units of analysis in this study were individual Black women principals - not their schools or districts - it was not necessary to gain approval for my study through district leadership channels.

Instead, I reached out to individual principals directly to request their participation in my study. With a small sample size, I was able to personalize my outreach approach. For example, after I posted a message advertising my study on various social media networks (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn), I compiled a contact list of prospective current and former Black women principal interviewees and reached out to them individually via text message or email address. In my initial text message and email, I briefly introduced myself, shared the purpose of my study, and shared the link to the "Black Woman Principal Questionnaire" (see Appendix A). If a prospective interviewee agreed to participate in my study, I used a software called Calendly to schedule their interview at a time that worked with their schedule. Finally, following their interview, I sent a thank you note and gift card expressing my appreciation for their time and support.

Recruitment

My positionality as a former Black woman K-12 principal and a UCLA doctoral student was an asset when recruiting principals for my study. Having served as a public school vice principal and a charter school principal, I had firsthand knowledge about the complexities and challenges of the principal job. This experience alone helped me earn the respect and trust of my interviewees. Additionally, my identity as a Black woman increased my interviewees' comfort level when speaking to me about their unique perspectives and experiences as Black women principals. While all Black women leader experiences are unique, I was able to establish trust

and rapport with my interviewees based on the racial, gender, and professional experiences we shared.

Although my interviewees did not share my positionality as a UCLA doctoral student (with one exception), I learned through the interview process that many interviewees were interested in my study as a result of this role. I did not specifically recruit current and former Black women principals with doctoral degrees; however, 14 of the 23 women I interviewed shared that they possessed doctoral degrees, or were currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Many of these women explicitly stated their desire to support me with my research as they had recently gone through the same dissertation writing and research process in their doctoral programs.

Ultimately, whether my connection to my interviewees was grounded in our shared racial and gender identity, our shared principal experience, our shared experience as doctoral students, or all of the above, many expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their principal journey with someone who could relate to them and who took the time to listen. I believe having the chance to make a positive impact on the career success of Black women principals beyond their individual schools and districts motivated prospective interviewees to participate in my study.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Data analysis is a complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (p. 202). Both methods of data analysis - deductive and inductive coding - were used in this study. I started with deductive coding. Looking at my research and interview questions, I created coding categories

that were "*responsive to the purpose of the research*" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 212). Examples of coding categories I created through the deductive process that align with my research and interview questions included: site-based systemic challenges, non site-based systemic challenges, poor admin training, good admin training, race influence, gender influence, decision to leave, etc. Based on themes reflected in my research and interview questions, I deductively created 25 coding categories.

While using deductive coding to generate coding categories, I simultaneously used inductive coding to revise existing categories, create new categories, and to eliminate a research question based on my interviewees' responses. For example, through the inductive or open coding process, I changed the name of two coding categories from "race challenges" and "gender challenges" to "race influence" and "gender Influence." I also created new coding categories such as: teaching experience as an asset, religious influence, challenges all principals face, and interviewer/ee connection. Finally, as a result of the inductive coding process, I decided to remove one of my original research questions that ultimately did not accurately represent the interviewees' descriptions of their leadership experiences. Durkin (2021) notes that changing one's research questions or interview protocols is sometimes necessary "if the protocol's wording is ineffective in eliciting the intended data" (p. 92).

I used a coding software known as MAXQDA to analyze all 23 interview transcriptions. In the first round of deductive coding, I created coding categories and saved them in MAXQDA. In subsequent rounds of deductive and inductive coding, I recorded memos by hand and in MAXQDA to identify possible themes and findings that answered my research questions. Creswell (2013) defines memos as "notes written during the research process that reflect on the process or that help shape the development of codes and themes" (p. 184). MAXQDA not only

made it easy to record, sort, cluster, and analyze memos, but it offered a much more efficient way to organize and analyze *all* of my coding data. With the support of MAXQDA, I was then able to move from a categorical form of qualitative data analysis to a more conceptual one using Donella Meadows' Iceberg Model Concept Map (see Appendix E).

Using Donella Meadows' Iceberg Model Concept Map, I identified patterns and trends, structures, and mental models that may be contributing to the "event" highlighted in this study - that is the higher attrition rates of Black women principals in California's K-12 schools (see Appendix F). Once I identified these system components, I began to search for connections or relationships between them. For example, in Appendix F, I could see the connection between the negative mental models about Black women principals at the bottom of the iceberg (e.g., Black women must change themselves to fit appropriately into the work environment.) and the trend of Black women principals leaving their principalships due to microaggressions. The connection between negative mental models, microaggressions, and poor retention was made clearer through the use of this visual representation.

With regard to negative mental models, like the one noted above, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helped me identify the ways Black women's race and gender impacted others' perceptions of them. For example, many interviewees discussed feeling judged in the workplace for exhibiting qualities that were authentic to their Black woman identity. These qualities included: the way they looked, dressed, talked, and carried themselves. Carbado et al. (2013) describe an iteration of intersectionality known as "intra-intersectional" discrimination which explains the vulnerability of professional Black women who are subject to "negative racialized gender perceptions" (p. 310). Examples of negative racialized gender perceptions experienced by Black women professionals include "one's demeanor and other characteristics

such as name, accent, hair, political identity, social identity, marital status, residence, and religious affiliation" (p. 310). Being able to situate the negative mental models described by the Black women principals in this study in the larger conceptual framework of intersectionality allowed me to analyze the issue of Black women principal retention from a critical race and gender perspective.

Donella Meadows' Iceberg Model Concept Map was a useful tool to support my *critical* systems thinking analysis of the K-12 education system. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the process of using concept maps and diagrams to link conceptual elements together during the data analysis process.

> A model is just that – a visual presentation of how abstract concepts (categories) are related to one another. Even a simple diagram or model using the categories and subcategories of the data analysis can effectively capture the interaction or relatedness of the findings. (p. 216)

In this study, Donella Meadows' Iceberg Model Concept Map supported a *critical* systems thinking approach to my data analysis process by highlighting the dynamics between parts of the K-12 education system, viewing these dynamics as a means of understanding complex systemic problems as a whole (Hammond, 2005; Senge, 2006; Shaked & Schechter, 2019, 2020).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In designing this study, I considered how personal bias could pose a threat to the credibility of my findings. While my positionality as a Black woman and former K-12 principal helped me develop trust and rapport with study participants, it could potentially adversely affect my ability to be objective in the data collection and analysis process. For example, during the data analysis process, I had to stay disciplined and resist the urge to seek out participant

responses that validated my experience as a former principal (Maxwell, 2013). To prevent this, I collected direct quotations from interviewees instead of paraphrasing their responses to ensure that I accurately conveyed their ideas. I also conducted three member checks with Stephanie Willis, Lisa Kane, and Jamisha Levitt to ensure that my description of their experiences was accurate and illustrative of their feelings and thoughts on various situations and topics.

Another possible threat to the credibility of my study involved participant reactivity. Since I had prior relationships and mutual connections with several of the interviewees in my study, I considered that my interviewees may feel pressure to align their interview responses with their perceptions of my views and beliefs. For example, if my interviewees knew that managing teachers was a significant challenge for me as a principal, they may feel compelled to also speak about their challenges with teachers even though those experiences may not be significant to them. To prevent this, I made sure that regardless of my relationship with each study participant, I asked every principal the same interview questions based on their status as current principals, former principals, or principal coaches. Also, I tried to avoid sharing too much of my principal background with interviewees. That way interviewees did not feel compelled to censor their experiences in ways that aligned with mine.

Ethical Considerations

This study posed few ethical concerns since I was not connected to any of the schools, districts, or organizations that were involved in my study. However, as a former employee and member of some of the professional schools and organizations from which I recruited principals, I considered that current principals may feel concerned about the confidentiality of their interview responses. To address their concerns, I shared with interviewees that no identifying information would be shared throughout my study including: participants' names, school names,

and district names. In addition, once my dissertation was filed, I informed participants that I would shred all interview transcriptions and delete Zoom recordings from my computer and hard drive. My hope was that taking these measures to protect the confidentiality of my study's participants would prompt interviewees to share openly and honestly with me about their experiences as K-12 principals.

Conclusion

Conducting in-depth interviews with Black women principals from diverse professional backgrounds across California produced meaningful insights concerning Black women principals' retention decisions. Semi-structured interview data collected in this study yielded critical findings related to the interpersonal, structural, and systemic factors that determine/d Black women's effectiveness and longevity in their principal roles. Ultimately, this data could help district leaders and policy makers enact systemic changes that could lead to significantly greater retention amongst California's K-12 Black women public and charter school principals.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter reports the findings from a qualitative study about the reasons Black women principals decide to stay or leave their principalships. This study explores Black women principals' perceptions of the systemic challenges they face, as well as the systemic solutions that could improve their retention. Current education research literature posits that the number of Black women principals has increased over time, and yet, Black women principals remain underrepresented compared to other groups. In addition, Black women principals continue to leave the profession at higher rates compared to their White and male counterparts. To examine the reasons behind this phenomenon, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews of current and former Black women principals from K-12 public and charter schools.

All interview questions were based on the following research questions:

1) According to current and former Black women principals, what systemic challenges do Black women principals face in their work as school leaders?
    a) What systemic challenges - if any - do Black women principals believe are related to their racial and/or gender identity?
    b) To what extent do these systemic challenges influence their decision to remain a principal, or to leave that role?
2) According to current and former Black women principals, what policies, systems, structures or supports would significantly improve the retention of Black women principals?

To be eligible for this study, all participants had to self-identify as Black women and had to serve in California as a charter or public school principal for at least one school year. As noted

previously, Donna Kim, former principal who worked in Washington, D.C., was the only exception to this.

Out of the 23 principals interviewed for this study, nine are current principals with 2-13 years of experience, fourteen are former principals with 1-10 years of experience, and five are former principals who went on to coach principals as program directors, executive leadership coaches, or consultants following their principalships. Out of the 23 participants, twenty reported having attended a Tier I Administrative Services Credential program, fourteen reported having doctoral degrees, and three reported that they serve/d as principals without an administrative services credential. Out of the 23 participants, ten reported that they serve/d as principals in charter schools and thirteen reported that they served as principals in public schools. Out of the 23 participants, twelve reported that they serve/d as principals in elementary schools, eleven reported that they serve/d as principals in middle schools, and nine reported that they serve/d as principals in high schools. (Note: Some principals work/ed at elementary/middle schools or middle/high schools). Lastly, out of the 22 California principal participants, twelve reported serving as principals in the San Francisco Bay Area, one reported serving as principal in the Central Valley, three reported serving as principals in Los Angeles County, and six reported serving as principals in San Diego County.

This chapter is divided into four sections: Principal Motivation and Purpose, Systemic Challenges, Top Challenges That Lead to Black Women Principal Attrition, and Ways to Improve Black Women Principal Retention. In the first section, I discuss the primary reason many of the Black women principals in this study decided to pursue principalships. In the second section, I describe the key systemic challenges many Black women principals in this study identified as barriers to their success. Section two answers Research Question 1a. In the third

section, I describe three main reasons many of the Black women principals in this study decided or would decide to leave their principalships. Section three answers Research Question 1b. In the final section, I outline five recommendations the Black women principals in this study offered to improve Black women principal retention. Section four answers Research Question 2.

Principal Motivation and Purpose

Many Black women principals choose to lead schools for the express purpose of serving Black students.

The majority of Black women principals in this study (16) claimed that their desire to become principals stemmed from their strong commitment to serving students of color, Black students specifically. For many reasons, outlined below, these women decided to work at schools with a higher percentage of Black students, or at schools where they felt strong ties to the Black community. Either way, these women chose to be principals because they cared for Black students, they felt they could relate to Black students, and/or they were invested in providing Black students with the best education possible.

Faren Dudley and Natasha Green, both current principals with over 20 years of experience in their school districts, described feeling a close connection to the Black students in their schools. When asked why she decided to become a principal, and what factors impacted that decision, Faren Dudley, a veteran middle school principal from Los Angeles County, stated:

> I knew from my experience as a student teacher there 30 years prior, that the Black children at my school did not feel like they were included and wanted and the environment was welcoming for them. But that was my vision, first and foremost, was to make sure that I addressed opportunity gaps for Black and Brown children, particularly

> Black children, but all Black and Brown children to make sure that they were being served.

Having student-taught at her current school over 30 years ago, Faren Dudley felt she understood the needs and challenges of the Black students at her school, and made it her mission to support their success. Similar to Faren Dudley, Natasha Green has worked at her school district in the San Francisco Bay Area for decades. Although she is a new principal, Natasha Green has over 20 years of experience in her school district as a former student, student teacher, classroom teacher, and vice principal. In the interview, Natasha Green described instances as a principal when students attempted to come to her office instead of attending their classes. She stated, "They'd rather be in my office than be in their classroom. And it just goes back to the relationship. And I think as being an African-American person, we know how it feels to be looked over." Like Faren Dudley, Natasha Green empathizes with her Black students, and sees her purpose as providing them with a safe and welcoming space to learn.

The desire to serve Black students did not just come from Black women principals with close ties to their school communities. Amy Harrison, a former elementary and middle school principal from the San Francisco Bay Area, described her motivation to serve Black and Brown students from Richmond, California despite being new to the area. When Amy Harrison relocated from Southern California (Los Angeles) to Northern California (Richmond), she explained how people would use deficit language to describe the Black and Brown students who lived there. Tired of listening to people complain about how Black and Brown students from Richmond "couldn't do this [and] couldn't do that," she decided her principalship would be devoted to proving them wrong. She said, "So when I headed for my principalship, that was still my goal, was to show that given the right resources and love that African-American and Latino

students could also perform and do just as well. And that's always been my mission." For Amy Harrison, it did not matter that she was not from Richmond, California. What mattered was that all of her students, including her Black and Brown students, received a quality education no matter where they came from.

Lisa Kane, a former middle and high school principal from San Diego County, and Stephanie Willis, a former high school principal from the San Francisco Bay Area, shared Amy Harrison's passion for providing their Black students with a high quality education. Lisa Kane commented on her personal motivation to pursue her principalship:

> It's not just business as usual. It's not haphazard any kind of way. It's going to be with some level of excellence, because, well, if my baby went to this school, what would I expect? Well, then that's what I'm going to expect for yours, too. I won't say that there aren't others that might have that thought process, but I will say that I don't know any Black women principals that don't.

Lisa Kane, and her Black women principal colleagues, had high expectations for their work with students. They believed it was their responsibility to provide other people's children with the same high quality education that they would expect others to provide their children. On the topic of high expectations, Stephanie Willis stated, "I cannot sit in a class, run a school, where Black children aren't learning. That's not going to happen. I can't be where Black children aren't being held to high expectations. It's not going to happen, but it requires *a lot*." For Stephanie Willis, providing her Black students in San Francisco with an excellent education was a non-negotiable. If she could not provide her Black students with the education they deserved, she did not believe she had any business being their principal.

While Stephanie Willis discussed her goal to provide Black students with an excellent academic experience, Madison James and Toni Oaks, both former elementary and middle school principals, described their desire to provide Black students with an emotionally safe and affirming learning environment. When asked what her hopes and intentions were when she started as a principal, Madison James stated:

> I feel like I had a lot of hopes and intentions. That one of the biggest ones was wanting to provide quality education for Black kids given that our population of Black students was 84%. So wanting to have a space where students felt included in their education, students felt heard in their education, and then authentic relationships were being built with families.

Madison James described feeling a sense of responsibility to meet the needs of her Black students who represented over 80% of her student population. Similarly, Toni Oaks believed that her role as principal was to affirm, uplift, and empower her Black students. In fact, Toni Oaks worked at a K-8 charter school in Los Angeles County with a 99% Black student population. When asked what her hopes and intentions were when she started as a principal, she stated:

> I think my hopes and intentions were that I wanted to continue the legacy of what the school started to create a really caring and community-based space that centered Black life and Black joy and centered home language and made our students feel like they were validated and affirmed every day that they walked into a space … I wanted everybody to walk in opulence in a space of joy, and it never shifted from that.

For Toni Oaks, serving Black students was her sole motivation for becoming a principal. Early in the interview, she stated, “I wanted to be a principal of a school that had Black children in it, and I wanted to be in a school where I felt I had support, and I was able to be free. And if I didn't

have those parameters, I don't know if I would've became a school principal." For the majority of the Black women principals in this study, having the opportunity to serve Black students surpassed any other reason given for pursuing their principalships.

Systemic Challenges

Many Black women principals experience microaggressions tied to their racial and gender identities.

The majority of Black women principals in this study (20) described instances of teachers, parents, colleagues and/or supervisors directing race and/or gender-based microaggressions at them. In fact, students were the only subgroup that was rarely mentioned when describing instances of microaggressions. The types of microaggressions experienced by the Black women principals in this study varied. Some microaggressions challenged their competence, skills, and racial and gender identities. Other microaggressions involved criticizing and undermining their leadership decisions. While all forms of race and/or gender-based microaggressions had negative effects on the Black women principals in this study, microaggressions from parents, teachers, and supervisors emerged as the most prevalent type of microaggression in the K-12 school environment.

Parent and Teacher Pushback

Twelve principals in this study described facing race and/or gender-based microaggressions from parents and teachers, including Black parents and teachers. In some cases, the microaggressions they experienced involved parents and teachers making derisive comments about their qualifications, competency, and skills. Other times, the microaggressions they experienced involved parents and teachers criticizing the way they looked or expressed themselves as women, specifically as Black women. Finally, some Black women principals in

this study reported instances of parents and teachers subversively undermining their leadership in large part due to their racial and gender identity. While the examples provided below are not exhaustive, they reflect the most common types of microaggressions reported in this study.

Jackie Erickson, a former middle and high school principal from the San Francisco Bay Area, recounted her parent community's efforts to end her principalship. She stated:

> And then, you know, parents were rallying to get rid of me, and actually to get rid of [Name] before that, and that had a lot to do with the anti-Blackness. They wanted a Latin principal, or a White principal, or a male principal. For whatever reason, they didn't see [that] an African-American woman could lead the program and do it justice of what needs to happen.

Like Jackie Erickson, Nesha Johnson, a former elementary school principal from the Central Valley, claimed that some members of her parent community, particularly Latino fathers, were not receptive to her leadership due to her racial and gender identity. She stated:

> I felt like more of the challenges with our multilingual group were from some of the fathers I think. I think culturally, you know, from what I have experienced, [they] were kind of used to women in that culture just kinda being subservient and just kinda doing whatever, and that's definitely not me. And so they were like, who is this Black woman that's going to come in here and tell me. And specifically when it was about Latinx boys. I remember a specific incident.

The male parent pushback described by Nesha Johnson and other Black women principals in this study was not limited to the Latinx community. Yanessa Rider, a former elementary school principal from San Diego County, described facing pushback from White male parents due to her racial and gender identity:

> I think about the reaction from parents, particularly White male parents, who when they need to talk with the principal, it was me. And they didn't like that, you know. You can tell by the reaction, like the posturing, the White male superiority that came out and wanting to dictate, and I had to use my Black womanness and make it very clear that you don't run this place. But I don't think I was prepared to deal with the reality of what I would experience as a Black female in a typically White male position. So there's not even a conversation about that.

Some Black women principals in this study claimed that the worst parent resistance they faced did not come from Latinx or White male parents, but rather from Black female parents and caregivers. Stephanie Willis stated that "some of the hardest experiences in negative interactions with parents I've had have been with other Black women." Stephanie Willis described the resistance she faced from a Black parent following a disciplinary incident involving her child:

> A lot of Black, unfortunately, Black moms or Black caretakers were like, 'You think you better than everybody. You think you smart. You think you this. You think you.' It oftentimes had very little to do with the consequence, and it was all about me thinking, the perception that I was better.

Stephanie Willis was candid about the pushback she received from the community she cared about the most - the Black community. In this quote, she described the comments one Black female caretaker made about Stephanie's attitude towards herself and others, claiming that Stephanie thought she was better than her.

For Stephanie Willis, facing resistance from Black families was challenging, as was facing resistance from young and inexperienced White teachers. Despite having a doctorate degree and years of teaching and leadership experience, Stephanie Willis faced resistance from

brand new and non-credentialed White teachers who challenged her expertise and authority. For example, Stephanie Willis described a time when a new White teacher at her school insisted on arguing with her about the appropriateness of allowing a Black student to wear a hoodie in the classroom:

> Someone telling me, I don't want to tell so-and-so to take their hood off because I feel like I am policing their body. And that's just what happened with Trayvon Martin. No honey, don't put those two together. Don't put those two together. They need to take their hood off because they're listening to music and not listening to *you*. Full stop. You telling a Black kid to take their hoodie off is actually not you being a racist. You arguing with *me* is. [We laugh.] You know. That was tough. That was tough. You think that you know better than me is actually problematic. You sitting here with an institute, literally Teach for America's Institute worth of experience and telling me that you studied something in a book and I'm sitting in front of you with a whole doctorate and years of experience, that's actually racist.

For Stephanie Willis, this teacher's resistance was frustrating for three reasons. First, Stephanie Willis' teachers knew to expect feedback on their instruction because this was a priority she explicitly named for her teaching staff. Despite this, some of her new teachers were still resistant to receiving feedback from her. Second, it was frustrating for her to have to listen to a White teacher try to educate her, a Black woman, about what is and is not considered racist teaching practices with Black students. Third, this teacher did not have a teaching credential or teaching experience. However, she still felt it was appropriate to push back against her highly educated, credentialed, and experienced Black woman boss.

Black women principals in this study described facing resistance from teachers of all racial backgrounds, including Black teachers. For example, Sam Brown, a current elementary school principal with 10 years of experience, discussed the resistance she faces from Black teachers at her school in San Diego County:

> And I realize I think that I had to just accept that just because you have Black staff members doesn't mean that they're going to be rooting for you. And so I had to actually accept that. And that was a hard pill to swallow.

Despite facing resistance from Black teachers and others, Sam Brown, and other Black women principals in this study, were able to persist through their principalships. For example, Lisa Kane continued with her principalship for another seven years after receiving a letter of no confidence from her teaching staff early in her career. Lisa Kane described feeling shocked after learning that every teacher on her staff collaborated behind her back to sign a letter of no confidence:

> And he wrote a letter of no confidence and he signed it from everyone … And so I was devastated and I was angered. And what he said was that I thought I knew everything. That I was younger than everybody else. And I thought I could come and tell people … I didn't respect the work that other people were doing, and that they weren't going to be able to listen to me. It just wasn't going to happen. And this happened pretty early in my career. And the way that I had been as a principal in the last place was *so* wonderful and great that it was a shock. It was a *big* shock.

Eventually, after eight years, the entire administration at Lisa Kane's school site was replaced. Soon after, she returned to classroom teaching for a few years and served as principal at two additional school sites before transitioning to an interim director position at her school district.

Latoya Price, a former elementary school principal from the San Francisco Bay Area, also received a letter from her teaching staff urging her to resign. She stated:

> I have found out that there was one particular staff person who was on the union, and he went around and this particular person went around and asked basically everybody to write a letter to get me out of there. And I didn't know about this until I had other staff members coming up to me, other teachers actually saying, 'Hey, did you know that this person asked me to write a letter to ask you to leave?' And I told them no. And this wasn't just from one teacher, this was from several teachers. So half the staff was divided. And I'm just like, this is really horrible.

Unlike the situation with Lisa Kane, this incident caused Latoya Price to leave her principalship after one school year and to not return to school site leadership. Following this experience, Latoya Price transitioned to a non site-based coordinator position in a different school district.

Lack of Supervisor Protection and Support

Nine Black women principals in this study made specific mention of their supervisors when describing some of the race and/or gender-based microaggressions they experienced during their principalships. Some discussed instances when their supervisors allowed teachers and parents to complain about them without first encouraging them to discuss their complaints directly with the principal. Others described situations when their supervisors failed to protect them from fierce, and sometimes threatening, teacher and parent opposition. In all cases, the Black women principals in this study described feeling unprotected and undermined by their supervisors' general handling of teacher and parent resistance.

For Latoya Price, the letter she received from her teachers was challenging; however, what made it worse were her supervisor's actions in response to her teachers' complaints. Latoya Price described her frustration with her supervisor:

> And when I questioned them, 'Well, if this person had an issue with this particular situation and they went straight to you,' meaning the director, 'why didn't you revert them back to me?' And you know what she says, 'Well, I have a relationship with [them].' I said, 'No. No. No. But you're not the principal of the school. So how are you helping my relationship with this particular staff member by you stepping in and not even giving me the opportunity to work it out with them,' you see? So I let them do what they needed to do, but at that moment, I felt like if this is the mindset that this organization is in, I can't stay there.

Latoya Price expressed frustration when describing how her supervisor did not direct her staff members back to her when they would go behind her back to complain about her performance. She felt that listening to her staff members' complaints, without first giving her the chance to address the complaints directly with her staff members, undermined her leadership. Nesha Johnson felt similarly about her supervisor's response to her staff members' complaints about her performance. She stated:

> And I don't think she always realized that when folks bypassed me and would go to her and talk to her about things, how that was undermining me … And I said, I need you to know that when you have conversations with them about what's going on on this campus, they're not seeing you as just, this is my friend. We used to work together back in whatever. They see you as you're [Nesha's] boss, supervisor. You're the superintendent, and I need you to know that I need *us* to be on the same page as well, too. So in some

> ways she needed to step back a little bit. It was hard for me to say because I respect her very much. She's a wonderful mentor, but we had to have some of those conversations. So that was tough.

Nesha Johnson respected her supervisor. She felt there were no malicious intentions behind her supervisor's actions. However, Nesha Johnson, and other Black women principals in this study, felt strongly that listening to complaints about them without first trying to redirect those complaints back to them, was detrimental to their leadership.

In addition to entertaining staff members' complaints, the Black women principals in this study described their supervisor's failure to support and protect them from harm. For example, Sam Brown described a situation with her White male supervisor when lack of support escalated into lack of physical and emotional safety. In a meeting with a contentious parent who had been harassing her for two years, Sam Brown described how her White male supervisor allowed the parent to verbally berate her to the point where she felt threatened. She recounted the incident:

> Something happened to me last year where I had a combative parent that I thought was completely out of line and had been harassing me for a while. And I was very, very uncomfortable. And I feel like because I'm a Black woman, I did not get the support of protection. And that really, it was really difficult for me to actually come to terms with I deserve that because as a strong Black woman, I was just like, I got this, used to not feeling that protection. But in that moment I finally was like, wait a minute, if someone is saying threatening words to me or cursing at me, or I'm fearful, why wouldn't someone step up to say, 'I'm recognizing this. Let me protect this not only woman principal, but *woman*.' Is it because I'm Black that it's like I can just, I don't want to say *we* but I felt

like it was a *we*. Like *we* could just handle it. *We* don't need the coddling or the care because I present myself as being able to handle anything.

Later in the interview, Sam Brown stated that years after this incident, her supervisor told her that he was not sure he handled that parent situation correctly. According to Sam Brown, her supervisor's goal was to appease the parent in that meeting (who happened to be White) to prevent further complaints. Ultimately, Sam Brown ended up issuing the parent a stay away letter after he later verbally attacked another parent in a parent meeting. Although a situation this extreme was exceptional, many Black women principals in this study believed their supervisor's lack of support and protection hindered their success, and in some cases led to their resignation.

Donna Kim, a former high school principal and current Founder and Executive Director of a principal coaching business, spoke passionately about the importance of supervisory support, and offered an explanation as to why people struggle to take direction from Black women principals. When I asked her to identify ways that her organization could have better supported her retention as a principal, she responded, "I mean, not listen to my White teachers complain about me. [Only if] they had just not even created that space. That would've been enough." For Donna Kim, allowing White teachers to complain about their Black woman principal without legitimate cause is one of the worst ways supervisors can undermine Black women principals' leadership. With that being said, Donna Kim felt that White teachers' resistance to being managed by Black women is to be expected.

> My friend [Name] runs the Black Teacher Project and the tagline is, every child deserves a Black teacher, which I agree with. And also, every child *needs* a Black teacher because if you never have a Black teacher, K-12 plus college, and then your first boss out of college is a Black woman, why would anybody expect you to know how to listen to her

> and to follow her direction when never in your life have you done that before … I mean, [in] my life, my whole career, I've had two Black teachers, K-12 through college - three if you count masters. Or yeah, two master's degrees K-12 plus college, two different master's degrees and I can only name three Black women that I've learned from. No men. So the experts in my life have been White women. That is true of the average kid who goes through K-12 education in this country. And then we expect them to enter a world where they're going to be led by Black bodies, Brown bodies, Asian bodies, and they don't know how to do it. And we're confused by it. It's not confusing.

According to Donna Kim, it makes sense that people struggle to follow Black women principals' leadership when you consider that most people have not been mentored, coached, or supervised by Black or Brown women before. This was her experience growing up in K-12 schools through graduate school. This was her experience as a high school principal in Washington, D.C. This continues to be the experience of many of the Black women principals she currently coaches in her program. For Latoya Price, Nesha Johnson, Sam Brown, Donna Kim and other Black women principals in this study, their supervisor's failure to support and protect them in response to parent and staff resistance is/was a significant challenge they face/d as principals.

Black Student Favoritism

Eight Black women principals in this study shared examples of race-based microaggressions they experienced in response to their support of Black students. In these examples, they described being characterized as racist for advocating for Black students. They also discussed the ways they attempted to deal with these microaggressions, and how their responses impacted their principalships. Nesha Johnson clearly described this issue. At the end

of the interview, when I asked her what she wished people understood better about the experience of being a Black woman principal, this is how she responded:

> I think maybe the third thing [I wish people understood] would be just because I'm Black and I'm a woman and I'm a leader, which are all three different identities, that it doesn't mean that I don't have the collective best interest in mind. The collective best interest in mind. That you can be a Black female leader and you can still advocate for White students, and I did. You can still advocate for whatever the need is. You can be just and you can be fair.

Several Black women principals in this study, including Pam Jones and Larissa Baker, expressed a desire to be trusted that they cared for *all* students, not exclusively Black students. Although they described feeling a racial affinity towards Black students, they reiterated that their affinity for Black students does not mean they do not care about students from other racial backgrounds. Pam Jones, a current middle school principal from San Diego County, defended her passion for and commitment to serving Black students. She stated:

> Someone will talk about the strength of Black women in these positions or why it's okay for me as a Black woman to say that my priority is Black children without being considered a racist against anyone else. It really has nothing to do with anybody else. I'm just telling you that my priority are Black youth, and that has always been my thing.

Pam Jones believes that her personal connection to Black students does not take away from her care and concern for all students. In her opinion, sharing a special connection with Black students and supporting all students are not mutually exclusive. Larissa Baker, a current middle and high school principal from the San Francisco Bay Area, provided a specific example of her

efforts to support Black students which was met with harsh criticism by many of her Latinx families. She recounted the experience:

> When we had our BSU celebration, this is our second year really having it, a really vibrant Black Student Union celebration. And it was perplexing. People were upset, angry, and they didn't come. Only the Black families came. And there was a lot of rhetoric around, well we shouldn't have something just for Black kids. And all kids need to be celebrated and yeah, right, that's true. But also, Black history is an important element of our country and we celebrate Latinx History Month. We do that too, and everyone shows up. And then when it's Black History Month, there is this element of we don't want to do this. And the only reason that you are doing this is because you're Black.

Like Larissa Baker, Toni Oaks, a former principal from Los Angeles County, described experiencing discomfort and resistance when advocating for Black students within a predominantly Latinx professional community. She recalled feeling isolated when trying to advocate for Black students with her Latinx colleagues:

> I think the issues of race and culture are extremely prominent inside of a school district where the majority of the folks and the teachers are White and Latinx. I feel that when I walked into those spaces, again people knew she was going to bring up Black kids again, but we only have three of them in our school. We only got 10. We only got 20. We only have 25. That's not our real issue. The issue is our Latinx students who are not being served well which all can be true at the same time. It's all true … So I think as a Black woman when I walked into those spaces, I didn't feel comradery with many … And if I spoke, it would silence the room … I also found myself in those spaces trying to then also draw people in. So I didn't want my Brown colleagues to feel ostracized as well. So I

> found myself doing this negotiation dance as a Black woman in there like, 'It's Black kids. Oh, yeah yeah. It's Brown kids too.' Which I think, in hindsight, I don't think I would've done. I wouldn't do that today. I would always say what I say now, which is, 'Both things can be true at one time.' … So I wouldn't do that now. But I found myself negotiating a lot in those spaces to draw them in only because I felt like [I was] on an island by myself. I feel many Black administrators feel more and more of that now because there's so few of them. It's dwindling down dramatically.

Toni Oaks responded to resistance from her Latinx colleagues by trying to be inclusive of their perspective. Jackie Erickson, on the other hand, responded with self-protection. Jackie Erickson described the resistance she faced from some of her Latinx families who called her racist without justification or cause:

> And so what would happen as a principal when I stepped into the principal [role], for parents that didn't know that I was African-American, they would come in [and] speak Spanish to me. And because I'm from LA, I understand a lot of Spanish, but I don't speak Spanish back. A lot of parents were like, 'She can't be Black. Why does she understand so much Spanish? Why can she communicate with me?' And then it became like, 'Well, you only care about the Black kids.' And so, I was like that's interesting that you would say that when I had worked there for so long, but sometimes as a principal people were looking for a way to either get under my skin or to call me racist or just anything to kinda say that I wasn't for them. And so I think in that I became very factual when I talk to parents. I really became guarded to share things about me. I also just sometimes I would second guess myself with decisions that I was making because I was really trying to

> make sure I wasn't being perceived that way. And I think sometimes that hindered my leadership as an African-American woman.

In these examples, both Toni Oaks and Jackie Erickson described how their response to pushback from Latinx community members did not sit right with them. In Toni Oaks' case, her response felt disingenuous as it required her to downplay her passion for supporting Black students. In Jackie Erickson's case, her Latinx families assumed that just because she was Black she would not support their students. According to Jackie Erickson, her instinct to self-protect in response to these assumptions, although justified, hindered her effectiveness as a Black woman principal.

Not Smart, Skilled, or Black Enough

Nine of the Black women principals in this study described receiving scrutiny or criticism from people of all races who claimed they were not smart enough, skilled enough, and/or Black enough to effectively do their jobs. Seven of these women, four who possess doctorate degrees, described repeated instances of having to prove their competence and skills to non-Black community members during their principalships. Two of these women described experiencing race and gender-based microaggressions related to people's perceptions of their racial and gender identities. In both cases, these Black women principals were criticized for not being Black enough.

Stephanie Willis, Faren Dudley, and Amy Harrison shared examples of non-Black community members questioning their competency, skills, and decision-making. Stephanie Willis recalled her comments in a principal meeting:

> I remember saying this at one of our school leader community of practices. I said, because the other two high schools were run by White men. And I said, 'I oftentimes

> wonder if I would have to repeat myself as much, explain myself as much, and justify the decisions that I make as a school leader if it was Ben or Tom that were saying the same thing.'

Like Stephanie Willis, Faren Dudley also expressed frustration with the resistance she faces from staff members who challenge her decision-making, especially when holding them accountable for adhering to professional expectations. She discussed her staff members' consistent efforts to undermine her leadership six years into her principalship:

> This I do think is related to race in many ways … And they had 14 years of no accountability before I got to there. And I'm a person who's holding them accountable. I'm making them do PD [Professional Development], something they didn't have to do before. Going into their classrooms. And so even after six years, you still have to make sure that they know that I know more than they know. So there's still this need for making sure, proving your competence continues still after six years.

Like Stephanie Willis and Faren Dudley, Amy Harrison described the pervasiveness of this particular form of microaggression. At all four school sites she led, she shared examples of non-Black community members, particularly teachers and parents, questioning her decision-making:

> I think the district, I didn't have to prove it [her competence] as much, but at the school site level, it was more of a constant thing with parents questioning you about your decisions, with teachers questioning you about your decision, and feeling like you were always being tested and quizzed by those that you were supervising … So there was always something that you had to show that you were learned and knew something, and you just weren't coming in here filling some quota or whatever they might think I ended up being there for.

Knowing Amy Harrison's experience facing constant skepticism from multiple stakeholders throughout her principal career, her final comments at the end of the interview make sense. When asked what advice she would give to a new or aspiring Black woman principal about how to sustain herself in the role, she responded:

> Like I said, if you're going to half-do your job, no one's going to have that respect for you. But if you go in there crossing all your t's, dotting your i's, and being as professional as you can be, you're gonna still get hit with stuff but you'll have somebody that might step out and be, like I said, your challenger. Not your challenger but your supporter.

According to Amy Harrison, the best way a new or aspiring Black woman principal can protect herself against criticism about her performance is to do her job *exceptionally* well. Even then, after years of experience and expertise in the role, she too, like Amy Harrison, may still be "tested and quizzed" by parents and teachers who assume she is "coming in here" as a Black woman principal "fulfilling some quota."

Sasha Sundry-Sailors, a former principal and current director of a principal credentialing program, described her experience in her principalship navigating similar microaggressions. She shared that despite qualifications, she was constantly having to prove her competency. When describing her school context, she stated, "We are very first name basis even with our students. But the moment I got to that position, I made a conscious choice that they were going to call me Dr. [Sundry-Sailors]." According to Sasha Sundry-Sailors, her doctorate degree and years of leadership experience in the district did not protect her from the skepticism she faced regarding her ability to succeed as a principal.

In addition to not being smart or skilled enough, two Black women principals in this study described being characterized by others as "not Black enough" to do their jobs effectively.

Like Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Jackie Erickson also possesses a doctorate degree and had years of leadership experience in her organization prior to becoming a principal. Neither her experience nor her degrees protected her from criticism about her Blackness. Jackie Erickson experienced criticism from Black families who assumed she was unable to understand Black people's experiences due to having lighter skin. She described a specific example of criticism she received from Black families following a Black History Month event:

> But then also when we would have our African-American History Month celebrations, people were angry and saying they weren't done well because I didn't understand the Black experience. And I would be like, is it because of that, or is it because my team didn't do it well? And so then you're overly cautious to make sure things are done well. So people didn't accuse me of not showering our students with love and affection.

Instead of trying to understand the source of the issue, some Black families made assumptions about Jackie Erickson's racial identity, her involvement with the event, and blamed her personally for the outcome. In addition to Black family pushback, Jackie Erickson also experienced pushback from Black teachers. She recalled resistance she faced from Black teachers while leading Black affinity group meetings:

> And so I would say another, I mean, it wasn't just parents though. When I was leading the African-American Affinity Group, we had staff that identify as African-American and both from [School A and School B] that would come to meet and they would say things like, because you're a light-skinned African-American woman, you don't understand the anti-Blackness that we're dealing with. And I'm like, just the way they call you the N word, they're calling me that too in English and in Spanish.

In a racial affinity group space designed to provide safety and support for Black staff members, Jackie Erickson found herself defending her Blackness to Black teachers. To challenge their assumptions, she pointed out that she received the same disrespectful treatment from Latinx students that they did. Consequently, she asserted that she *did* understand their experience. Ultimately, Jackie Erickson felt that the racial microaggressions she experienced made her job untenable. For that reason and others, she decided to leave her principalship after just two years.

Parenting poses a systemic challenge for many Black women principals.

Fourteen Black women principals in this study identified balancing motherhood with school leadership as a significant challenge during their principalships. These women provided examples of how being mothers impacted their careers at every stage of their child's life from pre-birth to adulthood. It impacted when they started their principalships, when they ended them, where they worked and how they approached their work. Of the fourteen principals who noted this challenge, seven are current principals and seven are former principals. Of the seven former principals who discussed this challenge, none described parenting as the sole cause behind their decision to leave their principalships.

For Nesha Johnson, getting pregnant was not the only reason she decided to leave her principalship; however, it influenced her decision. She stated:

> Yeah, so some of those health challenges, and we got pregnant my last year as a principal and I knew that in order to take care of myself [and] our new little one, I needed a different pace. I needed to do something differently.

In the interview, Nesha Johnson explained how difficult it was to leave the school community she grew up in. However, prioritizing her growing family felt most important to her during that time in her career.

For Evelyn Albertson, a new mother and a new elementary school principal, returning to work after her daughter was born was extremely challenging. She discussed feeling conflicted as a new mother and a new school leader:

> And I'm a new mom. This is a lot. A lot happened while I was gone. A lot of people want me to immediately just solve these situations where it's just like, I'm still not getting full sleep. I don't share these things because my job is to be there for my teachers. So they have things going on, and my staff, and my families. So I never share to people the baby was up till one, and I usually would never have caught her but I really am trying to do better and be an example for [Baby's Name]. And I was like, 'I'm just not in a great place. I think I need you to just kinda come. Come check on me. It's a lot right now.'

On the one hand, Evelyn Albertson knew her staff was navigating their own challenges and she did not want to burden them with hers. On the other hand, she felt she was drowning as a new mother and a new principal and would not be able to continue without extra support.

Knowing the difficulties of raising small children, some principals, like Elise Frank, a current high school principal from San Diego County, decided not to pursue certain principal positions until her children were older. She claimed, "I purposely chose *not* to go to the high school level in an administrative position until my kids were older." Unlike Elise Frank, Jackie Erickson, another secondary principal, felt she had little choice when it came to balancing work with family planning. In the interview, Jackie Erickson described her concerns with leading at her children's school. However, for practical reasons, she decided it was necessary for her and her two children to attend the same school. Jackie Erickson described the challenges of being a mother and school leader in the same building:

> And so I was trying to navigate how do I be a mom to them, but also be a principal. And then I was trying to set these hard [and] fast rules. You can't just come to my office and circumvent the rules of the school, and then my kids just want to spend time with me. And they just felt like I would spend all of my energy with other people's kids. And so when I got home, I had no patience. I kinda needed to reset and be by myself. And they were like, we need our mom.

Jackie Erickson found it difficult to support her children, her school community, and herself at the same time in the same building. Pam Jones, like Jackie Erickson, struggled to be present for her child and her students at the same time. She recalled her daughter's experience as a student while serving as principal at her daughter's school:

> And with my own daughter, she used to tell people all the time, my mom spends more time dealing with everybody else's kid than she does her own. And that was her reality. That's what she saw. That's what she believed. That's what she experienced. And so her sixth grade year was horrible.

According to Pam Jones, her relationship with her daughter suffered as a result of her principalship. For Pam Jones and Jackie Erickson, the cost of leading at the same schools their children attended sometimes outweighed the benefits.

Toni Oaks, like Jackie Erickson and Pam Jones, decided to be a principal at her children's school. Although she described this experience positively, she spoke candidly about her views on the sacrifices working mothers make compared to working fathers. She noted a time when she pushed back against her male colleague's male-centered view of the principal role:

> And I remember one of my colleagues, he said, 'When you're a principal, you have to be there day in and day out. You've got to start at six. You got to leave at seven, and you've got to be there for everybody. And this is just what you do as the life of a principal.' And I looked at him and I turned around to the rest of the class and I said, 'Well, that's great when you're a man.'. . . I said, 'Because [of] the luxury you have.' It's not that men aren't great fathers. My husband's a great dad and he does a lot. But that didn't relinquish the role that I wanted to have in my own daughters' lives, especially as two young Black girls. It mattered to me what they were being taught in school. How they were. So it all mattered to me. So I think the biggest personal challenge for me was being able to find the balance between the importance I felt of having my two girls, what their institutional experience was going to be and how I was going to help try to shape that.

Toni Oaks pointed out that the principal job had to be approached differently as a working mother. For working mothers, being a great principal could not involve working from 6 o'clock am to 7 o'clock pm because that meant they could not be there for their children the way they needed to be. By pointing out the limitations of her male colleague's views on principal work hours, Toni Oaks highlighted the different perspectives working mothers and fathers may have regarding the role of work and family life.

Most administrative training programs are not designed for Black women principals.

The majority of participants in this study (13) shared that their administrative credentialing programs did not effectively prepare them to lead as Black women principals. Some principals appreciated the texts they read, the courses they took and the professors they had; however, many principals felt their programs were too theory-based, impractical, and lacked racial diversity. In addition, many Black women principals in this study described feeling

frustrated that their programs did not explicitly discuss issues of race and gender. Consequently, these women felt ill-prepared to deal with the amount and intensity of the race and gender-based microaggressions they experienced as new K-12 principals.

Yanessa Rider, Sam Brown, Faren Dudley, Pam Jones, and Erika Arnold all mentioned the lack of racial diversity in their administrative credentialing programs. For example, when I asked Yanessa Rider in what ways her administrative credentialing program prepared her to lead as a Black woman principal specifically, she replied:

> Oh God, not at all. I was the only *Black* female in the program. And you know, yeah no, there was not even a conversation about equity. At that time, I think it was about diversity, right? But yeah, there was no preparation to lead as a Black woman. Not at all.

According to Yanessa Rider, her program lacked racial diversity *and* did not create time and space to have explicit conversations about equity. In my interview with Erika Arnold, she also claimed that her program lacked racial diversity and did not cover content relevant to women leaders of color. She said, “There's not one single solitary class in undergraduate or graduate studies where I learned anything about leadership as a woman of color.” Jackie Erickson and Pam Jones expanded on the shortcomings of their administrative credentialing programs. For Jackie Erickson, the main issue was that the program was White and male-centered. She stated:

> I think I only had one African-American teacher who could give us any perspective, but that was never talked about, your positionality as far as race. It was talked about definitely as a woman and being a principal, but not as far as race and being a woman and being a principal. Like many things, it's just assumptions that are being made. Here's what you're expected [to be] as a principal, but it's very male-centered, White centered.

Jackie Erickson acknowledged that her program addressed challenges related to gender; however, she believed there was no opportunity in her program to discuss the intersection of her racial and gender identities largely because the content was intended for White male principals. Because there were no explicit conversations about race and gender in their administrative credentialing programs, many Black women principals in this study felt forced to face these issues alone on the job. Pam Jones described several specific microaggressions she was not prepared to face headed into her middle school principalship. When I asked her in what ways her credentialing program supported and prepared her to lead as a Black woman principal specifically, she replied:

> I don't think it did … It did not prepare me to embrace my identity as a Black woman … Definitely being in a system where I would be a minority, I wasn't prepared for that. I should have known, but there was nothing that was very explicit in my program to prepare me for what it would feel like to sit in a room full of middle school principals and I'm the only Black, right? There was nothing that prepared me for that. There was nothing that prepared me for getting a letter from a parent requesting my assistance and then talking on the phone and the parent is saying how she doesn't want her son to go to the next school because there are too many Blacks there. And it was like, did you not know that I'm a Black woman? So there was nothing in the credential program that would prepare me for those difficult conversations about race, or responding to people who, it's like I took an oath to serve them, but nothing prepared me for the reality that they might not like me or respect me because of my skin color. And that was something that I had to just experience and then take a moment and reflect and figure out how I was going to navigate through that.

Pam Jones' program did not prepare her to be the only Black woman in predominantly White leadership spaces. Her program did not prepare her to deal with explicit racism from parents. Her program did not prepare her to have difficult conversations about race. Finally, her program did not prepare her for the resistance she would face for simply being a Black woman in a school leadership position.

Top Challenges That Lead to Black Women Principal Attrition

Many Black women principals leave (or would leave) their principalships due to unsustainable working conditions.

Nearly half of the Black women principals in this study (11) described the principal position as unsustainable. These principals spanned all Black women principal subgroups including: new and experienced principals, current and former principals, elementary, middle, and high school principals, public, charter, and affiliated charter school principals, and principals from southern, central, and northern California. They described unsustainable working conditions related to instructional leadership, school culture and climate, challenging personnel issues, parent complaints, commuting, and all of the administrative duties that come with the principal job (e.g., emails, data reports, etc.). Many of the Black women principals in this study reported experiencing poor mental and/or physical health as a result of unsustainable working conditions.

For Sasha Sundry-Sailors, being an elementary school principal felt like an impossible job. She described some of the specific administrative duties she felt she could not delegate to her leadership team:

> My only experience was as an elementary principal, and I had over 500 students and no VP [Vice Principal], so it was just me … But in terms of administrative functions, I

> remember I would just be in my office like, 'I'm in charge of everything?' And so I marvel at folks who've done the job for 20 or 30 years or a good portion of their career, but I never was able to grow into the ability to do that. And I think it was because of the safety issues, the special ed discipline, instructional leadership, culture and climate, then the parents, and it was a lot to try to do everything well while still maintaining your own health and wellbeing and all that.

According to Sasha Sundry-Sailors, there simply was not enough time in the day to do the work of a principal regardless of the size and capacity of her leadership team. Camryn Lamb, a current high school principal from San Diego County, described a similar sentiment. She talked about her principal workload during the week spilling into her evenings and weekends:

> But I think some of my being done is that I was working six, seven days a week. I wasn't able to get all the work done Monday through Friday. So therefore I would always go back to Starbucks on a Saturday and spend maybe four hours in Starbucks, answering emails or working. I would come home after work, I'm answering emails. I wasn't turning stuff off. And then, yeah, last year I realized I cannot continue doing that. So I stopped working on the weekends.

Like Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Camryn Lamb entered her principalship with an administrative services credential and years of experience working in her district. However, even with 14 years of teaching experience in her district, and seven years of principal experience under her belt, it was not until last year that she described finally being able to stop working on the weekends.

Another experienced principal, Sam Brown, described feeling shame about her perceived inability to meet professional expectations after ten years in the principal role. She described often feeling unsuccessful as a principal:

> And so every day I would talk about, with some of my friends, how shameful it feels that you once again didn't meet the expectation of being an instructional leader day after day after day. So then for me, the excuses, because even as a year 10 principal, I still beat myself up. I should have this down packed by now. I should have figured out the way that I'm going to coach teachers and work with office staff and staff not getting along and kids having issues and all of that and my emails and then still get home to exercise, sleep well, have some downtime, you know. It can feel like you're just never going to succeed for me.

Sam Brown believes that her primary purpose as a principal is to be an instructional leader, and yet, every day she feels distracted by other competing priorities. Stephanie Willis talked at length about the competing priorities and challenges she faced as a former high school principal. In addition to fighting traffic on her commute to and from San Francisco each day, she described her principalship as a constant fight in many respects:

> [School C] is in San Francisco, and it got to a certain point in time when my entire day was fighting. I'm fighting traffic to get to my school. When I get there, someone has called out. So I'm fighting people to try and do coverage. I'm fighting White savior teachers who want to dumb down the curriculum and not teach to the high bar of rigor, and I'm fighting them about having ruinous empathy and lowered expectations. At times, I'm fighting with kids about uniforms. At times, I'm fighting with parents about the rules, and then I'm fighting traffic to get back to my house. So I didn't know how much longer I was going to fight.

In Stephanie Willis' case, leaving her principalship was about refusing to fight anymore. She was done fighting traffic. She was done fighting teachers about coverages. She was done fighting

White teachers' low expectations of Black and Brown students. She was done fighting students about uniforms, and fighting parents about policies. In essence, according to Stephanie Willis and nearly half of the Black women principals in this study, many principals are leaving their jobs because the job itself is unsustainable.

Many Black women principals leave (or would leave) their principalships due to lack of supervisory protection and support.

Eleven of the Black women principals in this study stated that lack of supervisory protection and support was ultimately the reason they decided or would decide to leave their principalships. In many cases, these principals described instances when parents or teachers would complain about them behind their backs and their supervisors did not defend them. In other cases, these principals spoke about this issue more generally, highlighting different ways their supervisors failed to support or protect them. In all cases, these women shared that failing to provide adequate support and protection was or would be reason enough to leave their principalships.

Larissa Baker, a current middle and high school principal, identified many reasons she felt unsupported by her supervisor including: her supervisor's lack of coaching and mentorship, her supervisor's punitive responses to her mistakes, and her supervisor's mischaracterization of Larissa's actions and her own. According to Larissa Baker, the challenges with her supervisor were more burdensome than being a new charter school principal during the Covid-19 pandemic. She stated:

> I didn't get fired obviously, or let go, and there was *an* attempt to keep me, but I couldn't do it anymore. But it feels like the only reason I'm leaving is because of the lack of support from my manager and what I've had to deal with on that end. And not even all of

> the other things that I described to you from coming back from Covid as a first-year principal, that doesn't even seem hard compared to dealing with that.

Larissa Baker described the first year her school returned to in-person learning after a year of Zoom instruction as a "hellfire year." She stated, "Everyone was really angry. Everyone was really angry, and really scared. And the kids were dysregulated, obviously. And we just came back to school, okay, let's just do school. And it just didn't work." According to Larissa Baker, the challenges she faced as a new school leader during an unprecedented global pandemic did not even compare to those she faced working for her supervisor.

For most principals in this study who discussed facing challenges with their supervisors, the primary issue they noted involved their supervisors not defending them against inappropriate, unsubstantiated, and in some cases threatening parent and teacher pushback. Former elementary school principal, Sasha Sundry-Sailors, described an instance when her parent community went behind her back to complain to her superintendent about her decision to move the date of a school spirit event. In this case, her supervisor's response to parent pushback signaled to her that it was time to leave her principalship. She stated:

> And I remember the superintendent called me and said, '[Sasha], the parents are really upset. They always have this dance at this time of year. What are you doing? Why do you want to not let the kids dance?' And I explained my rationale and I said, 'This makes no sense. When they come back from that event, they are so wound up. It's 500 children in a cafeteria basically doing the cha-cha slide and 15 other dances. It lasts an hour.' And I was like, 'We're not doing that right now. Let's push it to June. Let's have it at the end of the year.' And he was like, 'I'm sorry, I got so-and-so in my office. I got so-and-so they're

calling me. They're blah, blah, blah. They said this is ruining blah, blah.' And I remember I said to him, 'Well, that's my decision. You gon fire me?'

In response to this, I asked Sasha Sundry-Sailors, "You said that?!" She continued:

> I said that, and you know me, Brianna, that's not how I lead. That's not how I come across. But I had got, and when I heard that come out of my mouth, I was like, 'Oh, it's time for me to leave.' … But yeah, he didn't like that so much when I asked him if he was going to fire me over the Hornet Hustle.

In Sasha Sundry-Sailors' case, her supervisor ultimately allowed her to change the date of the school dance. For Sam Brown, another elementary school principal, her most traumatic experience with her supervisor did not end in her favor. As noted earlier, Sam Brown described being harassed by a parent for two years. When the area superintendent attempted to intervene by meeting with her and the parent, Sam Brown recalled the devastating and long-lasting impact his response had on her:

> So basically the area sup [superintendent] didn't stop a meeting that the parent was just saying nasty things and cursing at me and come to find out I got where he was. White man. He didn't want to escalate the parent, but it was at the expense of me. And it wasn't until he left and I'm crying and I was defending my dissertation that same day that I called my boyfriend and I'm crying and I'm like, 'I know what he's saying isn't true, but I don't know why this affected me like this.' And my area sup [superintendent] didn't even tell him to stop. And I had some harboring feelings about this for a while. You didn't stand up for me.

In this interaction with a volatile parent, Sam Brown described her supervisor's permissive response to the parent's offensive and aggressive verbal attacks. Although this parent eventually

was forced to disenroll his child from her school, and her supervisor acknowledged his own ambivalence regarding his response, Sam Brown never forgot the vulnerability she felt in that moment when her supervisor failed to protect her.

Donna Kim, a former principal and current Founder and Executive Director of a principal coaching business, described the role race often plays in the relationship between Black principals and their White supervisors. She explained her reasons for leaving her principalship in Washington, D.C., and what motivated her to address this issue head on in her current principal coaching business. When I asked Donna Kim why she ultimately decided to leave her principalship, she responded:

> I was simply exhausted. And part of that was in those early years in particular doing too much myself, but also it was, you know, my staff went behind my back to my boss anytime they felt like it. And my bosses didn't do a good job of having *my* back. So you talk about how I think being a Black woman played out, I think it's there where, and I just spoke at South by Southwest about supervising principals of color. What you don't do is give space and audience to the White teacher to come complain about a principal of color because they will, if you give them the audience, and all you're doing is affirming that that's an appropriate thing to do when it's absolutely *not* an appropriate thing to do, ever, ever, unless, you know, the principal has really done something egregious and horribly wrong. But that is not what was happening in my case. And so I felt undermined by my bosses.

Like Sam Brown, Donna Kim called particular attention to race when describing her experiences with her former White supervisors. In both cases, these women described instances when their White supervisors protected their White teachers and parents over protecting them. According to

Donna Kim, resistance from teachers was to be expected as a principal; however, resistance from her supervisors was not. After recalling her personal experiences with her former White supervisors, she stated, “Being undermined by my teachers is one thing. That I could have navigated. Being not supported by my bosses, that was too much that I couldn't navigate.” As a principal, Donna Kim was limited in the ways she could respond to this treatment by her White supervisors. Now, as a Founder and Executive Director of a principal coaching business, she has created a coaching program for principals of color *and* their supervisors that specifically addresses the ways White supervisors perpetuate racism against principals of color, and how they can and must disrupt these patterns if they intend to support principals of color.

Some Black women principals leave (or would leave) their principalships due to the microaggressions they experience.

Several Black women principals in this study (7) shared that a key reason behind their decision to leave their principalships was (or would be) related to the race and gender-based microaggressions they experienced. Jamisha Levitt, a former principal and current Bay Area school board member and school leader consultant, described her personal reasons for leaving her principalship. She stated:

> I was exhausted. I was so exhausted. It takes so much just to do transformational work, emotionally, physically, mentally, it takes so much. And then to feel like you're being oppressed yourself, it’s like you're going against the grain even if you have a team behind you. Even if you have a coalition.

Jamisha Levitt claimed that the principal job was exhausting. As a Black woman in that role, experiencing what she described as oppressive resistance to her leadership, she felt the job was unsustainable. According to Jamisha Levitt, the oppression she felt as a Black woman principal

is shared by the Black women teachers in the district where she currently serves as a school board member. She described the microaggressions experienced by several Black women teachers in her current Bay Area school district:

> We are not paying educators enough, but that's not enough because my school district where I'm a board member now, we actually are the highest paid district in our county, and we have people leaving in droves. And I know it's the culture and climate, and I know from being with teachers, especially the Black teachers, they're sick of the racism. They're sick of the privilege. They're sick of people not listening to them. Most of our district are Black and Brown, and people don't listen to Black and Brown educators. White people are not listening to Black and Brown educators who are saying, 'This is how people like me learn. Listen to me.' They're like, 'No, we know everything.' The 90% of our teachers are White. Of those, I think 85% are women, yet we're not listening to the few Black and Brown educators who are getting results that are good to say, 'You're teaching kids who look like me. Listen to me.' They're not listening. And so the Black teachers are like, we're out.

Former Black women principals, Erika Arnold and LaToya Price, agreed with Jamisha Levitt that the oppression Black women experience in education is persistent and pervasive. Erika Arnold described her efforts to warn her school district leaders about the consequences of continuing to hire Black women principals without preparing to adequately support them:

> And a really sad part about it is when I left, they asked, 'Hey, when we look for a new principal, who do you think we should get?' And I openly said, I said, 'Do not hire another Black woman. Do not do that to her.' And they went ahead and hired another one. And this poor woman, she's so sick, and it's really sad. When I was there, I lost, I

> started off the school [year] a little heavier. I was like a size eight. I left a size two because of the stress.

Similar to the experiences of the Black teachers mentioned in Jamisha Levitt's quote, Erika Arnold felt ignored and not listened to when she advised her leadership team to think twice before hiring another Black woman principal with no plan to support her.

Latoya Price, another former Black woman principal, described the after effects of her decision to leave her principalship after receiving a letter urging her to resign from her teaching staff. For Latoya Price, the effects of the microaggressions she experienced as a principal currently impact her work in her new position. She reflected on the challenges she faced during her principalship:

> There's a lot of money that I spent out of *my* pocket as incentives to staff to say, thank you, I appreciate you. You know. So there was a lot that I was like, oh my gosh, I gave my all, blood, sweat and tears, and this is what I get in return. So I felt like I don't want to put myself in that position again. And now, even in this particular role, I'm crossing my i's and dotting my t's because I don't know who. It's like I got to watch what I say, how I say it. I got to put in my emails on this day and at this time, you see what I'm saying? So it's like. You know. It was just really an eye opener for me.

In LaToya Price's case, ending her principalship did not stop the fear and anxiety she felt as a Black woman principal. Even after taking a completely different job, she continues to be fearful of how others perceive her and unsure of who she can trust.

Ways to Improve Black Women Principal Retention

Investing in hiring, developing, and supporting Black women principals could improve Black women principal retention.

Nearly 100% of Black women principals in this study (22) claimed that the best way to improve Black women principal retention is to invest in them. The five primary forms of investment they mentioned included: offering coaching and mentoring support, hiring more of them, creating racial affinity spaces, paying for professional development opportunities and external partnerships, and creating leadership pipelines and trajectories for new and experienced Black women principals. Most of the Black women principals in this study described the positive impact the presence of these supports has had on their success and retention, or the negative impact the absence of these supports has had on their principalships. In many cases, the principals in this study shared that having or not having access to one or more of these supports has heavily impacted their decision to become principals, to stay principals, to coach principals, or to leave their principalships to pursue other professional options.

Provide Coaching and Mentorship

Most Black women principals in this study (17) discussed the importance of having a coach or mentor during their administrative credentialing programs and/or during their principalships. For example, Tonya Dodd felt prepared for her principalship coming out of her administrative credentialing program. She described the positive impact of the coaching she received in her program:

> I had about two to three coaches in the program, one of which was a Black woman who used to be a principal. So I find her to still be a mentor to me. She was able to share experiences and more anecdotal scenarios than probably New Leaders was presenting on

> paper, and it gave context to me on how I might need to operate. So I had a model of success, and a model that I could work from.

Tonya Dodd described having multiple coaches during her administrative credentialing program. One woman in particular, a Black woman, continued to serve as her mentor after leaving the program. Despite her effective training, Tonya Dodd decided not to continue as a principal after one school year.

There were a few principals, like Tonya Dodd, who described having positive experiences with coaches and mentors in their credentialing programs, and yet, they felt unprepared for the highly unpredictable nature of the principal job. Erika Arnold discussed the unpredictable nature of the principal position. She stated, “The hard part is when you become a principal, as you know, you get those keys and you're on campus and not everything falls into place like it did in the class. It's learning in real time. How do I navigate these different scenarios that are coming my way?” Erika Arnold served as a principal for five years at two different school sites. According to Erika Arnold, nothing could have prepared her for what she experienced as a principal. However, she described the invaluable role her mentors played in helping her navigate challenges at both school sites during her principalships:

> So I had really, really great mentors. None of them were Caucasian. They were either Asian or Black. So that was very helpful. And so I found myself having real conversations with them about things that I would experience at either school. And so those structures that were put in place were very helpful for me.

A commonality between Tonya Dodd’s and Erika Arnold’s stories is that despite their respective challenges, both women identified having Black women mentors specifically as being critical to their survival and success.

Donna Kim, and others, discussed two essential qualities that Black women principal coaches and mentors should have - a Black identity and principal experience. When asked in the interview what advice she would give to a new or aspiring Black woman principal about how to sustain herself in the work, Donna Kim immediately responded, “Get a coach who's a Black woman who successfully has done the job.” According to Donna Kim, the Founder and Executive Director of a principal coaching business, the best coaches for Black women principals are other Black women principals with a track record of success. Jackie Erickson’s perspective supports Donna Kim’s advice. Jackie Erickson recalled her experience with her coach who was not a Black woman. She stated, “And I had a coach because I was finishing my Admin credential, but she wasn't an African-American woman. So just those nuances, right, she didn't quite really understand how to help navigate and talk through those situations.” A non-Black coach’s inability to understand the race-related nuances of the Black woman principal’s experience was mentioned a few times in this study.

Larissa Baker also commented on this issue. Although she described having a contentious relationship with her current Black woman supervisor and coach, she still felt that Black women were the best coaches for Black women principals. She stated:

> I do agree that having a Black woman leader as my coach would be my preference. If I could choose, that's what I would choose 100% because there are just some things that you don't have to explain. The shared experience will. There's just a natural bridge there.

In addition to sharing lived experiences, Toni Oaks described the feeling of protection she felt from her Black mentors while serving as a teacher and principal in Los Angeles County. Although her mentors were Black men, she felt they allowed her the freedom to be who she

wanted to be, and they did not let her fail. She discussed her decision to eventually become the principal of the school she taught at. She explained:

> Anyway, I did it because I taught there and I was surrounded by two Black men who allowed me to be free, and they also protected me. So it's easy when you have the safety that they will never let you fall, and they allow you to be innovative and free.

Considering that 17 Black women principals in this study discussed the importance of coaching and mentorship, and many explicitly shared the value of having a Black coach or mentor specifically, providing this support to Black women principals may be critical to improving their retention.

Increase Representation

According to 10 Black women principals in this study, hiring more Black women principals could be another way to improve Black women principal retention. Yanessa Rider noted that racial diversity in hiring never came up when she was a principal in San Diego County. She stated, “There was not even a conversation about recruiting and retention. It was just you post a position and you hire. And there was no conversation about diversifying the workforce either.” In this quote, Yanessa Rider was referring to the absence of conversations about hiring diversity over 10 years ago when she last served as a principal. Today, just two years into her current principalship, Natasha Green also noted the lack of racial diversity in hiring as a serious issue in her Bay Area school community. She recalled her experiences being the only Black person at district leadership meetings:

> I think it goes back to, you know, so when we have our leadership meetings, and that's like everyone in the district that holds a leadership position. So all the principals, all the directors, anyone that works in the district office … When you look in this room and

> there's 60 people in the room and there's only *one* Black face, like *they* should not be okay with seeing that.

Natasha Green pointed out the danger of normalizing the lack of Black leader representation in leadership spaces. Sasha Sundry-Sailors expressed the same concern when recalling her experiences being the only Black person in principal meetings. She discussed feeling isolated in these meetings:

> And so I remember we would have principal meetings and they would break us up by secondary and elementary. And I remember one day just sitting in there just looking across the space going, oh wow, I'm really the only one here. Or it's me and one other person. And that feeling of isolation and just not being able to look across the room and lock eyes with somebody, it's real.

According to Sasha Sundry-Sailors, one of the best ways to support and retain Black women principals is to "hire some more critical mass." She claimed that being around more Black women principals would have reduced her feeling of isolation in the role.

Pam Jones characterized her feeling of isolation as having "to hide in the shadows." Similar to Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Pam Jones was often the only Black woman principal in leadership meetings. That is until her school district hired a Black male superintendent which impacted her comfortability in predominantly White leadership spaces. Before he came, she felt like she had to hide her identity. After he came, she felt more empowered to share it. Pam Jones explained how she felt when her Black male superintendent would share positive stories about the Black woman who raised him at leadership meetings:

> And so because he's done that publicly many times [discussed the Black woman who raised him], you could see, we can hold our heads up higher as Black women in this

> space because there's been some public recognition that Black women contribute a whole hell of a lot to this damn country, to this city, to our schools. And so I appreciate him for that. And it has made a difference. It has changed how I think we walk into a space. It used to be one of those things where you'd be in the room with another Black person and you just want to run over and give them a hug because you're so happy to see them in the space, but then you don't because you don't want to make it awkward. And now we're just like, we got a Black administrators group that goes out for happy hour and everybody's getting BSUs [Black Student Unions] on their campus. There's that sense of empowerment, like, okay, we can do this and not have to hide in the shadows.

Pam Jones felt that having a Black superintendent positively impacted her sense of belonging as a Black woman leader in predominantly White leadership spaces. She provided several examples of ways her Black superintendent's presence facilitated stronger bonds between the Black leaders in her school district. For example, she described Black leaders gathering for happy hours and feeling empowered to advocate for Black Student Unions on their campuses. According to Pam Jones, having Black representation at the highest leadership level contributed to Black leaders' increased sense of pride and belonging.

In addition to reducing isolation and fostering a sense of pride in Black women principals, other benefits of increasing Black women leader representation included inspiring Black youth and women leaders. For example, the main reason Diana Bradley wanted to become a principal is because she had Black women principals growing up in school. She recalled her relationships with her Black women principals:

> My mother's a teacher. I have an aunt that's a teacher, but in high school I took it a step further. I wanted to be a principal. Like I knew in high school. I had two Black female

> principals during my high school experience that really helped shape that passion, not only for teaching, but for leading. They were great role models. I mean, supported me, came to my basketball games, knew my parents. It was a very close knit family that I had in high school as far as the school community. So I knew right away.

For Diana Bradley, seeing Black women principals as an adolescent inspired her to want to be a principal. She described the Black women principals at her school as role models, and considered them a part of her "close knit family." Similar to Diana Bradley's principals, Elise Frank's current female superintendent and associate superintendents actively support her. For example, in the interview, Elise Frank provided examples of ways her current female supervisors make efforts to support her professional development:

> Our superintendent and two of our associate sups [superintendents] are female, and they're really big about trying to ensure that females and leadership that we have what we need. And so when there are opportunities to do presentations or go to other trainings or conventions just about women in leadership, they've reached out, invited me. I've presented with our superintendent before. So I think that's been really beneficial as we're trying to expand leadership for women in education.

Elise Frank described the gender affinity she shares with her female supervisors as supportive in her leadership development. She implied that sharing this affinity prompted her supervisors to take an interest in her professional growth in a way she personally appreciated. Many of the Black women principals in this study felt that seeing someone who looked like them in a leadership position, whether they were Black, a woman or both, produced positive feelings of safety, community, and pride as Black women principals.

Create Racial Affinity Spaces

Nine participants in this study stated that creating racial affinity spaces could support greater Black women principal retention. Not only did these women express a desire to create and/or participate in these spaces, but they also described many different ways these spaces could look. For example, Jackie Erickson's interest in participating in a Black affinity space stemmed from her desire to discuss the challenges Black principals face navigating what she referred to as "White systems." She stated:

> I know there's no real container, but I would've loved for us to have some type of support group or even working with maybe the Black Teacher Project to talk about Black teachers who had been elevated to administrative roles. And even us just being in community around how to navigate just the White systems that are in place that really don't support you as a leader. I think that would've been amazing.

As noted earlier, Jackie Erickson's administrative credentialing coach was not a Black person. Because of this, she felt that her coach could not fully understand her experience navigating issues of race in the workplace. Being in community with other Black administrators, ideally those who had experience moving from teaching to administration, would have supported her work as a new middle and high school principal.

Jackie Erickson's desire to find and/or create community with other Black leaders was shared by many women in this study. For instance, Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Donna Kim, and Amy Harrison provided examples of their own efforts to provide racial affinity spaces for Black women principals. Sasha Sundry-Sailors' approach is more formal. As a director of a principal credentialing program, Sasha Sundry-Sailors offers a consistent monthly racial affinity space for alumni of her program to attend voluntarily. She described how offering this space aligns with

her program's mission which encourages principals to continue collaborating with fellow leaders after they graduate. She stated:

> And so we train leaders to lean on each other and to work in collaborative groups and think about the fact that nobody can do it on their own. And you need to have spaces to kind of like release that pressure, if you will. And many of our graduates continue to cultivate their network, whether it be among people they graduated with from our program or whether it be through, we offer affinity groups for leaders, racial affinity groups that many of our alumni participate in to help to offer continued ongoing support once they're in the field.

Sasha Sundry-Sailors discussed her personal experience dealing with isolation as a principal. She discussed being the only Black person in leadership meetings. Having that experience has inspired her commitment to creating as many opportunities as possible for the principals in her program to build connection and community within racial affinity groups. Donna Kim, also a principal coach, described a time when a racial affinity group helped retain a Black woman principal in her program. She stated:

> One principal in particular went through something horrible, came to the session, was in a racial affinity group with two other Black leaders and was held and seen and supported. And I think she would say that *one* session kept her in the job at least another year, by being held and supported by other Black women.

For Sasha Sundry-Sailors and Donna Kim, a central part of their principal leadership programs involves creating racial affinity spaces for Black and Brown leaders to show up as their authentic selves and to be supported and affirmed in their leadership.

Amy Harrison, like Sasha Sundry-Sailors and Donna Kim, continues to support Black women principals after her own principal tenure has ended. However, Amy Harrison takes a more informal approach to creating racial affinity spaces. Passionate about supporting Black women leaders, Amy Harrison takes the initiative to build partnerships with new Black women principals in her school district. She described how this support helped her greatly when she was a principal:

> I don't know how this fits into your study and so forth, but this was not a structure that the district put in place, but this is a structure that the women, the Black women of this district, put in place. And that was that we formed our own community, shall we say, where we had meetings at each other's homes and stuff, and we became each other's support and sisterhood. And that could have been why things were not as hard too. I had very supportive, older, more experienced Black women that were in leadership positions who made it a point to support me along the way.

Amy Harrison is now retired. She is not required nor expected to support Black women principals in her school district. However, she spoke about how valuable it was for her as a principal to be mentored by older Black women administrators, and to have them as part of her professional community. Therefore, she continues to offer the same mentorship to new Black women leaders in her school district whenever possible.

In addition to discussing the value of racial affinity spaces, some Black women principals in this study gave specific advice on how to make these spaces most effective. For example, Pam Jones suggested that school districts offer these spaces during the work day. She stated:

> I shouldn't feel guilty if I leave campus and go to a two-hour meeting for Black administrators, right? There has to be some intentionality around allowing these safe

> spaces … They need to exist and we need to be able to be a part of them within our workday.

Other principals felt similarly. While they value collaborating with other Black women principals, they noted the challenge of attending evening events. Faren Dudley stated:

> We do have the Council of Black Administrators which just doesn't work for me because I'm in the valley. It meets in LA. There's a thing about LA, right? They think that all Black people live in LA and at four o'clock in the afternoon, I'm trying to go north and I'm not thinking about going south into LA for a meeting of the Council of Black Administrators.

Faren Dudley's comment suggests that if these opportunities were offered during the work day, they would be easier for principals to attend.

It is important to note that in my interviews with Jackie Erickson, Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Donna Kim, Amy Harrison, Pam Jones, and Faren Dudley, I did not explicitly introduce the topic of racial affinity groups. When asked a general question about ways school districts could increase Black women principal retention, these women mentioned racial affinity groups. They expressed the value of creating space and time, preferably during the work day, for Black women principals, current and former, to gather and engage in conversations about the experiences they are navigating in the workplace.

Invest in Professional Development and External Partnerships

In this study, some Black women principals (6) spoke at length about the role of professional development and/or external partnerships in supporting their retention. In fact, the Black women principals in this study referenced over 20 different professional development opportunities and external partnerships that had a positive impact on their growth and retention.

The types of professional development opportunities and external partnerships varied in terms of topic, length, and purpose. Some of the professional development organizations that were mentioned included: the Standards Institute, the Pacific Educational Group, the National Equity Project, the Cal State Leadership Academy, Deloitte, and the California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators. Some of the external partnerships that were mentioned included: the Teaching Well, the University of Washington, the San Diego County Office of Education, and the National Center for Urban School Transformation.

In general, the Black women principals in this study described three different types of professional development opportunities and external partnerships. The first type is best described as job-specific professional development offered by a school district or charter management organization. The second type includes guest speakers or conference events that happen once and are not sustained over a long period of time. The third type involves sustained professional development for a leadership team or an entire school community over a longer period of time. Diana Bradley described the first type:

> The region has implemented community of practices for each leadership role. So principals have a community of practice once a month. My AP [Assistant Principal] and my deans, even my mental health therapists, our college counselors have a community of practice that just allows alignment, collaboration, engagement for like-minded and content-related jobs in the region. I think that has been important.

Ultimately, Diana Bradley believes that principals benefit from consistent job-specific training and collaboration with other principals. She was not the only Black woman principal in this study to make this claim.

Similar to Diana Bradley, Sam Brown found the district's leadership training to be most valuable to her. She described the difference between being a manager and a leader, and asserted that principals need time to develop leadership skills. She enthusiastically cited several examples of district-sponsored leadership training she has received:

> We've had great speakers like Dr. Pedro Noguera spoke at our principal institutes. The guy who wrote *No Bad Stats*, he spoke at our principal institutes. We've had Zaretta Hammond, I mean, so we have been, I think definitely if you would take it on. We've had a lot of professional learning on leadership and leadership styles … Yes, like leverage leadership, service leadership. We also get professional learning around how to work equity and then how to work with our English learners. But I feel like there's been a lot of focus on how to be a good educational leader. It takes more than just, we're not managers, we're leaders. And that takes a lot of development.

In addition to the guest speakers and topics mentioned above, Sam Brown also described her appreciation for the principal institutes she participates in four times a year and the books she has read as part of those experiences (e.g., *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown and *Leverage Leadership* by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo).

Other San Diego County principals, including Camryn Lamb and Jamisha Levitt, spoke positively about their school district's investment in their leadership development. These principals specifically mentioned their school district's investment in equity work. Camryn Lamb described her site-based Equity Leadership Team's multi-year collaboration with the San Diego County Office of Education:

> So last year was eight times we went to the county to get guidance on leading equity work at our site. And then this year, because we did such great work, we're still working

> with one of the Executive Leadership Coaches … and working with also more equity work. So they're just helping us. It gives us a time to meet and have … someone who's very knowledgeable about equity work guide *our* equity.

Camryn Lamb expressed excitement when discussing the professional development opportunities offered by her school district. She appreciated the chance to collaborate with an equity expert to support her school site's equity work, and then to present her team's equity work to other school sites. Finally, Jamisha Levitt also conveyed excitement when discussing the professional development she received from the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) on the equity work she was doing at her school site. She stated:

> So we had an audit by the National Center for Urban School Transformation based out of San Diego. And they had years of research about what high performing schools do with demographics of kids just like ours, which were mostly Black and Latino and lower socioeconomic status. And so with that research, my staff and I were able to see the areas where we needed to improve. We had our audit. We worked together as a team. The next year after our audit, we made it to 815 API. And you could see the difference in the classrooms.

In this case, Jamisha Levitt's external partnership with the National Center for Urban School Transformation had a lasting positive impact on her school community. She discussed not only how the partnership supported her principalship during that time, but also how it inspired her thinking about how she wanted to support principals as a leadership consultant later on in her career. For many Black women principals in this study, their school district's financial support of their professional growth and learning strengthened their leadership skills and capacity, and was at least partially responsible for their success and/or retention as principals.

Create Leadership Pathways

Six of the participants in this study claimed that school districts could increase Black women principal retention by providing Black women principals with clear leadership pathways before and after their principalships. While some principals discussed the need to strengthen the teacher pipeline, others discussed the importance of long-term professional pathways for principals who do not wish to be career principals. Pam Jones spoke about the lack of diversity in the teacher pipeline:

> So I know last year they did start having conversations about being intentional about hiring people of color. I know I just signed us up for a new residency program where they're trying to hire Black teachers and they wanted some schools that would have some good mentor teachers. And so I told my staff *straight up* two months ago, 'Y'all want to know why I signed us up? I want more Black teachers.' I was like, 'So I'm just being honest with you guys about that. It's no offense to the rest of you, but I'm tired of being the only Black certificated woman on this campus.'

Several of Pam Jones' principal colleagues from San Diego County mentioned the teacher residency program as a step in the right direction when it comes to developing a teacher pipeline. Nesha Johnson, a former principal from the Central Valley, currently works for a teacher residency program. She described her pathway to leadership, and explained the importance of career pipelines for teachers, especially teachers of color.

> I think, and it was feedback that I have shared as well too, where I felt kind of happenstance, me kind of matriculating through being a teacher, and then a lead teacher, and then a coach, and then a principal, and then even a mentor principal. But I think that it would be ideal to build a pipeline and really talk about the possibilities of a career

> ladder early on in teachers' careers. I think there's also opportunity to have, with that, I think, and I think we're doing it now during the residency, but before that being really intentional about hiring teachers of color because those are the folks that actually should be the ones. I think also hiring classified staff that are of color. Our afterschool educators, our IAs [Instructional Assistants], our whatever. Those are the folks that typically matriculated into our sub pool, to our teacher pool.

Nesha Johnson described her pathway to leadership as rather happenstance. She more or less stumbled into teaching, then teacher leadership, and finally administration. Based on her experience, she asserted that there is value in being more deliberate about recruiting teachers of color, and developing a career path for teachers like her who are looking for ways to stay in the profession long-term.

After her principalship, Stephanie Willis also worked for a teacher residency program as the Director of People Initiatives. In that role, she led efforts to create teacher pathways to school administration. Below she describes the work she did to strengthen career pathways for leaders of color.

> I got my role at the region. Director of People Initiatives. So aside from doing the residency, I was also responsible for leadership pathways and development. So I did an Emerging Leaders of Color program. I revamped the way in which we did principal selection so that it was more equitable. It was both qualitative data and quantitative data. So we did those things, but then that's getting them in the door. There's this sustaining piece that I think we need to do a stronger job of, right?

In her role as the Regional Director of People Initiatives, Stephanie Willis described specific ways she has been able to get more people of color into school leadership. However, she also

noted that getting leaders of color in the door is not the same as keeping them there. Jackie Erickson, like Stephanie Willis, left her principalship after two years. Although Stephanie Willis and Jackie Erickson both cited unsustainable workload as one reason they decided to leave their principalships, Jackie Erickson also left because she did not see desirable professional growth opportunities for herself post-principalship. Not interested in being a career principal, Jackie Erickson wanted to know what came next after serving 3-5 years as a site principal. She stated:

> I think when I asked about what is the trajectory for a principal in this organization [that] could have helped retain me because it was very clear that if you start as a teacher, or even as a non-teacher, a paraeducator, you could go to the Alder program and become a teacher. A teacher becomes a dean or some type of specialist. There's a clear kind of pathway if a person wanted to move and grow. As a principal, it was not clear. It was like you become a principal and then what? You just kinda wait until somebody decides to retire?

For Jackie Erickson, the lack of a clear career path for principals post-principalship impacted her decision to leave her principalship. Like many other former principals, Jackie Erickson wanted to stay a principal at her school. However, ultimately she did not feel supported to grow in her position and decided it was best to leave school site administration in pursuit of other professional opportunities.

K-12 school districts could improve retention for Black women principals by offering differentiated support.

Seven Black women principals in this study described feeling frustrated by their school district's lack of differentiated support. These women noted their school district's "one-size-fits-all" approach to supporting school sites which limits their ability to make decisions in the best

interest of their school communities. Elise Frank, a current veteran high school principal from San Diego County, expanded on the issue of school district versus school site priorities:

> So I think just trying to support students and find the services and support that the student or the family needs is at the site level. I think at the district level, it's much, they're looking at it from the 35,000 foot level per se. They're trying to meet the needs of *all* of the schools. And so it seems more of just a systematic, what can I do the same for all the schools, but every school is a little different. So sometimes I think that that might be something that districts deal with that's a little different than the site because at the site we try to do what's best for the students at that site.

Elise Frank called attention to the different perspectives that inform district and school site decision-making. For Madison James, the challenge with her organization's approach to decision-making was that her school's needs were often not reflected in her organization's priorities. She discussed her frustration attending principal meetings that she felt were not designed to meet her school's needs:

> I remember being in principal meetings like this doesn't apply to me at all. This is not where I am. This is not. Three years from now this might be where I'm at, but this is not where I'm at now. I can't really think about a strategic plan for instruction if I have no teachers. I need teachers, and I need teachers who are not scared of Black kids because that was also the big difference. No other school had as many Black kids as I did, or like the percentage. So it was kind of like, I hear you and you're trying to make the comparison of Latinx kids. And I'm like, but it's, as a person who is both, it's different. It's just different.

Madison James was a brand new principal. At the time of her principalship, she was dealing with excessive teacher turnover, high student academic and social emotional needs, and a severely unqualified teaching staff at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike her principal colleagues, she did not have the capacity or resources to focus on anything other than survival. In light of this, she needed a different type of organizational support. According to Madison James, the reason she left her principalship is because she never received it.

Madison James' situation highlights a tension many principals discussed related to the mismatch between the support offered by school districts and charter management organizations and the support needed at individual school sites. Nesha Johnson, like Madison James, was a charter school principal. She discussed how her organization addressed the issue of diverse principal needs from a regional and structural perspective:

> So being able to regionalize our work was huge. And I think allowing each region to establish whatever policies and practices that made sense for the region was very wise. That helped us to sustain. We would not be able to function as one organization doing the same thing across the state. It just wouldn't be contextualized.

Nesha Johnson's charter management organization took a structural approach to providing differentiated support for site principals. Although this approach was not perfect, according to Nesha Johnson, the regional structuring helped her organization better meet the distinct needs of each school site principal.

K-12 school districts could improve retention for Black women principals by trusting them to make decisions about their site-specific needs.

Six Black women principals in this study described their district leadership team's lack of trust in their ability to make their own leadership decisions. Regardless of the principal's school

district or charter management organization, all the Black women principals in this study who commented on this issue felt the same way. They agreed that the best way school districts could support them was by stepping back and allowing them to make decisions about their school sites. For example, Lisa Kane stated, “I think, quite frankly, letting me just do what I needed to do was helpful. I didn't have a lot of people always in my ear, ya know, kinda poking with me. They trusted you to be a professional, and that was helpful. That was very helpful.” Natasha Green also emphasized the importance of trust and principal autonomy. She discussed her school district’s hands-off approach to site budget management:

> So what I do is I use my site funds. I seek out what I think that I need. I really felt like I needed support with restorative justice, and I wanted to really build that. And so I used my site funds to go to a restorative justice training. I used my site funds to go to a leadership symposium. So usually, I'll use site funds to fit the need that I feel that I need directly.

Natasha Green feels supported by her school district’s hands-off approach when it comes to her site budget. Not only did attending the restorative justice training and leadership symposium help build her leadership capacity, but it allowed her to share her learning with her entire school community.

Although some principals, like Lisa Kane and Natasha Green, applauded their school district’s approach to principal autonomy and decision-making, many had the opposite experience. For example, unlike Natasha Green, Tonya Dodd described having no control over her school site budget:

> The challenge might've been, I *never* saw a budget, so I was not able to learn in that way how to manage the budget because it was owned by maybe the COO [Chief Operating

> Officer] at the time. I could meet with her. I could see it on her screen, but it wasn't shared with me in a way that I could make any decisions on.

For Tonya Dodd, making budget decisions on her own was never a possibility. She had no control over how the money in her site budget was spent. She barely even had access to her site budget spreadsheet. According to Tonya Dodd, she was unclear why her school district took this management approach with her. Jackie Erickson, on the other hand, knew exactly why her organization restricted her control over her site budget. Jackie Erickson stated that she was told by her supervisors that she was too inexperienced to make her own leadership decisions:

> And then as I was deciding to leave, I wasn't even asking for a raise, I was just saying, 'Can you trust me to make decisions as a principal?' And basically I was told, 'No. We don't trust you. We don't trust you. We want you to do it our way, and you haven't been a principal long enough to have that autonomy and [to] make those decisions. And I said, 'Okay, fine. I respect that that's your perspective. I disagree with you. And you'll see that. You'll see that in my results.'

Ultimately, Jackie Erickson's district leaders were unwilling to step back and allow her to make decisions for her school site. This was a key reason she decided to resign. Like many principals in this study, she did not want to resign. She asked her supervisors if they could trust her leadership. When they communicated they could not, only then did she decide it was time to leave her principalship.

K-12 school districts could improve Black women principal retention by explicitly supporting anti-racist and equitable schooling practices.

Ten of the Black women principals in this study discussed the importance of district messaging and support when leading equity initiatives at their schools. For these women, their

advocacy of Black students and other marginalized groups was most powerful when district leaders set the tone and held others accountable for prioritizing anti-racist equity work. Tonya Dodd claimed that setting the tone in her school district meant "not just letting DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion] be a buzzword." She went on to say, "And then of course, not putting the onus *only* on the Black women. Making a point for everyone to play a part in learning and growing and being uncomfortable in those spaces." In short, the success and retention of many Black women principals in this study relied on the level of support they received from their school districts when trying to lead equity work onsite.

Sasha Sundry-Sailors and Jamisha Levitt provided concrete examples of how their school district's messaging and leadership supported their success and retention in the principal role. Sasha Sundry-Sailors discussed how equity language was "in the water" in her school district:

> So I was in a context where from a policy standpoint, we were at least saying that we were about equity and we had these mandates in place that we were supposed to be enacting this in our classrooms. And so it was very helpful to be able to lean on that when I would walk into a teacher's class and say, 'Let's talk about how your instruction is or is not meeting the needs of *all* of your students. So that kind of language was in the water, if you will, and for the teachers who had been there for quite some time, they had experienced that. And so it was just a matter of kind of keeping that initiative going and trying to push it forward.

In response to a lawsuit concerning educational equity, Sasha Sundry-Sailors' school district took action by mandating district-wide training for all employees related to Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversations About Race framework and culturally responsive teaching. Although moving the equity work in her school district from theory to practice was challenging, having

these frameworks there in the first place supported her equity leadership at her school site. Jamisha Levitt, like Sasha Sundry-Sailors, used her district's equity principles to hold her team accountable for enacting anti-racist and anti-classist practices at her school site. She described her school board's equity principles as "the best thing ever":

> The board had created these principles, p-l-e-s, not person principal, but principles, and I don't remember exactly what they were, but one was around interrupting racist [and] classist practices, and they had several. There were three or four of these principles that they created. Everything I did was based on that. So any decision I made, I would say, 'Oh, I'm going back to the board principles. And that made it so much easier to lead in the way that I led, in the way our staff could go, because we would lean on those principles. And if the superintendent had questions or anybody, I would go back to, 'This is what the board says. They want us to have to focus on interrupting racist and classist practices. And what we're doing right now is racist and classist, and so we're interrupting. So I could always go back to that. That was like the best thing ever.

Similar to Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Jamisha Levitt valued having the school board principles at her disposal when she was confronted with opposition as a principal about her equity leadership. While many of the Black women principals in this study spoke candidly about the challenges of leading equity work, some, like Lisa Kane, explicitly stated the positive long-term effects it had on their school communities. Lisa Kane, a former middle and high school principal from San Diego County, described the long-term impact of her school district's equity work:

> The second thing that was helpful was the work we were doing in equity. Those equity initiatives, they lasted for probably about nine, ten years. And so we got *real good* about calling a spade a spade and getting people to be real honest and upfront about their

> feelings. Even if they're not in alignment with mine, at least I know what I'm dealing with kind of a thing. So that was very helpful. That worked out really well for us all, I think. But it really helped me to feel validated and to feel supported in the work that I was trying to do.

Lisa Kane pointed out that the outcome of her school district's equity work was not complete philosophical alignment with regard to everyone's views on educational equity. However, the outcome was more honest staff communication and more support for Lisa Kane's equity vision and site leadership. For Lisa Kane and others, this support contributed to their feeling of efficacy in the principal role.

Administrative training programs could improve Black women principal retention by inviting explicit conversations about the role of race and gender in educational leadership.

Out of the 20 Black women principals in this study who completed an administrative credentialing program, four described having positive experiences. According to these principals, there were three main features that made these programs effective. First, a significant amount of time was devoted to critical reflection and personal identity work. Second, there was a heavy emphasis on building community, usually within a cohort model format. Finally, there was an explicit focus on educational equity. However, unlike many administrative training programs that tend to center White and/or male leadership perspectives, these programs centered the voices and experiences of those belonging to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities.

Sasha Sundry-Sailors, Donna Kim, and Toni Oaks, all current principal coaches, described the importance of personal and critical reflection in their principal coaching or

administrative training programs. Sasha Sundry-Sailors discussed her program's focus on "the personal, local, and immediate" leadership context:

> So something that the program offered from the very beginning was a specific focus on understanding your own personal identity. This idea that if you hope to lead any population, whether it's one that is very much like you or one that is very much unlike your background, you have to first understand yourself, your positionality, what it means to show up in spaces in your own skin. And we did that by writing our racial autobiographies, by listening to other people in our group who had also written their racial autobiographies and learning about their histories. And just being really cognizant of the fact that when I show up in a space and my PTA [Parent Teacher Association] is 90% White and my teaching staff is 90% White, that yeah, I still have to engage with these folks and I have to understand where they're coming from in order for us to all stay at the table and have a conversation. So I think that focus on the personal, local, and immediate was critical to my early coming into myself as an administrator.

In the interview, Sasha Sundry-Sailors described facing strong staff and parent resistance when she tried to engage them in critical conversations about her school's inequitable practices. At the same time, she described feeling prepared for those conversations coming out of her administrative credentialing program. She stated, "But I think I was prepared for that and it still wasn't easy, obviously, but at least I wasn't surprised, I'll say by the resistance that I was met with." By the time she became a principal, Sasha Sundry-Sailors had already begun to think critically about her own positionality and her positionality within the context of her school community.

Donna Kim and Toni Oaks also spoke about the importance of critical self-reflection in their principal training programs. When I asked Donna Kim to describe how the training and mentorship she provides attempts to support the retention of Black women principals, she stated: "Well, there's a space for them to think about what it means to be a Black woman, [to] do that with their coach as well as when possible in racial affinity with another Black woman principal or a Black principal period. And so we don't duck from race." Donna Kim stressed the importance of centering explicit conversations about race when coaching and supporting principals of color. Toni Oaks expressed similar thoughts. She asserted that all principals, not just Black women principals, must examine issues of race and culture, particularly the presence of anti-Blackness in spaces as well as one's own proximity to Whiteness. When asked how her training and mentorship attempts to support the retention of Black women principals, she stated:

> I think that because I make a point to say in the work that we do that we will talk about anti-Blackness inside of a space. I think it gives them space inside of [Program XYZ] to voice their concerns and we start off by saying, you have to examine your proximity to Whiteness. You have to examine it. That means Latinx folks. That means Black people. That means the White people. That means the Asian folks. You have to understand why we live in a society and [in] our educational system the further on the spectrum you are towards Blackness, the further vilified you are. I don't care if you're Black Filipino. I don't care if you're darker-skinned Latinx. If you are closer to the verge of Blackness over here, culture, the way you look, your proximity to this dictates how you are treated and how you do inside of spaces.

Toni Oaks, like Donna Kim, does not "duck from race" in her principal credentialing program. Conversations about race and culture are centered in the principal learning space so that principals feel equipped to engage in these conversations in their K-12 schools.

Jamisha Levitt, a Bay Area education leader consultant, also prioritizes critical self-reflection in her work with school leaders. Furthermore, she insists that critical self-reflection must happen in community with others. She claimed that her administrative credentialing program helped her "understand on a deeper level the importance of community and allyship because you need community in order to do the work, the deep work that needs to happen to transform schools." As a former principal, Jamisha Levitt knows how isolating the job can be for Black women principals. As a current school board member, she described the experiences of Black teachers in her district who are struggling to be heard and respected within their school communities. For this reason, Jamisha Levitt emulates the community-centered approach she experienced in her credentialing program in her current work as a school board member and an education leader consultant.

Conclusion

From the start of the interview when I asked about each principal's motivation behind their career choice, to the end when I asked about their decision to stay or leave their principalships, participant responses yielded varied and nuanced findings related to the topic of Black women principal retention. They discussed a myriad of personal and systemic challenges they faced as site principals. Participants discussed the top reasons they decided to quit, were forced to resign, or would resign in the future. Lastly, they shared five recommendations to improve Black women principal retention. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the challenges and

solutions shared by study participants that I believe offer invaluable insights into supporting Black women principal retention from a systemic perspective.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

"Well before you can start hiring more, think about how are you going to keep them. What does that look like? And you're not going to know until you ask them about their experiences."

- *LaToya Price, former elementary school principal*

For decades, education research literature on Black K-12 education leaders has centered on the issue of underrepresentation. How do we recruit and hire more leaders of color in K-12 schools? Earning a seat at the leadership table was and remains the goal for many K-12 leaders of color, including Black women. In fact, that was my goal 10 years ago when I started my principalship in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had never had a Black woman principal growing up in school. The school I served as principal had never had a Black woman principal before me. I wanted to change that. Leading up to and during my principalship, I did everything I could to earn a seat at the leadership table. And yet, like LaToya Price notes above, getting to the table is one thing. Staying there is another. The K-12 principalship remains one of the hardest and loneliest roles I have ever had. My personal story, and those from my Black women principal colleagues, inspired this study. I wanted to know, "How can we move beyond representation?" "How can we shift our focus from adding seats for Black women at the leadership table, to designing a new table that supports their success and retention?"

This study on Black women principal retention supported and expanded on prior research related to the underrepresentation and retention of Black women K-12 administrators. Beyond issues of representation, existing education research literature minimally addresses the experiences of Black women administrators in K-12 schools (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2021). While there is ample education research literature on the challenges of the

principal role in general (Hamilton et al., 2007; Ewy, 2009; Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Terosky et al., 2021), studies show that Black women administrators in K-12 schools face unique challenges related to their gender and racial identities (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017). Consequently, this study sought to achieve two goals. First, using intersectionality as a conceptual framework, this study aimed to discover the role of race and gender, if any, in the professional experiences and career decisions of Black women K-12 principals. Second, using systems thinking as a conceptual framework, this study sought to critically examine the K-12 education system as a whole to better understand the underlying factors and possible solutions to improving Black women principal retention from a systemic perspective.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the findings from my qualitative study of 23 current and former Black women principals in K-12 schools. The findings from this study addressed the following research questions:

1) According to current and former Black women principals, what systemic challenges do Black women principals face in their work as school leaders?
    a) What systemic challenges - if any - do Black women principals believe are related to their racial and/or gender identity?
    b) To what extent do these systemic challenges influence their decision to remain a principal, or to leave that role?
2) According to current and former Black women principals, what policies, systems, structures or supports would significantly improve the retention of Black women principals?

Key findings from this study were organized into four central themes including: Principal Motivation and Purpose, Systemic Challenges, Top Challenges That Lead to Black Women Principal Attrition, and Ways to Improve Black Women Principal Retention. Within these themes, I provided examples of successes and challenges Black women principals experienced in their K-12 principalships. In addition, I shared the reasons why some Black women principals ultimately decided to leave their principalships, and the recommendations they offered to support Black women principal retention. In Chapter 5, I will expand on the issue of K-12 Black women principal retention using a *critical* systems thinking approach. Using Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, and Derrick Bell's interest convergence theory (1980), I will discuss my interpretation of the study's key findings. I will then discuss the implications of my findings for K-12 systems leaders, the limitations of my study, and recommendations for further research.

Through A *Critical* Systems Thinking Lens

"But some systems are more than surprising. They are perverse. These are the systems that are structured in ways that produce truly problematic behavior; they cause us great trouble" (Meadows, 2008, p. 111). In this study, the system under examination is the K-12 education system. According to the Black women principals in this study, there are many reasons why they decide to stay or leave their principalships. Whether they explicitly referred to the K-12 education system or not, findings from this study point to a number of systemic challenges that may impact the retention decisions of Black women principals in California. As a former Black woman principal from California, I am not surprised by the existence of these challenges, but I am surprised by the "perverseness" of them. Particularly, I am struck by the parallels between the lived experiences of the Black women principals in this study and key themes present in

Meadows', Crenshaw's, and Bell's conceptual frameworks including: the role of purpose in creating and sustaining inequitable systems (Meadows, 2008), the self-interests of White people in Black people's past and present liberation efforts (Bell, 1980), and the feminization of poverty as it relates to Black working mothers (Steinmetz, 2020). An analysis of these frameworks follows.

Interpretation of the Findings

To begin, I will apply Donella Meadows' systems thinking framework to the findings from this study. Using Meadows' Iceberg Model (see Appendix E), I will describe the role of elements, interconnections, and purpose in creating barriers to success and retention for Black women principals in K-12 California schools. While Black women principals are the focus of this study, I assert that the struggle to retain them has little to do with the aptitude of individual Black women principals. Rather, it has more to do with the design of the K-12 education system itself, namely its purpose and the interconnections of the elements within it.

Despite the rhetoric or stated goals of the K-12 school system which is to provide all students with a humane, purposeful, and equitable education, findings from this study highlight differences between the espoused or stated purpose of the K-12 education system and the actual purpose of the K-12 education system. Findings from this study raise questions related to:

- the value of Black students and leaders
- the relationship between school sites and districts
- the training needs of Black versus non-Black leaders
- the relationships between Black principals and White supervisors
- the relationship between underrepresentation and retention
- the needs of working mothers in K-12 leadership positions

In light of these questions, the discussion offered in Chapter 5 moves beyond the individual stories and experiences of Black women principals. Instead, it describes the mental models, patterns, and structures within the K-12 school system that work together to strengthen and reinforce its purpose.

Mental Models

According to Meadows (2008), a mental model is the way we picture the world in our head. Mental models often share a strong congruence with the world around us. However, they do not represent the real world fully (p. 87). In my iteration of Meadows' Iceberg Model diagram (see Appendix F), mental models are located at the bottom of the iceberg. They represent the values, assumptions, and beliefs that shape the system. Findings from this study revealed several mental models that perpetuate deficit views of Black women principals. These mental models include:

- Black women principals are not qualified for their jobs.
- Black women principals are not smart or skilled enough to run schools.
- Black women principals only care about Black students.
- It is not necessary to listen to Black women, or to take their advice or needs seriously.
- Black women must change themselves to fit appropriately into the work environment.

Out of all of these negative mental models, arguably the most destructive to the Black women principals in this study is the idea that Black women principals are not competent or skilled.

One of the most compelling examples of this racist and sexist mental model was found in Stephanie Willis' interview. When I asked Stephanie Willis what were the biggest challenges she faced in her work at her school site, she replied, "Well-meaning White folks were the biggest challenge." She went on to describe conflicts she had with new and inexperienced White

teachers who felt entitled to question her knowledge and experience working with Black students. In one instance, she described a time when an inexperienced White teacher refused to tell a Black student to remove his hoodie in class because she felt doing so would be racist. Stephanie Willis responded:

> You telling a Black kid to take their hoodie off is actually not you being a racist. You arguing with *me* is. [We laugh.] You know. That was tough. That was tough. You think that you know better than me is actually problematic. You sitting here with an institute, literally Teach for America's Institute worth of experience and telling me that you studied something in a book and I'm sitting in front of you with a whole doctorate and years of experience, that's actually racist.

For Stephanie Willis, interactions like this were exhausting and exasperating. Despite being the most educated person on her campus, with years of teaching and leadership experience working in urban schools, inexperienced White teachers still tried to educate *her* on what was best for Black and Brown students.

Stories like Stephanie's supported studies noted in Chapter 2 about Black women teachers and superintendents. For example, Black women teachers in Benson et al.'s (2020) and Mosely's (2018) studies described the following push factors that drove them out of education: racial microaggressions, navigating White supremacy culture, and experiencing racial battle fatigue. In Brown's (2014) and Johnson's (2021) studies, Black women superintendents described a specific type of race and gender-based microaggression involving negative perceptions of Black women superintendents' intelligence and capabilities. The Black women principals in this study have experienced the exact same type of microaggression causing them to

constantly exert energy trying to prove their value and worth to teachers, parents, and supervisors who challenge their authority.

Donna Kim, the Founder and Executive Director of a principal coaching business in the San Francisco Bay Area, explained why many people possess racist and sexist mental models of Black women principals, and consequently, resist being led by them. She stated:

> So the experts in my life have been White women. That is true of the average kid who goes through K-12 education in this country. And then we expect them to enter a world where they're going to be led by Black bodies, Brown bodies, Asian bodies, and they don't know how to do it. And we're confused by it. It's not confusing.

Throughout Donna Kim's K-12 and higher education schooling experience, grade Kindergarten through graduate school, she has only had three Black women teachers. She argues that her experience is not unique. In fact, many of us have rarely - if ever - been taught, coached, led, or mentored by Black women in school or elsewhere. Donna Kim's point illustrates Meadows' research on the impact of interconnections within a system. In this case, the underrepresentation of Black women teachers and administrators in schools, a structural issue discussed in Chapter 1, is connected to the negative mental models of Black women principals. This interconnection works to preserve the purpose of the K-12 education system which does not - and has never - supported the success and retention of its Black women principals.

Another mental model that was reflected in this study was not related to race or gender. This mental model involves the characterization of site principals as task-oriented middle managers. According to this mental model, principals function solely as middle managers. Therefore, they cannot be trusted to make decisions about their school sites independent from their school districts. In this study, the contrast between some school districts' approach to

middle management compared to others was stark. For example, Lisa Kane, a former middle and high school principal from San Diego County, was given the freedom and flexibility to lead her school site without district interference. She stated, “I didn't have a lot of people always in my ear, ya know, kinda poking with me. They trusted you to be a professional, and that was helpful. That was very helpful.” Other principals, like Tonya Dodd, were given little to no freedom to make site-based leadership decisions without district approval. In her interview, Tonya Dodd claimed that her site budget spreadsheet was managed by the Chief Operating Officer who restricted her viewing and editing access. She stated, “I could meet with her [the Chief Operating Officer]. I could see it on her screen [her budget], but it wasn't shared with me in a way that I could make any decisions on.” For new principals, like Tonya Dodd, Jackie Erickson, and Larissa Baker, not being trusted to make leadership decisions about their schools weakened their relationships with their organizational leaders.

Findings from Terosky et al.’s (2021) study support the findings from this study. Both studies provide insight into K-12 organizational leaders’ beliefs and mental models about site principals’ decision-making capacity. Terosky et al.’s (2021) study of four urban school principals identified three key themes that hindered their principal participants’ effectiveness as school leaders. These themes included: the illusion of control, the unsustainable nature of the career, and the challenges associated with adult people management. Many Black women principals in this study expressed a similar frustration related to “the illusion of control” they felt as school leaders. Despite their understanding of the unique needs and challenges of their school sites, many felt micromanaged and distrusted by their school districts. Unable to make independent decisions about their site budgets, site expansion, hiring, firing, etc., these principals

felt disempowered by their organizations, and consequently, decided to leave their principalships.

Interest Convergence

Findings from this study support Derrick Bell's theory known as Interest Convergence. Interest Convergence maintains that Black people only achieve civil rights victories when the interests of White and Black people converge (Shih, 2017). While Bell's theory was not the focus of my study, its relevance is clear when examining the issue of Black women principal retention from a systems thinking perspective. Meadows' discussion of *purpose* in her systems thinking framework supports comments made by several Black women principals in this study who spoke critically about the purpose of the K-12 school system. According to Meadows (2008), "Purposes are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals." In short, while the espoused purpose of the K-12 school system may be that all students and adults succeed, including Black students and Black principals, key behaviors, policies, and outcomes in K-12 schools challenge this assumption.

Pam Jones, a current middle school principal from San Diego County, claimed that the purpose of K-12 schools was *not* to serve students. She claimed that the K-12 school system is "not typically designed for our [i.e., Black] students." She went on to say, "In some cases, they're not designed for students at all. They're designed for adults." According to Pam Jones, elements within the K-12 school system such as school districts, school boards, and teachers' unions support policies and decisions that often adversely affect students' education.

Principals like Jackie Erickson, Larissa Baker, and Toni Oaks support Pam Jones' assertion, and go even further to suggest that the K-12 education system is *not* designed to serve Black students specifically. As noted in Chapter 4, Jackie Erickson and Larissa Baker discussed

being called racist by Latinx community members for supporting Black students. They claimed that simply expressing support for Black students caused resistance to their leadership. Toni Oaks shared similar stories of resistance she faced advocating for Black students, especially in predominantly White and Latinx schooling contexts. She described receiving minimal support as a principal of a charter school that served 99% Black students. She stated, "And again, it's like I always, for me, it's your proximity to Blackness means you are the most marginalized and, you know, messed up thing. Your proximity to Whiteness dictates what you get." Many of the Black women principals in this study, including Toni Oaks, described the ways their schools and students, especially their Black students, are deprioritized, underserved, and unsupported by the K-12 school system.

Similar themes related to the decimation of Black schools, students, and administrators emerged in Chapter 2 when discussing the implications of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision. Education research literature in Chapter 2 highlighted the ways White students and administrators were supported and protected during the school integration process. For example, White administrators kept their jobs and followed White students to integrated schools. Black administrators, on the other hand, lost their jobs and were not guaranteed employment at any schools, including schools that served predominantly Black students. Butler (1974) referred to this phenomenon as "whitening the K-12 principal pipeline." Based on Bell's Interest Convergence Theory, Bell (1980) challenged the notion that the purpose of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision was to improve education for Black students. At least that was not its sole purpose. Instead, he argued that the *Brown v. Board* decision happened because school integration advanced the interests of White Americans just as much - if not more - than it protected the rights of Black Americans.

Findings from this study raise questions about the purpose of today's K-12 education system, 70 years after the historic *Brown v Board* decision. In an article that examines the role of Interest Convergence in school integration and more recent education policies, David Shih, associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, writes, "Schools and universities are natural sites to observe interest convergence because inequitable access to quality education ensures White social advantage." Shih's assertion strongly supports the experiences of most Black women principals in this study who describe the following:

- the underrepresentation of Black women principals in K-12 schools
- the persistent presence of race and gender-based microaggressions in K-12 schools
- the resistance Black women principals face from non-Black community members for supporting Black students
- the lack of support for Black women principals leading predominantly Black and Brown schools

At some point, one must question the purpose of K-12 education in light of these systemic issues. Based on the experiences of Black women principals in this study, it would appear that the purpose of the K-12 school system is actually *not* to serve students, especially not Black students. Moreover, it would appear that the perpetuation of inequitable outcomes and poor treatment of Black principals and students is *not* a sign that the K-12 school system is broken, but rather, as Donna Kim puts it, is a sign that "the system's not broken." On the contrary, she states, "The system is doing exactly what it was designed to do." Based on Bell's Interest Convergence Theory, the purpose of the K-12 school system, like many systems, is to support equity and access for marginalized groups only when doing so benefits White people.

Intersectionality

Education research literature acknowledges that Black women administrators grapple with discrimination related to their intersecting racial and gender identities (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Robinson et al., 2017); however, the impact of these intersecting identities is less clear. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes the complexity of recognizing gender and race-based discrimination as equal within the Black community. She states:

> While there are a number of reasons - including antifeminist ones - why gender has not figured directly in analyses of the subordination of Black Americans, a central reason is that race is still seen by many as the primary oppositional force in Black lives. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 161)

As previously mentioned, most Black women principals in this study spoke about race and gender interchangeably, rarely distinguishing gender-based microaggressions and challenges from race-based ones. A couple exceptions to this included findings related to supervisory support and protection and motherhood. With regard to supervisory protection, Sam Brown noted her vulnerability as a woman when her White male boss failed to defend and protect her against a combative parent during a highly contentious parent meeting. She stated:

> But in that moment I finally was like, wait a minute, if someone is saying threatening words to me or cursing at me, or I'm fearful, why wouldn't someone step up to say, 'I'm recognizing this. Let me protect this not only woman principal, but *woman*.'

In this example, Sam Brown described feeling physically threatened by the male parent who was verbally berating her in a meeting with her White male boss. Unclear why she was not being protected as a woman in the presence of an aggressive man, she wondered if her Blackness was the cause of this. She went on to state, "Is it because I'm Black that it's like I can just, I don't

want to say *we* but I felt like it was a *we*. Like *we* could just handle it. *We* don't need the coddling or the care because I present myself as being able to handle anything." For Sam Brown, she wondered if her perceived strength and independence as a Black woman specifically led her boss to believe that she did not need help in the meeting when she did.

The topic of motherhood was another example when the Black women principals in this study called particular attention to gender-based challenges they experienced. For instance, even when participants shared examples of professional successes as working mothers, they often noted the adverse effect their career success had or would have on their families. Some participants shared examples of having to choose their families over their careers. For example, Nesha Johnson left her principalship when she became pregnant with her child after a 14-year struggle with infertility. Other participants shared examples of not being there for their families due to the demands of the principal job. For example, Pam Jones and Jackie Erickson described the negative effects their principalships had on their children's lives. In both cases, their children wanted to spend more time with their mothers.

Toni Oaks was the only participant in this study to compare her challenges navigating work and family life as a woman to her husband's experience navigating these challenges as a man. She was also the only participant to explicitly mention race in the context of motherhood. In her case, she described the importance of being present in her Black daughters' lives. She stated, "My husband's a great dad and he does a lot. But that didn't relinquish the role that I wanted to have in my own daughters' lives, especially as two young Black girls." For Toni Oaks, there was no way to compare the sacrifices a working mother makes to the sacrifices a working father makes. In addition, as Crenshaw notes, there was no way to talk about being a mother

without also talking about being a Black woman as both parts of Toni Oaks' identity were critically important to understanding the impact of motherhood during her principalship.

Implications for K-12 Systems Leaders

The reason I chose to study Black women principal retention is because I know from experience how difficult it is to lead as a Black woman in K-12 organizations. Many Black women who are given positional power through district and site-based administrative roles continue to leave education at alarming rates. Given that Black women principal attrition persists despite increases in representation (Brown, 2014), my hope for this study is to elevate the stories of Black women principals to provide greater insight into their experiences. Based on the stories of 23 Black women principals from this study, I offer three implications for K-12 systems leaders to improve Black women principal retention: improve administrative credentialing programs, invest in leadership coaching and mentorship, and create leadership pathways for Black women educators pre- and post-principalship.

Improve Administrative Credentialing Programs

Findings from this study suggest that administrative credentialing programs can function as pull factors to systemically improve Black women principal retention. In order for this to happen, administrative credentialing programs must be redesigned to reflect the unique leadership experiences of Black women principals. According to Coetzee and Moosa (2020), pull factors are considerations that attract a person to a profession. Benson et al. (2020) and Mosely (2018) identified teacher credentialing programs as a key pull factor for Black women teachers. Findings from these studies show that Black women teachers experience different challenges than their White and/or male counterparts. Therefore, they require different training. For example, Benson et al. (2020) claimed that university-based teacher credentialing programs must

shift their focus from raising awareness and consciousness amongst White female pre-service teachers to training and empowering Black women teachers specifically to effectively navigate race-specific K-12 challenges.

Benson et al.'s (2020) assertion about Black women teachers applied to the majority of Black women principals in this study who also claimed that their administrative credentialing programs were not designed for them. According to Erika Arnold, a former elementary school principal, she never took "a single solitary class" in undergraduate or graduate school that taught her "anything about leadership as a woman of color." Pam Jones, a current middle school principal, claimed that her administrative credentialing program "did not prepare [her] to embrace [her] identity as a Black woman." Pam Jones described feeling unprepared to deal with the isolation she felt as a racial minority in a predominantly White school district, and unprepared to deal with the blatant racism she faced from parents and other stakeholder groups. For most Black women principals in this study, the lack of racial diversity in their credentialing programs, along with the White-centered curriculum and exclusion of critical conversations about race and gender in leadership, left them feeling unsupported and unprepared heading into their principalships.

In this study, interviews with five principal coaches offered valuable insights into the key components needed to effectively train Black women principals. Ultimately, regardless of who the principal coach was, where they worked, or how long they worked as a principal, they all felt strongly about the importance of critical reflection, building community, and explicitly talking about race and gender. When I asked Donna Kim to describe how the training and mentorship she provides as a current principal coach supports the retention of Black women principals, she replied, "We don't duck from race." Sometimes her principal trainees discuss race

with a leadership coach. Other times they discuss race in racial affinity groups. What mattered most, according to Black women principal coaches, was that the conversations were happening and the conversations were happening in community with other Black leaders.

Invest in Leadership Coaching and Mentorship

Findings from this study point to leadership coaching as a critical pull factor to systemically support Black women principal retention. While administrative credentialing programs can help prepare Black women principals for their principalships, Black women principals greatly benefit from ongoing coaching support once they are in the role. As Erika Arnold points out, once you begin your principalship, "not everything falls into place like it did in the class." Education research literature on the importance of mentoring for Black women superintendents supports the findings from this study. According to Brown (2014), having a mentor helped Black women superintendents deal with the isolation of the role. It also provided access to culturally relevant and practical on-the-job training from former Black women superintendents.

The majority of the Black women principals in this study felt that having a leadership coach or mentor was or would be critical to their success. In my semi-structured interviews, I asked each participant, "What are the top 2-3 ways your organization currently supports, or could better support, the retention of its Black women principals?" Donna Kim's response was short and to the point and captured what most of the study participants felt. She stated, "Get a coach who's a Black woman who successfully has done the job." Donna Kim's advice aligns with comments made by several study participants who wanted to be mentored by someone who shared their racial identity, *and* who knew how to do the principal job effectively. Both of these factors mattered. If either was missing, the coaching was not as effective. For example, Jackie

Erickson described her White principal coach as helpful; however, as a White woman, she was not able to understand some of the nuances of the challenges Jackie was experiencing as a Black woman principal.

For K-12 organizations that desire to increase coaching and mentoring support for Black women principals, it is important to note that findings from this study suggest that coaching alone will not necessarily increase retention. For example, Erika Arnold described having excellent mentors during the time she served as a principal at two school sites. Ultimately, however, she resigned from the principal position after five years. Similarly, Tonya Dodd described having 2-3 coaches during her administrative credentialing program. One of them, a former Black woman principal, still acts as her mentor today. Tonya Dodd described her mentor as a "model of success, and a model that [she] could work from." And yet, despite Tonya Dodd's mentor's support, she decided to leave the principal profession after one year.

On the surface, one might question the utility of principal coaching based on the fact that some Black women principals still resign even when they have good coaches. However, for the former principals in this study who had good coaches and left, there is important context that must be considered. For example, Tonya Dodd claimed that leaving the principal profession had nothing to do with her coach's effectiveness. She left because she was assigned the principal position at two different school sites in one academic year during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, one of her school sites did not have a building. According to Tonya Dodd, being a "mobile principal" was not something *anyone*, including her coach, could have prepared her for. From her perspective, leaving her principalship was "a sign from God." She stated:

> I don't know anyone else that can say that in the first semester of being a principal, you don't have *a building* for 300 kids … And then the second semester there was a global

> pandemic. It was a sign … Okay, there are other roles for you. But if I were to take my experience into account, I had great mentors who were ready to help me and help me see that there's always a third way to solve a problem. The experiences I had with teachers or students, they had had many times where they were able to talk me off a ledge. I believe I was supported by my mentors *really* well.

Tonya Dodd experienced unbelievable adversity during her principalships. She claimed that her mentors were great, and had nothing to do with her decision to leave the principal profession after one school year. Former principal Toni Oaks, like Tonya Dodd, greatly valued the mentoring she received during her principalship. In fact, it was the support her mentors provided that inspired her to take the principal job in the first place. The reason she left her principalship after three years was because she had to. Her school shut down. I asked her, "Why did you ultimately leave being a principal? Would you say it's related to any of the challenges, or was it more so about just wanting something different career wise? She responded, "It's only [for] two reasons. One, I did want something different career wise, but two, the biggest reason was because we shut the school down. I would've stayed. We shut it down because the CEO and I said it became too difficult." It is true that Toni Oaks had great mentors and still resigned from her principalship after three years. However, she then went on to serve as an instructor and field supervisor for a university-based principal credentialing program.

Toni Oaks was not the only former principal in this study who went on to coach principals later on in their careers. Ten of the 14 former Black women principals in this study either went on to coach principals in their next position or were promoted to Director or C-level administrative positions. Considering these outcomes, findings from this study suggest that

coaching *is* a critical structural support for Black women principals even if or when they eventually decide to leave their principalships.

Create Leadership Pathways

Findings from this study suggest that providing Black women principals with clear leadership pathways before and after their principalships could systemically improve Black women principal retention. Several of the Black women principals in this study mentioned the need for a teacher pipeline, especially for teachers of color. For instance, principals from San Diego County expressed excitement about a new teacher residency program designed to recruit and hire teachers of color. Pam Jones, veteran elementary school principal from San Diego County, explicitly communicated to her teachers her desire to leverage the teacher residency program to hire more Black teachers at her school. She stated, "So I'm just being honest with you guys about that. It's no offense to the rest of you, but I'm tired of being the only Black certificated woman on this campus." Nesha Johnson, former principal from the Central Valley, echoed Pam Jones' support of teacher residencies, and currently works as a Regional Director in a teacher residency program. Nesha Johnson stated the need for "a career ladder early on in teachers' careers" starting with the recruitment of classified staff of color (i.e., paraeducators), substitute teachers of color, and alumni students of color.

In addition to creating pathways to teaching, Jackie Erickson discussed the importance of providing a career pathway for principals post-principalship. From her perspective, at least the pathway to becoming a teacher was clear in her organization. For example, paraprofessionals and others could join the Alder Teacher Residency program that partnered with her school to recruit, train, and hire teachers of color. What was not clear was what happened after becoming a principal. When Jackie Erickson asked her supervisors what career options were available to her

post-principalship, they responded in less direct language, “This is your ceiling. You've hit your ceiling.” This response, more than any other challenge she experienced, caused her to question her value in her organization and to leave her principalship after two years.

Jackie Erickson desired to lead her school, but she did not desire to lead it forever, nor did *any* of the Black women principals in this study. *None* of them said they wanted to retire as a principal. Knowing the difficult nature of the work, and that the average tenure of principals was only four years as of 2016–17 (Levin & Bradley, 2019), K-12 systems leaders must ask themselves how to make this career sustainable for principals, especially Black women principals who are grappling with excessive resistance to their leadership due to their intersecting racial and gender identities. Findings from this study show that the likelihood of Black women entering, succeeding, and staying in the education field is greater when they know what the long-term career path looks like - not just the pathway to the principalship.

Limitations

There were few limitations in this study. Regarding sample selection, I purposely chose to interview Black women principals who are not connected to my current K-12 organization. This contributed to the sense of safety my participants felt during the interviews. I also chose to interview principals across the state of California to capture diverse perspectives on Black women principals’ experiences in the state. One limitation to this approach is that my findings only capture the stories of Black women principals in one state. It is likely that Black women principals’ leadership experiences vary somewhat depending on the state they live in. Consequently, findings from this study only represent the experiences of 22 California current and former principals in K-12 public and charter schools. They do not necessarily represent the

experiences of all Black women principals, including Black women principals from other states or from private or independent schools.

Originally when considering the method of my study, I knew I wanted to capture individualized and thorough accounts of each Black woman principal's experience. This is why I chose to interview participants one-on-one for a period of 1-2.5 hours each interview. Prior studies noted in my literature review included quantitative methods like surveys. I also included findings from one 10-year qualitative study of a Black woman's experience in K-12 public schools. Although these methods produced interesting findings, with limited time and resources, I decided to devote all of my time to learning deeply about the principal experiences of a small group of Black women.

One limitation to this approach is that I did not interview an equal number of former and current principals. Nine of the participants in my study are current principals. Fourteen are former principals. If I were to do this study again, I would select at least the same number of current principals as former principals. I believe there is much to learn from Black women principals who, despite the odds, have persisted in their principalships over an extended period of time. For example, some of my richest data came from current Black women principals like Pam Jones, Sam Brown, Elise Frank, and Diana Bradley who have 10 or more years of principal experience. According to a report issued by the Learning Policy Institute, only approximately 11% of principals stay at their school sites for 10 or more years (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Knowing this, I would have loved to interview more career principals and asked why they think they have been able to stay in the job so much longer than most K-12 principals.

Additionally, participants in this study described instances when they felt their supervisors sabotaged their careers, or did not protect them from threatening parent and teacher

resistance. As I listened to their stories, I wondered what their supervisors' perspective of these experiences would be. Although I would not have heard as many principal stories using a broader approach, I would have been able to collect other people's perspectives in addition to the self-reported data provided by the Black women principals in this study. The additional perspectives would have given me more of a systems perspective.

Recommendations for Future Research

Principal Supervisor Training

In response to one study limitation mentioned above, one recommendation for future research is to examine the training of Black women principal supervisors. In Chapter 2, I discussed findings from studies on teacher credentialing programs. In my study, I explicitly asked the participants what their principal training looked like. Findings from my study show that many Black women principals believe their supervisors are not properly trained to support them. Some participants described their supervisors' job-related deficiencies, particularly related to instructional leadership. Other participants described their White and/or male supervisors' lack of cultural competency, specifically their inability to understand the challenges they faced as Black people, women, and mothers. Finally, several participants in this study described instances when their supervisors undermined their leadership by allowing non-Black teachers to complain about them behind their backs.

Donna Kim described at length the importance of principal supervisor training in her interview. For her, one of the primary reasons she left her principalship in Washington, D.C. after five years was because her White supervisors consistently allowed her White teachers to complain about her without just cause. After she stated that *not* entertaining these complaints

would have supported her retention, I asked her if there was anything else her organization could have done to support her retention. She stated:

> I mean, now I would say I would also add having explicit conversations about my race and gender identity and the impact of that, and for them to talk about theirs. If there had really been a space for me to say, I think this is happening because I'm Black, without me feeling like I'd be judged for that, that may have been helpful, but that space did not exist.

Based on Donna Kim's description of her relationship with her White supervisor/s, it seems that having explicit conversations about race was not encouraged. She described not feeling comfortable talking about her Blackness, and her supervisor's discomfort talking about her Whiteness. She claims that if her supervisor had created a safe space for both of them to explicitly talk about race, that could have created greater trust and a stronger relationship between them.

Knowing the importance of the principal-supervisor relationship, Donna Kim created a coaching program for principals of color *and* their supervisors that specifically addresses the ways White supervisors perpetuate racism against principals of color. In her program, she teaches principal supervisors and instructional leadership teams how they can disrupt these patterns to effectively support and retain principals of color. I recommend further research into programs like Donna Kim's, or those offered through K-12 school districts and charter management organizations, that train superintendents and other senior leaders to support Black women principals. It is unclear if principal supervisors are trained to discuss issues of race and gender with Black women principals and other leaders of color. Furthermore, it is unclear what exactly that training looks like, who is designing it, and if or how principal supervisor

performance is assessed based on the effectiveness of their support of Black women principals and other leaders of color.

The Glass Cliff Effect

One of the key findings in this study relates to the unique challenges Black women principal parents face in order to navigate work and family life. Some might say the Black women principals in this study "broke the glass ceiling" by reaching the top school leadership level as working mothers. Findings show that although the parent principals in this study were promoted to top leadership levels, the K-12 system by design is not set up for them to succeed. Coetzee & Moosa (2020) refer to this phenomenon as the "glass cliff effect." The glass cliff effect occurs when women are appointed to challenging leadership positions and are set up to fail. Unlike the "glass ceiling" phenomenon which describes barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers, the "glass cliff" effect moves beyond women's career advancement focusing instead on their success and retention after earning their leadership positions.

As mentioned previously, most of the Black women principals in this study spoke about issues of race and gender interchangeably. When describing challenges, including parenting issues, it was not always clear what role - if any - they felt their race played in their parenting challenges. It is also important to note that I did not focus on the impact of motherhood on Black women principals in this study. For example, I never asked participants what they felt could be done - if anything - to make the principal job more sustainable for Black women principals who are mothers.

In the context of her research on intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw addresses the topic of motherhood. She specifically talks about the "feminization of poverty" which describes all the ways that life circumstances, like childbirth, divorce, illness, etc., impact women more

profoundly than men (Steinmetz, 2020). In addition, Crenshaw distinguishes between the challenges faced by Black and White women with respect to their families and careers. She states:

> An analysis of patriarchy that highlights the history of white women's exclusion from the workplace might permit the inference that Black women have not been burdened by this particular gender-based expectation. Yet the very fact that Black women must work conflicts with norms that women should not, often creating personal, emotional and relationship problems in Black women's lives. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 156)

According to Crenshaw, it is a mistake to assume that all women experience the same challenges with regard to balancing their families and careers. For Black working mothers, including Black women principals, there is an added pressure to work and provide financially for their families that leads to added consequences that impact their partners, children, and other family members. Consequently, to ignore the issue of race when addressing patriarchal constructs that hinder women's professional retention and success is to ignore a key difference between the experience of Black working mothers and their White women counterparts.

As the mothers in this study talked about their struggles with infertility, divorce, illness, stress, and motherhood, it became clear that these issues greatly impacted their principalships. *How* these issues affected them, *to what extent* they affected them, and how their experiences as working mothers compare to those of working fathers, are areas that require further exploration. After all, if structures within the K-12 education system, like family leave policies or child care accessibility, do not adequately support working mothers, then we cannot expect Black working mothers to thrive in K-12 schools regardless of their abilities.

Conclusion

"So many stories we all have, but I'm like, if this can go on record somewhere, I'll have done my part to the world of research and supporting Black women leaders."

- Tonya Dodd, former middle and high school principal

In this chapter, I examined the issue of K-12 Black women principal retention from a *critical* systems thinking perspective. Using Donella Meadows' (2008) systems thinking framework, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, and Derrick Bell's (1980) interest convergence theory, I discussed my interpretation of the study's key findings. I then discussed the implications of my findings for K-12 systems leaders, the limitations of my study, and recommendations for further research. As I approach the end of the dissertation process, I find myself reflecting on Tonya Dodd's quote above. In many ways, we share the same goal in participating in this study - to contribute "to the world of research" and to "support Black women leaders."

At the very least, I hope my study presents a compelling case to K-12 systems leaders that giving Black women "a seat at the leadership table" is not enough. Ultimately, we will not stay at a table that is not designed for us. As I write this final paragraph, 3 years since the start of my study, I am struck by the power of this moment. For the past four months, while writing my dissertation, I have been anxiously waiting to see if we would elect the first Black woman President of the United States. As I was following Kamala Harris' historic presidential campaign, I was listening to 23 Black women principals' leadership stories - stories marked by racism, sexism, resistance, resilience, hope, and joy. Politics and education are different systems, but they are systems nonetheless. Now that the election is over, and I prepare for my dissertation defense, I find myself asking, "Where do we go from here? What is next for Black women in

America?" Based on the stories of the Black women principals in this study, and those of the Black women leaders who inspire us, the answer is clear. We go forward. We go with purpose. We go together.

APPENDIX A

BLACK WOMAN PRINCIPAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Black Woman Principal Questionnaire

1) **Do you self-identify as a Black woman?**
    a) Yes
    b) No

2) **Are you a current or former principal of a K-12 public or charter school in California?**
    a) Current Principal of a K-12 public or charter school in California
    b) Former Principal of a K-12 public or charter school in California
    c) I am a principal or was a principal but NOT at a public or charter school in California.

3) **How long have you served, or did you serve, as a K-12 principal at any location or context?**
    a) Less than 1 year
    b) 1-3 years
    c) 4-5 years
    d) More than 5 years

4) **What is your current position and place of employment?**

5) **Where did you receive your Administrative Services credential? If you don't have an Administrative Services credential, please state below.**

APPENDIX B

CURRENT PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Warm-Up Questions: The following questions relate to your career path in education.

1) How did you become a principal?

A. Probe: How long have you been a principal?

B. Probe: Where have you worked as a principal?

2) Why did you decide to become a principal?

A. Probe: What factors impacted that decision?

B. Probe: What were your hopes and intentions when you started as a principal?

a. In what ways - if any - have they shifted over time?

3) What was your experience like in your administrative training or certification program?

A. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program prepared you for your principalship/s?

a. In what ways - if any - did your program support you and prepare you to lead as a Black woman specifically?

B. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program *didn't* prepare you for your principalship/s?

II. Research Question #1: The following questions relate to your leadership work at your school site and outside of your school site.

4) What are the top needs/priorities at your school site versus your district? *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacts your ability to meet these needs, or to focus on these priorities? *(RQ#1B)*

5) What are the biggest challenges you face in your work at your school site? This can include your work with staff and students. *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacts these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*

B. Probe: How heavily do these challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

6) What are the biggest challenges you face in your work with parents or the larger school community? *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacts these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*

B. Probe: How heavily do these challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

7) What are the biggest challenges you face in your work with the district? This can include your work with your supervisor or other district personnel or departments. *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacts these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*

B. Probe: How heavily do these external (non site-based) challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

III. Research Question #2: The following questions relate to your current organization's policies, systems, structures or supports that impact your work as a principal.

8) Describe any organizational policies, systems, structures or supports that have helped you succeed as a principal. *(RQ#2)*

A. Probe: What professional training have you received from the district, or outside of the district, since becoming a principal? How has this training impacted your work as a principal? *(RQ#2)*

B. Probe: Describe your collaboration with the Human Resources department. How has your district's recruitment, onboarding, evaluation, or retention practices impacted your work as a principal? *(RQ#2)*

9) What are the top 2-3 ways your organization currently supports, or could better support, the retention of its Black women principals? *(RQ#2)*

IV. Closing: These final questions are more broad. They ask you to reflect on your work as a principal overall.

10) We've discussed the site-based and non site-based challenges you've experienced as a principal. What are the biggest challenges you've faced personally that impact your work as a principal? (Note: These challenges may or may not relate to your work at your school site or at the district level.)

11) What do you wish people understood better about the experience of being a Black woman principal, including the assets and challenges?

12) Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a new or aspiring Black woman principal about how to sustain themselves in this role?

13) After reviewing your interview transcript, would you be willing to answer any follow-up questions if needed to help me interpret your responses?

APPENDIX C

FORMER PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Warm-Up Questions: The following questions relate to your career path in education.

1) How did you become a principal?

A. Probe: How long were you a principal?

B. Probe: Where did you work as a principal?

C. Probe: What roles have you held since you left your last principalship?

2) Why did you decide to become a principal?

A. Probe: What factors impacted that decision?

B. Probe: What were your hopes and intentions when you started as a principal?

a. In what ways - if any - did they shift over time?

3) What was your experience like in your administrative training or certification program?

A. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program prepared you for your principalship/s?

a. In what ways - if any - did your program support you and prepare you to lead as a Black woman specifically?

B. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program *didn't* prepare you for your principalship/s?

II. Research Question #1: The following questions relate to your leadership work at your school site and outside of your school site. If you served as a principal at multiple sites, consider the site you served at the longest or that impacted you the most.

4) What were the top needs/priorities at your school site versus your district? *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacted your ability to meet these needs, or to focus on these priorities? *(RQ#1B)*

5) What were the biggest challenges you faced in your work at your school site? This can include your work with staff and students. *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacted these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*
B. Probe: How heavily did these challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

6) What were the biggest challenges you faced in your work with parents or the larger school community? *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacted these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*
B. Probe: How heavily did these challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

7) What were the biggest challenges you faced in your work with the district? This can include your work with your supervisor or other district personnel or departments. *(RQ#1A)*

A. Probe: In what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacted these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*
B. Probe: How heavily did these external (non site-based) challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*

III. Research Question #2: The following questions relate to the organizational policies, systems, structures or supports that impacted your work as a principal. Consider the same site you discussed in the previous questions.

8) Describe any organizational policies, systems, structures or supports that helped you succeed as a principal. *(RQ#2)*

A. Probe: What professional training did you receive from the district, or outside of the district, as a principal? How did this training impact your work as a principal? *(RQ#2)*
B. Probe: Describe your collaboration with the Human Resources department. How did your district's recruitment, onboarding, evaluation, or retention practices impact your work as a principal? *(RQ#2)*

9) What were the top 2-3 ways your organization supported, or could have better supported, the retention of its Black women principals? *(RQ#2)*

IV. Closing: These final questions are more broad. They ask you to reflect on your work as a principal overall.

10) We've discussed the site-based and non site-based challenges you experienced as a principal. What were the biggest challenges you faced personally that impacted your work as a principal? (Note: These challenges may or may not relate to your work at your school site or at the district level.)

11) What do you wish people understood better about the experience of being a Black woman principal, including the assets and challenges?

12) Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a new or aspiring Black woman principal about how to sustain themselves in this role?

13) After reviewing your interview transcript, would you be willing to answer any follow-up questions if needed to help me interpret your responses?

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL COACH/MENTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Warm-Up Questions: The following questions relate to your career path in education.

1) Why did you decide to become a principal? What factors impacted that decision?

A. Probe: How long were you a principal?

B. Probe: Where did you work as a principal?

C. Probe: What roles have you held since you left your last principalship?

D. Probe: What were your hopes and intentions when you started as a principal?

   a. In what ways - if any - did they shift over time?

2) What was your experience like in your administrative training or certification program?

A. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program prepared you for your principalship/s?

B. Probe: In what ways - if any - did your program support you and prepare you to lead as a Black woman specifically?

C. Probe: In what ways do you feel your program *didn't* prepare you for your principalship/s?

II. Research Question #1: The following questions relate to your leadership work at your school site and outside of your school site. If you served as a principal at multiple sites, consider the site you served at the longest or that impacted you the most.

3) What were the biggest challenges you faced in your work as a principal? This can include your work with staff, students, parents or the larger school community? *(RQ#1A)*

4) What were the biggest challenges you faced in your work with the district? This can include your work with your supervisor or other district personnel or departments. *(RQ#1A)*

5) We've discussed the site-based and non site-based challenges you experienced as a principal. What were the biggest challenges you faced personally that impacted your work as a principal? (Note: These challenges may or may not relate to your work at your school site or at the district level.)

6) Considering these challenges, in what ways - if any - do you feel being a Black woman impacted these challenges? *(RQ#1B)*

A. Probe: How heavily did these challenges impact your decision to stay or leave your principalship? *(RQ#1C)*
B. Probe: Why did you ultimately decide to leave your principalship?

III. Research Question #2: The following questions relate to your leadership work within your district or larger organization. Consider the same site you discussed in the previous questions.

7) Describe any organizational policies, systems, structures or supports that helped you succeed as a principal. This could include any professional training or coaching supported by the district along with any policies that supported your work as a principal (exp. employee recruitment and hiring, termination, teacher training) *(RQ#2)*

8) In what ways could your organization have better supported the retention of its Black women principals? *(RQ#2)*

IV. Research Question #2: The following questions relate to your current work with principals.

9) What do you think principals today struggle with the most in their work as school leaders? (Note: This question applies to all principals.)

10) To what extent do the Black women principals you work with experience similar or different challenges than principals of other backgrounds? If different, how so?

11) How does the training and mentorship you provide attempt to support the retention of Black women principals specifically?

12) For a long time, education researchers and practitioners have acknowledged that the K-12 system is broken. And yet, despite efforts to fix it, the problem of retaining its teachers and leaders still persists. Why do you think this is?

13) Based on your work with Black women principals, and your own experience as a principal, what parts of the K-12 education system must be reimagined to increase the retention of its Black women principals?

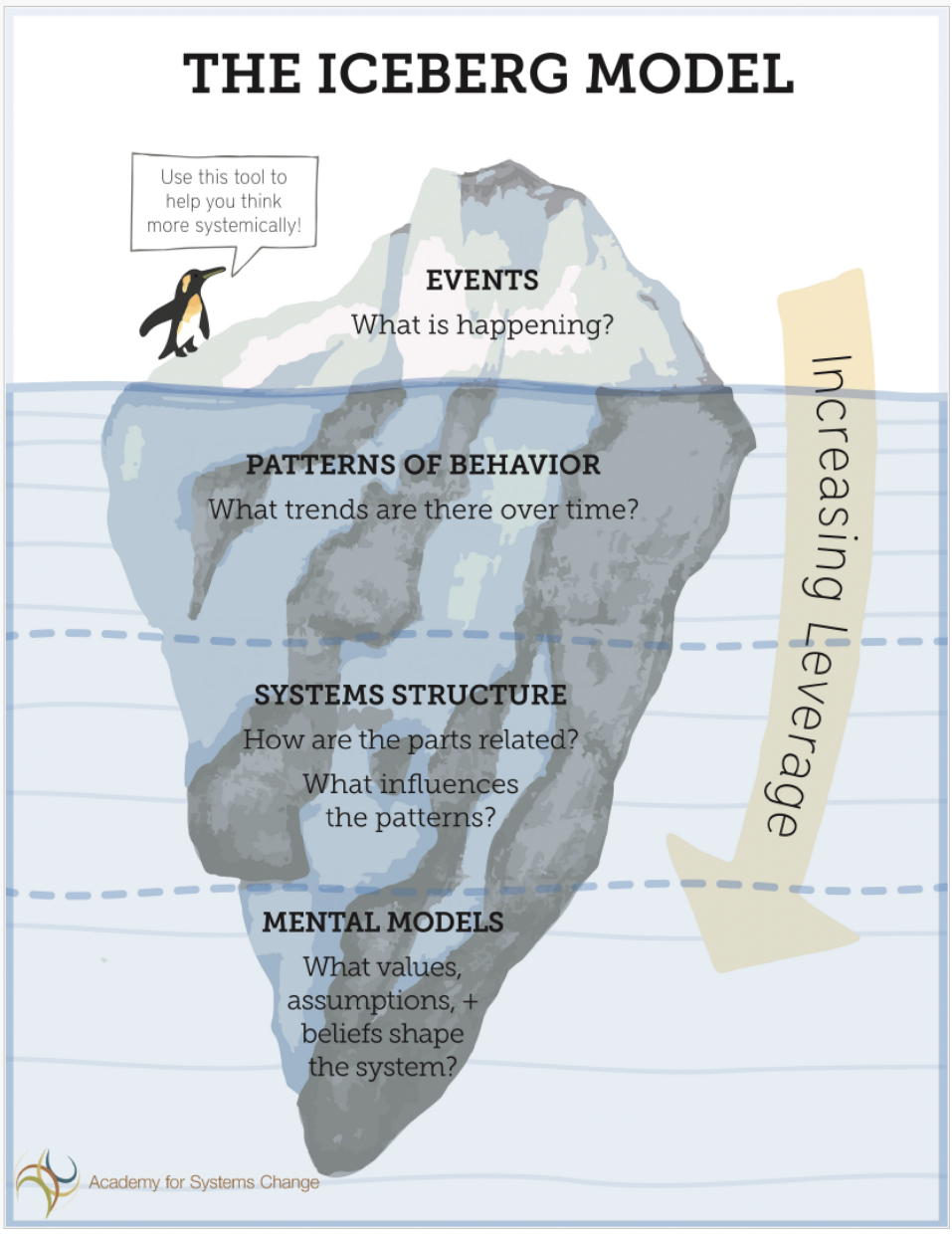
V. Closing: These final questions are more broad. They ask you to reflect on your work as a principal overall.

14) What do you wish people understood better about the experience of being a Black woman principal, including the assets and challenges?

15) Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a new or aspiring Black woman principal about how to sustain themselves in this role?

APPENDIX E

ICEBERG MODEL CONCEPT MAP



APPENDIX F

BLACK WOMEN PRINCIPAL RETENTION ICEBERG MODEL CONCEPT MAP

Black Women Principal Retention Iceberg Model Concept Map

Event

Poor Black Women Principal Retention

"I was in the shower and I'm like, I can't believe I held on this long for six years because my first couple of years I was like, I think the average tenure of a principal in L-A-U-S-D [Los Angeles Unified School District] is less than four years. And I remember my first two years going, wow, I understand why it is. And so this morning I was like, oh, you made it to six." (Faren Dudley)

Pattern/Trend

- Black women mothers often make career decisions based on having children.
- Black women principals leave their principalships due to unsustainable working conditions.
- Black women principals leave their principalships due to lack of supervisory protection and support.
- Black women principals leave their principalships due to the microaggressions they experience.
- Black women principals are hired for leadership positions but are set up to fail. (Glass Cliff Effect)

Structure

- Admin credentialing programs are not designed for Black women principals.
- Black women teachers and administrators are underrepresented in K-12 schools and in higher education.

- Schools that serve predominantly Black students are underfunded and under-resourced.

Mental Models

- Black women principals are not qualified for their jobs.
- Black women principals are not smart or skilled enough to run schools.
- Black women principals only care about Black students.
- It is not necessary to listen to Black women, or to take their advice or needs seriously.
- Black women must change themselves to fit appropriately into the work environment.
- Principals are task-oriented middle managers who cannot be trusted to make decisions about their school sites independent from their school districts.

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