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How I Got Over: Long-Serving Black Women Principals Coping with Microaggressions

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How I Got Over: Long-Serving Black Women Principals Coping with Microaggressions

By

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the lived experiences of retired Black women principals in relation to racial microaggressions, investigating their impacts, coping strategies, and the necessary support for sustainability in their roles. This study aligns with existing literature on racial microaggressions, emphasizing the profound toll these experiences have on the emotional and physical well-being of Black female principals. Key themes such as systemic challenges, resilience, commitment to students, coping mechanisms, and the critical role of intentional support from district leaders emerge from the findings. By shedding light on these issues, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by Black women principals and offers recommendations for further research and district-level practices aimed at supporting their well-being and professional success. However, the study acknowledges limitations, including a small sample size and regional specificity, which may temper the generalizability of the findings.

Keywords: Black women principals, racial microaggressions, educational leadership, gender and race intersectionality, coping strategies, support systems for principals, professional experiences of Black female principals

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

The role of the school principal is ever-growing in responsibilities and challenges while maintaining a focus on "providing strong educational opportunities and improved outcomes for students" (Levin et al., 2019, para 1). With all of the daily challenges in the principalship and the added impact of COVID-19 and events causing social justice unrest, how can principals sustain themselves and be successful in this role? I sought out to understand these and other questions from the perspective of a specific group of leaders: Black women principals.

Why focus on Black women principals in a research study? The Black woman's experience and the percentage they hold in school leadership is underrepresented. Sustainability is critical for this group of leaders and our schools. Most Black women in leadership lead a predominantly White staff that may find it challenging to follow a Black woman's direction or authority. "According to the National Center for Education Statistics, just 10 percent of principals are Black and 80 percent of public-school teachers are White. These demographics highlight the isolation Black women principals often experience, as well as the structural nature of their exclusion" (Aldrich, 2019, para 7). Black females in school leadership experience racial microaggressions and other forms of racism due to their intersectionality of race and gender. How do Black women navigate such challenges? "Research shows Black women often have fewer opportunities to join traditional professional networks and access the resources available

through them" (Aldrich, 2019 para 10). What coping mechanisms do they use in order to sustain themselves in their roles as leaders?

I gained knowledge and understanding from the lived experiences/personal stories of well-respected Black female principals that directly impacted my journey as a Black female principal in my ninth year of principalship. This researcher heard directly from Black women who held educational leadership positions for 10+ years and learned what coping mechanisms they used to sustain themselves personally and professionally.

Many Black female principals either left the district or the profession seemingly in the prime of their professional life. For those who persevered, what coping methods supported their longevity? Understanding the stories of Black women principals will add to the body of knowledge and can help move us closer to interrupting practices that have continued to marginalize this targeted group so that they may successfully sustain themselves in their role as principals and do the work they have been called to do for years to come.

This knowledge can, in turn, guide the development of supports and best coping practices that can assist Black female principals such as myself in sustaining a successful healthy leadership journey physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand, identify and present how Black female principals sustained themselves in their leadership role for so many years of service while facing challenges unique to them in a large urban school district in the Midwest. Through personal narratives of lived experiences of selected

participants experiencing the intersectionality of being Black and female, this study helped identify coping skills and mechanisms that were instrumental and necessary for their success and longevity in their roles as K-12 principals. It will respond to such questions as: What experiences were endured as a Black female principal? What coping mechanisms did they use and did they change over time? This study could lend itself to developing a resource guidebook targeting the support of current and aspiring Black female principals in this field for years to come.

Role of the Researcher

The challenges of microaggressions I experience as a Black female principal motivated my focus on the experiences of Black women principals leading predominantly White teachers. I was at an elementary school with a diverse student population, and like most of our schools, the staff was a makeup of the dominant culture and primarily female. A small group within the team made it known that they had issues taking direction from me and questioned everything I messaged out. Of course, the complaints did not come to me from any staff member themselves. I would receive emails from the union one to two times a month, causing me so much anxiety that I dreaded opening emails. Though I have always been conscientious about communicating orally and in print, it did not matter how thorough I was; the union steward still found a way to interpret my words as if I had a hidden agenda. Stewards presented half-truths as initial complaints against me and occasionally brought up unknown past practices when it suited them well. No complaint was about policy, nor were they substantiated in the end. I felt

continuously bullied. My colleagues of color shared similar experiences, but my White colleagues' lived experiences were quite different.

I am a Black woman in my ninth year as a building principal. Never could I imagine or anticipate the level of emotional stress I have experienced as a principal and how it continues to impact me personally and professionally. The more I give, the more is taken. The deposits made into relationships do not seem to add up and my relationship with the staff was only as good as our last interaction. I sometimes find myself not wanting to get out of bed, overthinking my responses to staff, not trusting staff or district leadership, experiencing anxiety, and hiding my true authentic self. It has been like playing a chess game, always in strategy mode. As I reflect and write, I am overwhelmed with strong emotions and my eyes fill with tears. I keep thinking this cannot be healthy, and it cannot continue to be the norm.

Because of my background, I have a passion and invested interest in this study. It is important to understand what has sustained Black female principals in their role for 10+ years while dealing with the challenges perceived to be motivated by microaggressions and the personal and professional impact these experiences have had. In addition to giving voice to their experiences, I want to learn and understand how to care for myself in this role. I care about my health and the health of other Black women in leadership and want to see this group have longevity serving in this role.

My experiences as a Black female principal are intense and emotional, which may have caused my biases to play out as I listened to the interviewees. I have tapped into some coping mechanisms that may or may not align with my interviewees, and as a

researcher, I was vigilant in putting them aside as I carefully analyzed the themes and patterns in my data. Though I could relate to participants' experiences, it was vital to be neutral in my participation and keep the focus on the participants' narratives and the coping mechanisms they have used.

Limitations

I studied only active and retired Black female principals leading predominantly White teachers in upper Midwest school districts. These leaders served a minimum of 10 years as principals. This study did not include assistant principals or deans.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study was: What coping mechanisms in response to microaggressions do long-serving Black female principals use to sustain them in their leadership roles?

Sub-questions related to the main research question were:

1. What are Black women principals' lived experiences with racial microaggressions?
2. What impact do racial microaggressions have on Black women principals?
    a) Personally?
    b) Professionally?
3. What coping strategies do Black women principals use in response to racial microaggressions?
4. What do Black women principals need to maintain sustainability in their role as principals?

Participant Recruitment

This researcher used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit Black females who were retired or currently active in their roles as principals. They each fit the criteria of being Black, female, and held their principalship for at least 10 years in school districts in the Midwest.

Data Collection

The data collection methods chosen for this study was a semi-structured focus group interview with participants. The session was videotaped with the participants' permission.

Analysis

The transcribed interview was analyzed using both open and axial coding for emergent themes.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study was designed to hear directly from Black women who held school principal positions for 10+ years and to understand what coping mechanisms they used, if any, to cope with racial microaggressions and other forms of racism. Gained knowledge and understanding from the lived experiences and personal stories of five well-respected Black female principals not only added to the literature but also directly impacted my leadership journey. My new knowledge could influence support offerings in and out of school districts and their accessibility to Black women leaders.

Racism, gender biases, and forms of microaggressions all impacted the experiences and longevity of Black female principals. It was essential to address the need to support Black female principals and gain knowledge of their experiences. This understanding, in turn, guides the types and levels of support and best practices that can assist Black women principals in sustaining a healthy leadership journey physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

This literature review explored the realities of the ever-evolving principalship and how racial microaggressions impacts the lived experiences of Black women and Black women principals. Finally, this review explored the critical race theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and the voice of color, and the framework of Black feminist theory.

The Current Reality of the Principalship

The school principal's role is ever-growing in responsibilities and challenges while focusing on "providing strong educational opportunities and improved outcomes

for students" (Levin et al., 2019, para 1). The principalship, in general, is challenging work and requires long hours of attention. With all the daily challenges in the principalship and the added impact of COVID-19 and events causing social justice unrest, how can principals sustain themselves and be successful in this role?

Changes in the Principalship Role and Accountability Over Time

The role of principals has become more complex over the years; what is expected of leaders, their growing list of responsibilities, the pressures they experience, and the risks principals take when decisions need to be made. The principal as the instructional leader is an added role that involves spending more time observing teachers in the classroom, providing teachers feedback, and formally evaluating teachers throughout the school year. Tyre (2015) states that this new role of instructional leader and all involved is one reason "nearly 30 percent of principals who lead troubled schools quit every year. By year 3, more than half of all principals leave their jobs" (para 9).

Principal Turnover is a Growing Trend

As of 2016-17, "the national average tenure of principals in their schools was four years" (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p.), with a national turnover rate of 18 percent and a higher percentage of principals leaving in high-poverty schools at a 21 percent turnover rate (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Levin et al., 2020). A high-poverty school refers to a school with 76% or more students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (FRPL). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), in collaboration with the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), examined why school leaders leave their positions. The study included six focus groups, with 33 secondary school leaders from 26 states (Levin

et al., 2020). For this 2019 study, these researchers worked with WestEd to execute a principal survey that went out nationally to 424 secondary principals in the U.S. with a response rate of 40 percent. In addition, "42% of surveyed principals indicated they were considering leaving their position" (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Levin et al., 2020). The survey results were similar to that of the 2017 survey results. However, it also indicated that school leaders with principalships in high-poverty schools and rural communities had a higher percentage of principals considering leaving their position (Levin et al., 2020, para 5).

The Learning Policy Institute's (LPI) review of literature consisted of findings already known about principal turnover and "found five main reasons principals leave their jobs: inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and ineffective accountability policies" (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Levin et al., 2019; Levin et al., 2020). These researchers found that the five known challenges uncovered in their literature review were similar to the challenges participants in their study experienced. However, this study did not share insight from the perspective of race or gender and how the intersectionality of the two might impact the known challenges of principalship for specific groups of leaders. Though it mentioned principal leaders participating in these studies are from diverse backgrounds, the demographic breakdown was not presented. Race and gender matter and isolating these physical characteristics in research is critical to understanding Black women principals' experiences and why they leave the profession.

Why Black Women Principals Leave

In addition to and unlike their White counterpart's challenges, Black women principals leading predominantly White staff encounter the unique behavioral challenges of racial microaggressions (Aldrich 2019). Black women principals navigating the daily harms of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, 2010), may find their working environment hostile.

In their extensive multi-published study, Levin et al. (2019) and Levin et al. (2020) did not identify the study participants by race or gender. Instead, these researchers focused on the larger general population of principals with no data to disaggregate, a historical trend in research. Aldrich (2019), however, identified Black female principals in her pilot study and offered the fact that Black females lead "the most segregated and poorly resourced schools in the country" (para. 5). By not isolating race and gender in research, researchers risked contributing to the inequity status quo. Simultaneously, the overrepresentation of dominant groups and the underrepresentation of marginalized groups are also maintained.

Murtadha and Larson (1999) wrote "principals of color, especially African American women, typically emerge as the leaders of urban schools that are under-supported and economically depleted" (p. 6). These authors went on to add, "they [women of color] are expected to establish and carry out educational agendas that clash with what they and the community see as vital to the education of African American children" (p. 6). The lack of training and the levels of experience the urban principal

needs to address the social and health issues within a school has led to more Black women principals leaving the principalship before retiring (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003).

Aldrich (2019) suggested that the five challenges in LPI's findings are not the only factors and that the environment in which they [Black female school leaders] lead contributes to their added challenges. In addition to the five factors mentioned in Levin et al. (2019), Black female principals also contend with a sixth factor, racial microaggressions, which may influence turnover. In this research, working conditions for Black women offered a different experience in the form of racial microaggressions compounded by gender bias.

Impact of Microaggressions on Black Women

The impact of microaggressions have been linked to biological and psychological stressors and other chronic health problems in the areas of mental, physical, emotional, relational, and behavioral health. The "micro" in microaggressions refers to the perpetrator—to them, it is no big deal, but to the victim, it is painful and has far reaching effects. "Microaggressions have the lifelong insidious effects of silencing, invalidating, and humiliating the identity and/or voices of those who are oppressed" (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 86).

Introduction to Microaggressions

Researcher Chester Pierce's seminal work coined the term "microaggression" as "subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce & Carew et al., 1978 p. 66). Researcher Derald Wing Sue (2010), known for deepening Pierce's work, explained racial microaggressions as "the

brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 5). Aldrich (2019) described microaggressions as "subtle acts of discrimination that occur on a daily basis" (para. 3). Since Pierce, other researchers have contributed to the expansion of how we describe microaggressions (Johnson & Johnson, 2019; Nadal et al., 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Sue et al. (2007) classified microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation as primary forms of racial microaggressions.

Jacob et al. (2022) recognized in their systematic review of literature that Black Americans first experience racism during their childhood years. There is strong research that supports that race-related and discrimination-related experiences cause biological and physiological (Dong et al., 2023; Spanierman et al. 2019), psychological (DeAngelis, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2019; Sue, 2007; Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; West, 2008), and chronic health issues in Black Americans.

Biological and Physiological Impact

Dong et al. (2023) reported that race-related discrimination begins at an early age for our Black children and that this is a critical period of time for the development of the brain-gut microbiome (BGM) system. The BGM system is the communication signal between the brain and the gut biomes in the digestive system, making it "highly responsive to stressful experiences" (para. 3). In their expanded research, Dong et al. (2023) examined the role of the BGM system in discrimination-related health issues.

These researchers found that “discrimination was associated with anxiety, depression, and visceral sensitivity. . . . [and] associated with alterations of brain networks related to emotion, cognition and self-perception, and structural and functional changes in the gut microbiome” (para. 3). More specifically, Black participants in the study had higher levels of inflammatory markers in the blood due to high levels of discrimination-related experiences. Still, compared to the other racial groups, anxiety and depression were the lowest for this group, while their resilience score was the highest. Of the 154 participants, there were only 20 Black participants, which the authors recognized as an underrepresentation. Other physiological effects of racial microaggressions are insomnia and hypertension, backache, nausea, and sleep disturbance (Hall & Fields, 2015; Spanierman et al., 2021).

Psychological Impact

When racial microaggressions occur, a Black woman may ask herself, *did that just happen, or am I being overly sensitive*? Because microaggressions are subtle, it is not immediately or at times ever obvious to a person of color or to the perpetrator that something happened (DeAngelis, 2009; Sue, 2007). However, the feeling of being insulted is real, and a decision about if and how to respond needs to be made. Does she confront the perpetrator and risk them denying it or give them the benefit of the doubt? This process happens many times over for Black women, and this uncertainty can cause stress and psychological strain resulting in her “feeling confused, anger and overall sapping of energy” (DeAngelis, 2009, para. 21). “Similar to an assault, microaggressions can produce fear, stress, and emotional harm, and may embarrass or intimidate the

victim, undermine his or her credibility, and expose vulnerabilities" (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, p. 3). In addition, "this suffering can lead to anger and depression and even lower work productivity and problem-solving capabilities" (p. 5). Sue (2010) added, "Microaggressions sap the spiritual energies of recipients, lead to low self-esteem, deplete or divert energy for adaptive functioning and problem-solving" (p. 15).

Internalization of Racial Stereotypes

Internalized racism is an unconscious view of one's own "racial features, culture, and traditions as inferior in comparison to the dominant racial group" (Roberson & Pieterse, 2021, p. 531). It is the belief that beauty is represented by Whiteness and the standard by which all groups are to attain. Research links internalized racism and self-esteem (Paradies et al., 2015; Spanierman et al., 2021; Sue & Spanierman, 2020; West, 2008). The pressures of projected stereotypes through daily interactions and the internalization of racial stereotypes can take a toll on Black women. They are constantly assessing and processing acts of racial microaggressions and choosing how to respond (Cyr et al., 2021; Sue & Spanierman, 2019). More often than not, Black women find themselves anticipating and preparing for their next encounter. Haeny et al. (2021) described how internalized racism presents itself: "When a POC racially discriminates against another POC, this is a manifestation of internalized racism . . . , which contributes to maintaining the system of racism that advantages White people and disadvantages POC" (p. 890).

Racial Battle Fatigue

For Black women, these ongoing experiences of microaggressions impact their "emotional, mental, and physical well-being . . . specifically, Black women, with some labeling this chronic stress as 'racial battle fatigue' (RBF) (Cyr et al., 2021). Racial battle fatigue was coined by William Smith in 2003. Sue et al. (2019) acknowledged racial battle fatigue in their work as a "chronic state . . . that taxes the resources of target groups" (p. 129). They discussed how these social stressors "can create a hostile and invalidating societal climate in employment, education, and health care" (p. 129). Targets of RBF find the workplace challenging and difficult to maintain top performance in their position (Sue et al., 2007). Psychological responses brought on by the stress of ongoing microaggressions and racial battle fatigue are fatigue, anxiety, irritability, hopelessness, sudden mood shift, emotional numbness, neck and shoulder pain, disturbed sleep, shock, worry, anger, disappointment, defensiveness, and fear (Goodwin, 2018; Krull & Robicheau, 2020). Untreated RBF can weaken confidence and self-worth (Goodwin, 2018; Krull & Robicheau (2020). In Krull and Robincheau's (2020) study of RBF, more than 80% of the participants experienced all but three psychological stress responses.

Research on Black Women Principals

Bloom and Erlandson (2003) referenced in their aptly titled article section "Visible Absences" the limited research focusing on Black women principals in education. I found most of our information on African American women's leadership within the "larger gender research on women in corporate, public, or educational administrative studies" (p. 343). In writing this literature review, I found that research

specific to Black women principals' lived experiences is found in more dissertation studies than academic journals. Lomotey's (2019) review found 57 studies about Black women principals published between 1993 and 2017 (see Tables 1 and 2). With the assistance of an expert librarian, I searched how many additional studies have appeared and been added to our understanding of the Black women principals' lived experiences since 2017. The task was challenging and complete works with this focus were difficult to find. It was confirmation that research on Black women principals is limited and under-researched.

Table 1

Number of Studies of Black Women Principals by Year

Publication Year	# of Studies Published
1993-1996	2
1997-2000	5
2001-2004	8
2005-2008	6
2009-2012	12
2013-2017	24
2017-2022	>2017 (Cyr et al., 2021; Aaron, 2020)
Total	57

Table 2

Where Research on Black Women Principals Appears

Studies Found	Number	Percentage
Dissertations	43	75
Journals	13	23
Book chapter	1	2
Total	57	100

Note. Studies referenced above do not include studies of "minority" principals or any assistant principals. Studies represent 24 years of research on Black women principals conducted from 1993 to 2017.

In the review, the Black woman principals' experience is shared not only from the first-person perspective, but experiences shared come by way of their impact on students, staff, and the school's culture.

While most research offers insight into the lived experiences of women principals in general, research also supported that the conditions for Black women principals versus White women principals in the workplace are different (Sue et al., 2010). Therefore, this generalization of knowledge does not offer the same depth to help us understand Black women's perspectives or their challenges with racial microaggressions. Bloom and Erlandson (2003) wrote:

> Asking questions from a White woman's view without incorporating race and class issues into the conceptual framework highlights the unwanted outcomes of such practices: (a) perpetuating the practice of intellectual and cultural exclusion by creating the appearance of acceptance in women's studies using an ethnic additive model and (b) failing to acknowledge that White women retain White

> privilege; women of color do not hold a color privilege, thereby making African American women's experiences similar in some ways to women in general but deviant from the White female norm. (p.344)

Black Woman Stereotypes

Referring to perceptions about how Black women walk, style their hair, and how they show emotions, Peffley et al. (1997, p. 31) described stereotypes as "cognitive structures that contain the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about human groups." Unfortunately, these structures usually lack truth and are "distorted beyond reality" (Green, n.d., p. 1). Since chattel slavery, stereotypes have plagued the Black woman's image, making their depiction of her a part of American culture (Motro et al., 2022). Still today, Black women feel the pressures of projected stereotypes through daily interactions and find that preparing for the anticipated experience is necessary. Stereotypes often associated with Black women are "strong Black woman" (Abrams et al., 2014; Abraham, 2014; Manke, 2019; Motro et al., 2022; Watson, 2015; Woods-Giscombe, 2010), "angry Black woman" (Watson & Hunter, 2015;), "Mammy/Aunt Jemina" (West, 2008), and Sapphire and Jezebel (Collins, 1990; Green, nd*;* West, 2008).

Strong Black Woman, AKA Super Woman

Manke's (2019) study shared five elements of the "superwoman schema": "feeling an obligation to present an image of strength, feeling an obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable, a drive to succeed despite limited resources, and feeling an obligation to help others" (para. 14). Sacrificing one's own self-care, not asking for help when needed, and the increase of mental and physical health issues are

often results of Black women internalizing this race-gendered schema (Manke, 2019; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Black women have resolved within themselves that they need to be strong to survive. However, space for Black women to express themselves freely and without consequence can often come with a price.

Angry Black Woman

To advocate and voice one's opinion as a Black woman is to risk being heard and seen as "hostile, aggressive, overbearing, illogical, ill-tempered and bitter" (UBC News, 2022; Motro et al., 2022, p. 2). As a result, Black women often find themselves faced with the decision to speak out or silence themselves to make others around them comfortable. Unfortunately, often the latter prevails, as Black women feel pressure to stifle/censor themselves to avoid perpetuating this stereotype. Being or showing anger has a different meaning, depending on race, gender, and emotional response. In the Motro et al. (2022) study the observers interpreted the emotional behaviors they witnessed as being caused by either something internal or external. Compared to other groups, Black women's expression of perceived anger is an attribute to their personality versus a reaction to something situational. "The angry Black woman stereotype was created as an extension of the sapphire stereotype during the antebellum period, which categorized Black women as inherently masculine, aggressive, and dominant" (Purks, 2021, para. 3). More on the sapphire stereotype will be shared later in this section.

Mammy/Aunt Jemimah

The mammy stereotype characterizes Black women as large-sized and dark-complexioned, with heads covered to hide their "ugly" hair, and having no sex appeal

(Green, n.d.; no author, 2018; West, 2008). Minstrel shows portrayed and reinforced how the public should see and understand her: "The devaluation of her physical features reinforced a beauty standard that valued White/light-colored skin; straight, preferably blond hair; and thinness" (West, 2008, p. 291). These features "could not be considered beautiful without the Other-Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (Collins, 2000, p. 89). The mammy is accepted by and non-threatening to Whites as a nurturer for her children and the "massa's" children (Green, n.d.).

Green (n.d.) distinguished the Aunt Jemimah stereotype from the mammy stereotype as having similar physical features, but Aunt Jemimah's duties focused on cooking for Whites and their families. The image of Aunt Jemimah became popular in the cooking and kitchen industry, which in turn, associated "African-American women with domestic work" (para. 16).

Sapphire, the "Sassy Mammy"

The depiction of Black women as "sassy mammies" dated as far back as the 1800s. Opposite the Mammy/Aunt Jemima stereotype, the Black woman's character description began trending toward "sassy, emasculating and domineering" (National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2018) and "feisty, quick-tempered mammies" (Pilgrim, 2012, para. 2). The first African American Oscar winner, Hattie McDaniel, best known for her role as Mammy, the maid in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, made her mark in radio, television, and film as a sassy maid (Shafer 2022). This "heavyset" (para. 6) actress appeared in more than 300 movies and "usually played a

"mammy" or maid who humorously catered to the whims of her White employers" (UXL Biographies, 2011, para. 2). "[S]he used her expressive face and voice to shape her characters so deftly that they often seemed stronger and wiser than the White people they served" (para. 9). McDaniel took charge of developing her character in *The Beulah Show* by "insisting that she be allowed to alter any script that she did not like, and she said she would not speak in dialect" (para. 9). She was known for flipping the script of the subservient mammy stereotype. However, it was Sapphire Stevens, a character in the all-black cast of the 1951 television show *Amos and Andy* whose performance cemented and coined this stereotype known as "sapphire." The name caught on and marked the Black woman as a "bossy, headstrong woman" (Green, n.d., para. 17), which developed into what became known as the "angry Black woman" stigma. Pilgrim (2012) wrote:

> The Sapphire Caricature is a harsh portrayal of African American women, but it is more than that; it is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen. . . . Today, the Sapphire is one of the dominant portrayals of the Black woman. (para. 1, 15)

Nene Leakes on the reality television show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Tichina Arnold's character Rochelle on the sitcom *Everybody Hates Chris*, and Jenifer Lewis who plays the grandmother in *Black-ish* are modern-day examples of the sassy sapphire stereotype.

Black women portrayed in situational comedy, reality shows, and talk shows tend to reinforce the racial stereotypes of African Americans.

Jezebel

Another negative stereotype depicting Black females is 'Jezebel.' With her light-colored complexion, this "slender Mulatto girl with long straight hair and small features . . . resembled the European ideal for beauty" (Green, n.d.). The Black woman stereotypes described in the above sections were considered nonsexual and undesirable to White males. On the other hand, Jezebel was considered "a hypersexual flirt and seductress" (West, 2008), "unable to control sexual desires" (Collins, 1990), who held White men blameless for the rape and sexual abuse of African-American women. In films, the Jezebel character shows up as a prostitute or Jezebel whore, using her body to influence men to get what she wants. Two examples are Pam Grier's leading role in the movie *Foxy Brown* and Lela Rochon's character Sunshine in *Harlem Nights*. Though Foxy Brown was not a prostitute per se, she did use her sex appeal as a means to get the bad guy. In addition, writer, director, and producer Spike Lee's movie and television series, "*She's Gotta Have It,"* portrayed his main Jezebel character, Nola Darling, as a freak having several love interests. Rap videos today are modern-day examples of Jezebels "jiggling and gyrating . . . scantily clad bodies . . . draped over expensive cars or fondled by male rappers" (West, 2008, p. 294). Other Jezebel characters to note are Lena Horne in *Cabin in the Sky* and Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* and *Porgy & Bess*.

We need to understand that these living stereotypes are what Black women leaders contend with in their role as principals. Throughout history, others have defined the Black woman even to her (Collins, 2000). Constructed to define who she is, each stereotype, in its way, is used to distort the identity of Black women leaders. They

stigmatize this marginalized group, and Black women leaders internalized these stereotypical images, promoting the need for Black women's personal and professional self-definition (Collins). Collins discussed self-definitions of Black womanhood as a way Black women collectively "resisted the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported" (p. 10). In the coping mechanism section of this review, I shared how Black women have sustained themselves in their role as principals while enduring these Black women stereotypes.

Microaggressions and Black Women Principals

With almost 80% of our nation's public-school teachers being White (NCES, September 2020), the principalship brings about unique challenges for our Black women leaders. Most Black women in leadership lead a predominantly White staff who may find it challenging or may "never comfortably accept an African American as their supervisor" (Cook, 2014, para. 27). According to the 2017-2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey results (NCES, May 2020), 78% of principalships continue to be held by White men and White women, keeping leadership predominantly White. This is a 4% decrease from 1999-2000, while Black men and Black women public-school principals maintain at 11% with no change across the two school years. That same period saw a 4% increase in Hispanic men and Hispanic women principals.

Many stressors come with being a school principal, but when you add the intersectionality of gender and race, the stress has a different effect (Sogunro, 2012). Being Black and a woman has become a target for racial microaggressions.

Intellectual Inferiority

Intellectual inferiority speaks to the stereotypical belief that one group is not as intelligent as another group because of their race. Spanierman et al.'s (2021) empirical study reviewed literature on racial microaggressions and found that reinforced intellectual inferiority experienced by Black Americans have been written by several researchers. They acknowledged that there are stereotypes that involved intelligence of Black Americans and that the theme *ascription of intellectual inferiority* (Hall & Fields, 2015; Holder et al., 2015) clearly stood out in these studies.

Hall and Field (2015) described an *iconic account* in which a Black female corporate leader shared her experienced microaggressions in the workplace. White staff made statements in shock when the fact that she graduated from an Ivy League university was made known.

The Myth of Meritocracy

The idea of American meritocracy has been long standing and presented social and economic success as something that is earned regardless of who you are. Meritocracy, according to Jackson (2021) involves "an elite group of people whose progress is based on ability and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth . . . [in] a system in which such persons are rewarded and advanced" (para. 2). This idea of meritocracy is flawed in that it assumes that the life we have is what we deserve. It implies that everyone has the same opportunities and choices to gain a good life in America. This may be White America's belief, but Black Americans are not convinced this pertains to them in the same ways (Ajunwa, 2021; Jackson, 2021) because of their

experience (Cook, 2014). The idea failed to acknowledge White people and their privilege as the elite group and that its definition is a contradiction. Derrick Bell wrote the following about the myth of merit: “We live in a system that espouses merit, equality, and a level playing field, but exalts those with wealth, power, and celebrity, however gained” (Jackson, 2021, p. 3).

A Black woman administrator of a predominantly White University shared in Cook’s (2014) study that she believed in meritocracy. She had a good education, worked hard, and she obtained a high position in administration. It was when she made a hiring decision that was “dismissed out of hand by someone whose power and privilege came from being a White man” (para. 34) that the reality of meritocracy and how it works for Black women was revealed.

How Black Women Cope

How Black women, in general, navigate and cope with racial microaggressions in the workplace involves their use of various adaptive and protective mechanisms unique to them (Burton et al., 2020; Holder et al., 2015). In their 26-study systematic literature review of Black people’s coping mechanisms, Jacob et al. (2022) stated that the stress brought on by racism “requires a unique approach to coping” (p. 2) and described “racism-specific coping mechanisms” (p. 3). Victims of the daily experiences of microaggressions must decide how they will navigate and cope with each assault. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). These researchers further

explained that coping involves intentional strategies to address race-related stressors, whether or not the outcome is successful. Everett et al. (2010) offered another definition, stating that "Coping is what an individual thinks and does in a situation to avoid, lessen, or ameliorate the impact of a stressor" (p. 31).

Coping options may include efforts to "seek social support, rely on spirituality, armor themselves, reinterpret events, withdraw, self-affirm, or confront the perpetrator" (Cyr et al., 2021, p. 68). Though Holder et al. (2015) discussed coping strategies for Black women in corporate leadership roles, parallels exist between the experiences of Black women in general and Black women principals. Among the coping mechanisms chosen, Black women "included religion and spirituality, armoring, shifting, support networks, sponsorship and mentorship, and self-care" (Holder et al., p. 164).

Religion and Spirituality

Holder et al. (2015) and Hall et al. (2011) revealed religion and spirituality as the most shared coping mechanisms amongst the participants in their studies. Prayer, like meditation, is an emotion-focused coping response to managing stress (Raypole, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Using prayer and meditation, Black women experience "a sense of empowerment, protection, making sense of things, feeling grounded, forgiving perpetrators, and . . . a reminder that racial microaggressions and other matters in the workplace are trivial compared with other issues in life" (Holder et al., p. 173). Similar to Hall et al., Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) study supported the importance of prayer and spirituality to the process of Black women coping and relieving stress. Respondents

reported that they "rely heavily on prayer and church attendance to manage and cope with stress" (p. 219; Everett et al., 2010, p. 39; Gary et al., 2015).

Armoring

Another protective mechanism Black women leaders use to cope with racial microaggressions in the workplace is *armoring* (Bell & Nkomo, 1998). Black women armor themselves by focusing inward on their strength, self-worth, and respect for family and culture. The 10 Black women participants in the Holder et al. (2015) study shared that having pride in these characteristics helped them navigate corporate America. Each of the participants in Bloom and Erlandson's (2003) study had a strong sense of self and "a cultural understanding of her own personal history" (p. 363), which helped these educational leaders put experiences happening in their school community in perspective.

Shifting

The term *shifting* is used to identify a coping strategy Black women use that ranges from changing their speech pattern and mindset to how they dress. In their study on shifting, Hall et al. (2012) highlighted Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) description of shifting as a *coping mechanism* used by Black women throughout their daily life that involves "speaking the King's English and not using colloquialisms and slang" (p. 216). However, the authors continued with "shifting is an internal process—a chipping away of the Black woman's sense of self, wholeness, and centeredness" (p. 216). This strategic response is commonly used to challenge the myth of inferiority and other stereotypes of Black women in the workplace (Dickens, 2019). Jones & Shorter-Gooden (2003) provided details of shifting behavior:

> African American women change the way they think of things or expectations they have for themselves. Or they alter their outer appearance. They modify their speech. They shift in one direction at work each morning, then in another at home each night. They adjust the way they act in one context after another. . . . They deny their sadness and loneliness. They shift inward. (p. 61)

Black women also limit how much personal information they share to keep their professional and personal lives separate (Holder et al., 2015). As such, they find themselves living a double life.

Social Support

The literature indicated that Black women are resilient. However, when addressing and coping with the daily transgressions of racial microaggressions, one common theme among studies on coping strategies is that Black women "consistently seek support from people with similar racial and gendered identities" (Davis, 2019, p. 134; Jacob et al., 2022).

For the Black women respondents in Hall et al.'s (2012) study, "Spirituality was a central form of social support" (p. 220), and the church is a community of supporters where values and religious beliefs are shared. "Church members perform functional, instrumental, and emotional support by providing guidance and advice, relaxing with or sharing recreational activities, and/or providing financial support, transportation, or assistance with childcare responsibilities" (p. 220).

In Davis' (2019) study of "supportive communication" and its process within networks of Black women, we found that similar to mentor/mentee relationships, Black

women forming a network of other Black women, otherwise known as a sistah circle, is critical to creating a safe space for Black women to seek and provide support. Hall et al. (2011) referred to this coping support as having *sister friends*. The sistah circle is a support space "reserved for Black women to escape the exclusionary practices of the dominant social world and retreat to a localized environment where they can relax, gain strength, and empower themselves" (p. 135). Davis added, "Black women confidants have the cultural capital to provide the type and amount of support that will temper the outcomes of stress" (p. 135). In turn, having a safe space to discuss racial microaggressions and hear their own experiences offered many a "sanity check" (p. 136). Networking provided a space where Black women accessed resources and designed a plan of action to address, in this case, racial microaggressions. (Holder et al., 2015).

Davis (2019) identified the *Individual Orientation Phase* and *Collective Orientation Phase* in her study as two stages that make up "the process of supportive communication about racial microaggressions among groups of Black women" (p. 140). These two phases described how the group members engage and identify their roles. The individual orientation phase focuses on the needs of the individual seeking support after experiencing a microaggression. Davis referred to the individual as a "support seeker" and the group as a "support provider" (p. 135). The support seeker shares their experience and then has the opportunity to clarify the type of support they were seeking from the group. For example, "[W]hat should I do . . . I just need to vent" (p. 141). Next was a shift from an individual focus to a collective focus in which the

discussion about microaggression among Black women became an issue for all group members.

Sponsorship and Mentoring

"Research shows Black women often have fewer opportunities to join traditional professional networks and access their resources" (Aldrich, 2019, para. 10). Therefore, Black women having access to other Black women leaders in sponsorship and mentoring is critical to their success (Holder et al., 2015). Holder et al. shared that those participants who experienced mentorships felt a level of empowerment and validation, which in turn grew their confidence when navigating racial microaggressions in the workplace. Black women who participated in "support systems become mentors and serve as life coaches and confidants for Black women" (Hall et al., 2011, para. 52).

Self-Care

Participants in the Everett et al. (2010) study stated that they knew the physical and mental consequences of stress, yet their experiences affirmed the researchers' understanding that "African Americas rarely seek mental health services" (p. 40). Therapy is not the first-choice Black women make for coping with the stressors of racial microaggressions; in fact, according to Holder et al. (2015), it is their last choice. In that study, the top self-care choices Black women made to relieve stress brought on by racial microaggressions in the workplace were vacationing, family time, and exercise (p. 174). However, respondents in the Hall et al. (2012) study listed "working out; getting massages; taking a long, warm, soapy bath with burning candles; walking; writing;

consciously breathing; and/or watching funny movies" (p. 219) for their self-care practices.

Positive Thinking

Another emotion-focused coping technique in the Raypole (2020) study is *positive thinking*, defined as using your internal voice to focus on positive thoughts. With this, you take a negative situation, challenge, or condition and find the positives while refraining from taking it too seriously. Having control over emotions can make it easier to manage challenging situations due to having a more positive sense of self. Some examples of positive thinking are: "building yourself up with positive self-talk instead of talking down to yourself; recognizing your successes instead of focusing on 'failures'; laughing off mistakes and; reminding yourself you can always try again" (para. 24). Findings in the Lloyd et al. (2021) study supported the notion that there is a "direct psychological benefit of coping with racial discrimination through positive thinking" (p. 82).

Physical Exercise

Physical exercise is considered an emotion-focused coping technique. Several studies (Everett et al., 2010; Jacob et al., 2022) mentioned working out, going to the gym, or going for a walk as activities used in combination with other coping strategies Black women participants use to relieve daily stressors. Though important, physical exercise is not a coping strategy used frequently by Black women.

Black Women Principals' Coping Mechanisms

The NCES (2020) reports that White men and White women still occupy 78% of principal positions, maintaining predominantly White leadership. This marks a 4% decline since 1999-2000. Meanwhile, Black men and Black women continue to represent 11% of public-school principals, showing no change over the two school years.

While Holder et al. (2015) studied Black women in corporate America, Bloom and Erlandson studied Black women school leaders. Each of the educational leader participants in Bloom & Erlandson (2003) had a strong sense of self and "a cultural understanding of her own personal history" (p.363), which helped these educational leaders put what was happening in their school community in perspective. When comparing the literature on Black women in general with Black women principals experiencing gendered racial microaggressions, findings in Burton et al. (2020) shared similarities, differences, and crossover of coping strategies found in Holder et al. Burton et al. noted that the same types of strategies used by the 10 Black school leaders in their study were also similar to Holder et al. These Black women principals used a*daptive* and *maladaptive* strategies to help them navigate and deal with gendered racism (see table 3). Burton et al. referred to the following lists of adaptive and maladaptive strategies used by participants as "*more affirming"* and "*less affirming,"* respectively. Faith, collective support, advocacy, student advocacy, and solution focus were considered adaptive strategies. Burton et al. categorized these as "more affirming strategies . . . to confront, manage, and problem-solve around their experiences of gendered racism" (p. 7). The authors added maladaptive strategies, known as "less affirming strategies," used for avoidance and denial, buffering and boundaries, and leaving. These strategies allow

Black women school leaders to choose whether to engage or confront the microaggressions they experienced. This approach can empower Black women principals, but how long can one endure this treatment and remain effective in their position? Burton et al. termed these strategies less affirming because they can be as detrimental as they are empowering. Table 3 describes the approach used by the participants.

Table 3

Adaptive vs Maladaptive Strategies

Adaptive "More Affirming" Strategies	**Manage Approach**
Faith	Considers her work a purpose or "calling"
Collective Support	Uses networking: personal and professional relationships that are supportive, connecting with other Black women principals
Advocacy	Focuses on supporting stakeholders and school community
Student Advocacy	Focuses on her impact on students and their success
Solution Focus	Utilizes problem-solving
Maladaptive "Less Affirming" Strategies	**Avoidance Approach**
Avoidance and Denial	Focuses less on gendered racial microaggressions and more on their work as leaders
Buffering and Boundaries	Prepares herself psychologically against anticipated gendered racism in between attacks. Decides which racial microaggressions to address and when
Leaving	Resigns from the position when gendered racial microaggressions are no longer avoidable or tolerable (if it is an option).

Note: Adapted from Burton et al. (2020)

Theoretical Framework

I explored this research through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist theory. The data was interpreted through the two CRT tenets intersectionality and the voice of color, along with the framework of the Black feminist theory. This research used the *intersectionality* of race and gender because the participants in this

study were either currently serving or retired Black women principals. Empowering the voices, perspectives, and experiences of an oppressed group of people, namely Black women principals, to understand their experiences better, what has helped them cope and sustain themselves in this work, and what specific supports are needed with intentionality for groups of leaders to follow. The CRT tenet the unique voice of color focused on lifting the voices of long-serving Black women principals to hear firsthand the racial-based challenges they experienced and the coping mechanisms they found to be successful for them. Both tenets helped explore the impacts and outcomes of the intersectionality of race and gender on these participants. This research was an effort to validate and give power to voices that have been traditionally oppressed.

The Black feminist theoretical framework focused on the life challenges and the impact these challenges have on Black women unique to them and separate from the larger population of women. Through this framework, Black women's voices were lifted to join the body of knowledge in education and health. Like CRT, analyzing this research through Black feminist theory narrowed a focus on the Black women in principalship I studied to capture their unique stories. It was essential to address the need to support Black female principals by gaining knowledge of their experiences. This understanding, in turn, could guide the types and levels of support and best practices that can assist future Black women principals in sustaining a healthy leadership journey physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to understand microaggressions, their effects on Black women, and how Black women principals manage the harms caused by microaggressions through chosen coping mechanisms. This review described literature about the current reality of the principalship, which included changes in the principalship role and accountability over time, principal turnover, and why Black women principals leave. The second section on the impact of microaggressions on Black women included an introduction to microaggressions, biological and physiological impact, psychological impact, internalization of racial stereotypes, and racial battle fatigue. The third section on Black women principals discussed Black women stereotypes such as the strong Black woman-aka superwoman and the following section presented studies—which were scant—that specifically addressed how Black women principals experienced microaggressions. The review of the coping mechanisms literature uncovered adaptive and maladaptive strategies related to religion and spirituality, shifting, social support, sponsorship and mentoring, self-care, positive thinking, and physical exercise.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study used the descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Black women principals with racial microaggressions and understand what coping mechanisms they used to sustain them in their role as principals. In the descriptive phenomenological approach, which Edmund Husserl founded, the researcher's "preconceived opinions [are] set aside or bracketed" (Reiners, 2012, p. 1). As I stated in my role as the researcher discussed in Chapter I, it was important that I remained neutral and take their words at face value and introduce any of my interpretations or biases when analyzing data collected from these Black women principals. These participants served in a principal position for 10+ years. Creswell (2018) described the phenomenological approach and considerations as follows:

- Research explores a phenomenon which, in this case, is "coping with microaggressions."
- The Group Size can vary from 3 to 4 individuals to 10-15 who have experienced the phenomenon being explored. In this study, current and retired Black women principals were invited to participate.
- The discussion focuses on lived experiences. Participants were asked about their experience with racial microaggressions as a Black woman principal, the effects of racial microaggressions, and strategies used to cope with racial microaggressions.

- Apart from serving 10 years as a principal, this researcher fits the remaining criteria of the participants in this study. In this case, Creswell suggests that the researcher disclose their lived experience in a phenomenological reflection to set their experience apart to focus on what is shared by the participants. The phenomenological reflection of my lived experience with the phenomenon is included in the section, Role of the Researcher in chapter 1.
- Data collection methods chosen for this study will include a semi-structured focus group interview with participants. The session will be audiotaped and videotaped with the participants' permission. In Zoom, participants were videotaped as they responded to interview questions.
- Phenomenological data analysis will involve reviewing statements in the interview transcription and highlighting sentences and quotes that help to make meaning of this phenomenon and the participants' lived experiences, how they coped with microaggressions, and in turn, pull out themes (horizontalization). I reviewed the transcript and took note of any statements or quotes that were relevant to understanding the phenomenon being studied, such as how participants cope with microaggressions. I highlighted sentences and quotes that directly addressed the research questions related to coping with microaggressions and lived experiences. I then looked for patterns or common themes across the responses of different participants that related to specific coping strategies, emotional responses, or perceptions of microaggressions. The highlighted sentences and quotes were organized into groups based on their similarity or

shared meaning. Overarching themes that emerge from the participants' experiences were then identified. After identifying themes, I interpreted their significance within the context of the research questions and participants' experiences.

- Lastly, capture the essence of this phenomenon by writing a description of what was experienced.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment began by contacting the researcher's network of Black women school principals. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional Black females who were retired or currently active in their roles as principals. For this study's purposive sampling, each participant fit the criteria of being Black, female, and have held their principalship for at least 10 years in school districts in the Midwest.

Data Collection

The data collection methods chosen for this study included a semi-structured focus group interview. The session was audiotaped and videotaped with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim.

Overarching Research Questions and Focus

This section contains the broad research question that guided the overall direction of the study and specific focus areas that were examined in detail throughout the research process.

Research question: How Do Long-Serving Black Women Principals Cope with Microaggressions?

1. What are Black women principals' lived experiences with racial microaggressions?
2. What impact do racial microaggressions have on Black women principals?
    a) Personally (mental health/overall health)?
    b) Professionally?
3. What coping strategies do Black women principals use in response to racial microaggressions?
4. What do Black women principals need to maintain sustainability in their role as principals?

Current and Retired Black Women Principal Group Questions

I wanted to know the participants' lived experiences with racial microaggressions as a Black woman in their role as principal. As I asked these 12 questions, I asked them to keep in mind their race and gender as they responded. The numbers and letters in the parentheses correlate to the four overarching questions and focus of this study.

1. As a Black woman principal, describe your experience leading a predominantly White staff and the school's culture. (1, 2a, 2b, 3, 4)
2. As a Black woman principal, how would you describe the types of responses and or reactions you received from staff, families, and senior leadership towards your leadership? (1, 2a, 2b, 3, 4)
3. As a Black woman principal, what problems or challenges did you experience because of your race and/or gender personally? Professionally? (1, 2a, 2b, 3, 4)

4. In your role as a Black woman principal, did you ever experience any of the following: microaggressions, macroaggressions, implicit or explicit biases? If so, name the type of experience(s) you faced and share examples. (1, 2a, 2b)
5. As a Black woman principal, how did the experiences you shared in the previous question impact you personally? Professionally? (1, 2a, 2b)
6. Was there ever a time you needed to do something to help you cope in your role as a Black woman principal? (3, 4)
    1. If so, what was that "something" and what did you do or use to cope? (3,4)
    2. Did what you initially used to cope change over time? If so, how? (2a, 2b, 3, 4)
7. Were there coping mechanisms that served you best to sustain you in your role as principal? If so, what were they? (3, 4)
    1. What were the advantages and or disadvantages of the coping strategy used? (4)
8. Did you ever resolve the problems or challenges you mentioned specifically to you as a Black woman principal? If so, how? If not, which problems or challenges did not get resolved? (1, 2a, 2b, 3)
9. As a Black woman principal, how similar or different were your leadership experiences to your White female counterparts? (1, 2a, 2b, 3)
10. Was there ever a time you wanted to quit? Please share. (1, 2a, 2b)
11. As a Black woman principal, to what would you attribute your ability to serve as long as you did as principal? **(**3**,** 4)

12. As a currently serving or retired Black woman principal, and looking back at your years of principalship, what advice would you give a Black woman principal today to help her cope and sustain her role as principal? **(**3**,** 4**)**

Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, I analyzed my data through a process of uncovering themes and discussing them through a theoretical lens that led to a rich description of the phenomenon I studied. The transcribed focus-group interview was analyzed for emergent themes. Creswell (2018) stated, "Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data . . . for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes" (p. 183). I followed Tesch's eight-step coding process (Creswell, 2014), which began with reading through the raw data (transcript of the focus group interview) and writing down ideas in the margin as they came up. "Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks . . . writing a word representing a category in the margins" (Creswell, 2014, p. 198). I coded the data by hand to cluster topics as I reread the material for salient points and recurring thoughts. I created categories to place the clustered topics and analyzed the material. Lastly, I identified and interpreted themes using the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory's voices of color tenet and Black feminist theory.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To mitigate the influence of my role as the researcher, who is also Black, female, and a principal, I used the coding process of bracketing to single out and memo personal experiences as suggested for '*researcher reflexivity'* (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The

memoing method happened throughout the analysis phase. This allowed me to self-reflect and examine my preconceptions freely to ensure I was cognitively and emotionally aware of my personal and professional biases (Tufford & Newman, 2012). "Bracketing approaches of memoing . . . is the researcher's commitment to surfacing . . . preconceptions both before and during the research process; and to maintaining the process as a priority that is fundamental to effective and meaningful qualitative research" (p. 86).

Each participant's participation in this study was voluntary and they had the option to end their participation at any time. By ensuring that participation in the study was voluntary, participants were more likely to provide honest and genuine responses, which enhanced the credibility of the findings. They were allowed to ask questions about any parts of the study (i.e., interview, data collection, and sharing of the findings) before and after the interview. Participants chose a pseudonym to protect their identity as retired or current principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus group was asked to respond to semi-open-ended questions and the interview was video recorded in Zoom and then transcribed verbatim. The transcription was reviewed and updated to include each participant's matching nonverbal cues to their verbal responses. Using semi-open-ended questions, video recording interviews, and transcribing them verbatim ensured the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, which was essential for establishing credibility. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended highlighting "significant statements" in the data, which Moustakas (1994) referred to as *horizontalization*. The highlighted quotes and sentences were reviewed to help make meaning of this phenomenon and the

participants' lived experiences which lead to generating themes. The themes and quotes were used to write a textural description and a structural description. They described what participants experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon in context respectively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then captured and presented the essence of this phenomenon by writing a description of what was experienced and revealed. My use of "a rich, thick description to convey findings . . . transport readers . . . and give the discussion an element of shared experiences . . . and add validity of the findings" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). My presentation of "*negative* or *discrepant information* that runs counter to the themes" (p. 202) and evidence supporting them increased credibility.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This phenomenological study aimed to understand long-serving Black female principals' lived experience with racial microaggressions and the coping strategies they used to sustain them in their positions. More specifically, how the intersectionality of being Black and female impacts these experiences professionally as K-12 leaders and in their personal lives. Participants in this study comprised six retired Black females who held K-12 principal positions for at least 10 years. Any years of service as assistant principal were omitted. Participants served at different public-school levels in various districts in the Midwest and had a combined 156 years of principal leadership experience among them. The 10-year minimum of service was to gain a deeper understanding through richer, more detailed descriptions of lived experiences that could only come from those with a longer career as a principal. Table 4 shows the years each participant served as principal.

Table 4

Participant Summary Data

Participant #	Pseudonym	Years in the Principalship	School Levels Served
P1	Rose	14	Elementary K-5
P2	Mary	16	High School (9-12)
P3	Sally	25	High School (9-12)
P4	Shuggie	25	Elementary K-5
P5	Mildred	31	High School (9-12)
P6	Florence	45	Elementary, Middle (K-8)

What makes these six participants unique is that their paths have, at one time or another, crossed professionally and personally over the years. They only knew the others were participating in this study once they joined the Zoom room for the scheduled focus group interview. As individual participants entered the Zoom room, gasps, wide eyes in surprise, laughter, and greetings of familiarity welcomed them into the space. They were comfortable and ready to engage, making the phenomenological focus interview approach the best choice for this qualitative study. Reviewing and analyzing data for recurring themes was exacting. The collected data was reviewed and analyzed using Tesch's eight-step coding process and helped address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are Black women principals' lived experiences with racial microaggressions?

RQ2: What impact do racial microaggressions have on Black women principals?

a) Personally?

b) Professionally?

RQ3: What coping strategies do Black women principals use in response to racial microaggressions?

RQ4: What do Black women principals need to maintain sustainability as principals?

The theoretical framework of the voices of color tenet of critical race theory and Black feminist theory helped to interpret themes.

With their race and gender in mind, participants responded to questions focused on answering the overarching research question: How do long-serving Black female principals cope with microaggressions? To best understand the need for coping, each participant described how they obtained their first principalship, the school community's demographics, and that they were the only person of color on staff. Five of the six participants reported they were either the first principal of color or the first Black female principal at their school. According to the participants, the challenges of leading a predominantly White staff came from resistance, silent sabotage, challenging their decisions, and perceived overt racism. The experiences participants shared were uninhibited and transported us back to when the events happened. Collectively, their journeys revealed direct and indirect acts of harm, resistance, health issues, and challenges to their leadership. Five out of six participants attributed the above behaviors primarily to being Black and female, where former high school principal Mildred said that being female as much as being Black amongst a primarily male staff was her

challenge. They spoke candidly about the importance of the right-fit superintendent and the inconsistency of district support, if any.

Each participant's descriptions included the experience as it happened then and reflection on the internal impact it made on them. They retold it in disbelief, as if they still could not believe those exchanges had happened. Conversations welcomed commentary amongst the group. They were not shy in voicing connections to each other's experiences. In our two hours together, we had created our own Sistah Circle.

Ensuring the participants' confidentiality was important. Before starting the video recording, each participant renamed their Zoom screen with their pseudonym and the years they served as principal. For consistency, their pseudonyms were used throughout the interview and in the reported data collection. Because the participants were familiar with each other, their willingness to share and interact during the interview made the conversation rich, lively, and engaging.

Participants

The following sections introduce each of the six retired Black female principal participants and provide information about their school community. Hearing lived experiences as only they can tell and directly through their voices added depth to understanding who they are and who they have had to be as leaders. Who they were together in this focus group made for a rich exchange and dynamic conversation. Here begins their stories.

Participant 1: Rose

Rose led as an elementary principal for 14 years and served in two Midwest school districts. In the first school district, she was the first Black female principal ever hired and the district's first elementary principal of color. Rose was also the only person of color in her building. She described the school's family community as being very educated. Families were in school working on professional degrees in law and medicine. Her challenges were with some staff, and she recalled one of her first interactions with a White male teacher:

> I remember a White male teacher coming to me because I had told everybody this is what we need to do, [as] this is coming from the district office. . . . He comes into my office and says, 'Are you on a power trip or something?' And, I'm thinking to myself, if I was a White male, he would not have said that.

The second district Rose worked in was a neighboring district where, once again, she was its first Black female principal. She similarly experienced microaggressions from staff challenging her leadership decisions, but now added challenges came from the families. Rose described this family community as having a robust Jewish population, including many doctors and attorneys. Moreover, the district was the first to work with the Pacific Educational Group and consultant Glenn Singleton. His work introduces strategies and protocols that invite, engage, and sustain courageous conversations about race among educational leaders and educators. They include The Four Agreements, The Six Conditions, and The Compass. The superintendent at the time recruited Rose from her previous district to join their principal team to be a part of this work as a Black female principal. The school had been functioning as a private school before her arrival.

She described the school's first Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting, where a White father publicly displayed blatant disrespect toward her. "I remember one of the White dads standing up and saying, 'You don't get it, lady.' In mid-share, Rose pointed out the microaggression of him not addressing her as principal or by her name but instead calling her "lady." "You don't get it. We're our own private entity, and you're gonna run it like that." She recalled trying to speak and share how she believed in public school and that it was her job to run it as a public school. He got up and walked out.

Participant 2: Mary

Mary retired from the principalship after 25 years of service between two Midwest school districts. Below, she described the demographics of her first teaching staff and first impressions of the building's culture:

> I had an all-White female staff, average age around 45 years old, who had been teaching there all of their teaching career. [T]heir bulletin boards look like they did 20 years ago with most of the students not looking like the students who were coming into the school.

Mary began addressing the issues and made changes to support all students. "They accused me of reverse racism." There was a lot of resistance from the staff, but she tapped into staff who also wanted to see changes made. Working with willing staff made a difference during the six years she was there, but because there was little to no district support, she returned to the district she worked in previously, where having the support made a world of difference for her.

Participant 3: Sally

Sally served as principal in specialized services in non-traditional and traditional high schools. She was the traditional high school's first Black female principal. Fifteen years before her principalship in the traditional high school, she had been the school's assistant principal. Sally shared what she discovered upon her return: "When I arrived and realized that nothing had changed in the fifteen years that I had been there I knew that . . . I had no time to waste. It was a sense of urgency." She recalled that the students of color population was 5% when she last worked at the school 15 years earlier. The school now had 34% of students of color, but the composition of the staff had not changed. It was still the same staff that were there 15, 20 years. It was the only school that they had actually ever taught. Sally shared how many of the staff saw their relationship with the school and that for them it was "The Liberty High (pseudonym) way or no way."

Sally made it clear that her belief in terms of education is that all children deserve a quality education. She spared no filter for tone as she shared her experience with microaggressions while leading a teaching staff of predominantly White women. White women were her challenge. Microaggressions were happening and pointed out, but when looked at, in the end, it was said they were unaware of what they had said or done. Microaggressions then became, in her opinion, "extremely blatant . . . and so overt that they felt entitled that they could do that." Sally told of her bold leadership move of having 40 staff removed in the six years of her principalship to detoxify the environment in this high school.

Sally also spoke to the district's failure of students by allowing the acts of harm to continue and not directly addressing the adult behaviors with accountability.

Participant 4: Shuggie

Shuggie led as an elementary principal in the same Midwest district for 25 years.

> I was interviewed and hired, so I had assumed that I would have been wanted at the position. . . . No Black staff whatsoever except for myself. The staff did not know what they were getting, so when I walked in the door, it was completely shocked.

She described the racial makeup of her first family community as White, lower-middle class, and a growing population of Hmong families. There were only two Black families.

From the start, three staff decided Shuggie needed to go. She recounted asking the district not to place her there, but their response left her in the position to work it through, and she did manage to do so with key staff. Eventually, her leadership moves led to the removal of those three staff, two in the first year and the third one by the third year. Unlike Rose, Shuggie reported that she did not experience many microaggressions from her school parents only because "Black was better than being Hmong." Hmong families were the target of racial microaggressions. White families were "unbelievably racist." As a Black female principal, this was a positive for her, but her fight for this population was challenging. "I had to fight for them as I would for any other Black family."

Shuggie's second experience as principal was quite different. She attributed her more positive leadership experience to hiring her own staff from the ground up. The staff

makeup in that school was 75% teachers of color and 25% White. She added, “Staff did not have a problem in my next building.”

Participant 5: Mildred

Mildred’s first assignment was to a program housed in a building with two other programs led by Black principals. This experience differed from that of the other five participants in that this was an instant opportunity for networking and support among the three Black principals. She later found herself assigned to different high schools in a district where she served for 31 years as principal. Mildred’s experience as a high school principal was again unique in that the microaggressions she endured were gender-based as much as they were race-based. The staff was predominantly male, and they challenged her ability to lead, direct staff, and handle discipline at the high school level.

She thought she needed to prove that as a Black woman, she was “educated and capable, and would do what was needed to make the school one where everybody who came there felt like they belonged.” Mildred recalled staff saying they would see how she worked out. Towards the end of the school year, a couple of male teachers approached her in passing and told her she had passed the test.

Participant 6: Florence

In her first assignment, Florence, who started as the district’s second Black female elementary principal, simultaneously served two schools. She started her 45-year career in 1965, making her the longest-reigning Black female principal of the participants. Florence attributed much of her leadership support to having strong parent allies from the community who showed up on her behalf and attended board meetings. From her

perspective, the difference between leading in the 1960s and leading today was that community support in the 60s was more robust, and the few administrators of color and teachers banded together. Today, in her opinion, community is what we lack. However, she believed things can change if principals speak up and speak out.

Of the six participants in this study, Florence is the only principal with a doctorate. When responding to the interview questions, her position used an advisory approach. She had many years of experience skillfully and expertly navigating the complexities and nuances associated with the concept of Whiteness and learned much about the crucial importance of nurturing connections and relationships within the community. Florence's unwavering dedication to this study was remarkable. She approached it seriously, sharing a wealth of wisdom and invaluable insights with me.

Theme Development

Participants referencing and sharing their firsthand accounts of lived experiences with microaggressions was powerful. In honoring and respecting their voices, their exact words were captured and made part of the *In Vivo* data coding process. The focus group interview transcript was read through repeatedly to identify codes that were expected, surprising, and presented as outliers. Sixteen codes were identified and reduced, and the following five themes emerged, each discussed in this section.

Theme 1: Challengers: From Microaggressions to Straight-Up Racism

Theme 2: It Takes a Toll

Theme 3: It Was Always About Them - All of Them

Theme 4: How I Got Over

Theme 5: Intentional and Consistent Support

Theme 1: Challengers: From Microaggressions to Straight-Up Racism

Participants shared experiences of racial microaggressions that occurred regularly during their principalship. The types of interactions they recalled ranged from subtle to overt, and these exchanges happened with staff and families and often about students of color. The six participants in this study reported that their assignments were at schools where they were the only people of color on staff. They each could recall being met with microaggressions early on during the first few initial interactions with White staff and White families. In one participant's case, she recollected an exchange between her and a White 6th-grade student who passed on the message that she didn't have to listen to her because her Dad said, black people are bad people, and she was not going to listen to her.

White School Staff

Before Sally took her position as principal at the high school, the assistant superintendent introduced her to her new staff that spring. Sally described that first meeting as follows:

> [I]n my very first meeting with the high school that I retired from and being introduced by one of the assistant superintendents as the new principal of this school, I was floored by a comment that was made by one of the staff. 'Well, we hope that you're not coming here with the four-letter words, data and race.' I mean, blown away. My response [was], if you don't want to talk about data or race, then tell me how you're going to show up every single day in front of your

> students. And that was the mantra with which I felt like I had to live within those five and a half years. (Sally)

Rose shared this story as an example of microaggression and pointed out while sharing that this was "very overt." Rose continued,

> I'd say half the staff was very supportive of me, and then there were . . . about a fourth of the staff that did sneaky things behind my back. You know, where I say, this is what we're doing, and they'd go and do something else and act like they never heard me.

Mildred encountered gender microaggressions as a principal working with a predominantly White male staff as much as she experienced racial microaggressions. She concluded they did not think a female could "direct staff" or "handle discipline."

Sally stated, "White women have been my challenge." She often heard that staff were looking for a leader and wanted that leadership but realized that they didn't really want to be led. She continued:

> That was a real challenge—what they said and what their actions showed. And I think it was certainly difficult particularly . . . for White women to feel that they had to acquiesce sometimes, or certainly that the person in leadership was a Black woman. There are times where you are very autonomous, and you make independent decisions. And then your job is to articulate why you made the decision. The challenges [are with] the receptivity . . . [I think they are] oftentimes feeling as though the only way to respond to her [Black female principal] is to sabotage her role as leader.

Sally talked about how the microaggressions targeted the students being served but were directed at her, specifically when speaking about Black and Brown students. Recognizing that just enough is not good enough for the students, she wanted to upset the status quo. However, the mindset of White female staff was a concern when it came to understanding Black and Brown students. The questions the staff directed to her were concerning, especially knowing that they were the ones working with Black and Brown students. Sally said they asked questions like the following and everything in between: "Why do you care so much for these young people?" "You know they've put themselves in this position." Or, "Their parents are the reason for why . . ." "You know they are not engaged or connected to school."

As participants shared these and other experiences, it was more apparent to them that what they were describing seemed more like acts of macroaggressions or straight-up racism than microaggressions. Sally believed strongly that White staff in her building used the excuse of being unaware of their actions or words to justify their blatant racism.

White Families

Each participant had a different relationship with their family community. Some were positive, and some were not. As noted in an earlier section, Shuggie's family community had only two Black families and a growing number of Hmong families enrolled. Additionally, the dominant culture in that community consisted of lower-middle class White families, whom Shuggie described as "unbelievably racist." She went on to say that though there were challenges, she did not experience microaggressions herself because, to the community, "Black was better than Hmong." Still, with her belief in

educating all children, she fought for Hmong children as if they were any other Black family.

Florence and Shuggie proudly spoke about the benefits of having a supportive family community. They both claimed the key was knowing their communities and leveraging them for support. Shuggie referenced a different school community than her first school and boasted about living in her school community and that her community knew her. She even mentioned families occasionally stopping by her home. Florence recalled community members' names from her first principalship and praised them for the support they gave her at board meetings and PTO meetings. Florence and Shuggie emphasized the importance of community several times throughout the interview.

However, two participants described how they were challenged by their communities that did not hold the same beliefs about educating **all** students. Rose shared, "[I] had a White group of parents that were trying to get rid of me, and they even came in and told me to stop recruiting these kids of color." Mary shared a similar unfortunate experience:

> One of the parents got mad with me about something and she yelled to me, 'You are nothing but my servant. . . . I don't know how you got this job, or why you had this job.' I can remember being really angry and upset.

Theme 2: It Takes a Toll

Many stressors come with being a school principal, but when there is an intersectionality of gender and race, the stress has a different effect. Rose described her experience with microaggressions as "these little things . . . just kinda eat at you. . . . Am

I back in the sixties, or what, you know? And it's constant, you know, it just didn't stop." Rose later revealed that these experiences made her feel "invisible" and that she didn't matter. "If you were White, it mattered." Eventually, brushing it off did not work to make it all okay. For Rose and the other participants in this study, stress brought on by constant experiences of microaggressions caused concerns for their work-life balance and health. Rose shared:

> It would take me all weekend to come down . . . I lost a lot of family time. I tell my kids, don't call me as much on the weekend. I gotta come down . . . and then Sunday comes, and Sunday afternoon, you go *Oh, shoot! I gotta get ready for the week,* and here we go again.

Florence added, "We don't realize we're stress[ed] because we're in it day to day and regardless of how we're being treated we show up."

Four of the six participants reported having high blood pressure and attributed it to the stress of dealing with microaggressions on the job. Participants discussed what they felt comfortable sharing about their health. Rose was surprised to learn that she had developed a medical condition even while regularly staying physically active:

> When they said I had high blood pressure the year before I retired, it's like, how? I do all this exercising and walking . . . and they said, Yeah, but it's still building up [and] you're not able to release all of it.

Though Florence never had high blood pressure, she did share a different health issue:

> It took its toll on me after I'd been in the district for forty some years and I ended up with an aneurysm. They said I did not have high blood pressure. They could

> not figure out what had . . . happened to me. The neurologist and the psychologist and a team of doctors . . . said it was delayed stress.

Sally did not disclose to the group whether she had dealt with any medical issues. She did, however, share how it took a toll on her emotionally and wondered when and at what point she would lose her religion.

Theme 3: It Was Always About Them . . . All of Them

One recurring theme throughout the conversation was the participants' commitment to children. "I did it for the children," Shuggie declared. Sally summed it up with, "Black women take on the burden and see every child as their own." There was a sense of purpose to show up for all students, but especially Black students. When the participants spoke about White women giving "just enough" or falling short of providing the best for Black students, the responsibility seemed to shift to being personal for them. Mildred stated, "We have to treat all these kids as if they were our own . . . if you treat kids differently, then you're in the wrong profession."

> I made sure that my kids came first. I mean, it was important. It was important that those kids learned. I guess that's how I feel. I felt. And I still feel. It's important that kids learn. And all kids learn, especially our black kids. (Shuggie)

The participants' collective belief about education is that all students deserve a quality education and an environment that is conducive for them to do their best learning. When facing microaggressions, Mildred said, "I would pray that, you know, tomorrow would be better and that I could function and do what I needed to do for the students. And it was always for the students." Florence added:

> They still have their own views about who you are so all you can do is do the best that you possibly can, but just know who you are and that you're there for the children and making sure they're going to be successful in life.

It was equally important to the participants that all students felt they belonged. Unfortunately, this was not always the case for many Black students in their schools. During the interview, Sally mentioned how incoming ninth-grade Black students left before their senior year. When asked why they left, the students stated they did not feel they belonged. Sally owned this as the school's leader and began detoxifying the school. In doing so, she removed 40 staff members during her six years as principal.

In spite of the challenges this theme revealed about their commitment to educating all students, participants stated and agreed that they genuinely loved the job.

Theme 4: How I Got Over—A Little Walk and Talk

How I got over? (How I got over)

How I got over? (How I got over)

You know my soul look back and wonder

How I made it over? (Oh yes)

Herbert Brewster's (Swan Silvertones, 2015) hymn "How I Got Over" celebrates triumph over hardship and may empower the participants by reminding them of their agency and ability to effect positive change in their school communities. It can encourage them to remain steadfast in their advocacy efforts and continue striving for equity and justice in education.

Overall, the hymn serves as a source of emotional and spiritual support for the participants, reinforcing their sense of purpose and resilience as they navigate the challenges of educational leadership.

Four of the six participants chose long walks and/or talking to someone as a way of decompressing and dealing with the daily pressures brought on by microaggressions. Whether it was taking morning walks while talking with a neighbor, as Florence did, or hiking and talking to yourself like Rose, or even calling someone on the phone as you're leaving the school parking lot at the end of the day like Mary, these participants emphasized the need for space to, as Mary put it, "at least come down a little and say the things that I could not say at work, because it would have been so unprofessional." As Mary talked about making the phone call as she drove away from work, she pointed out the importance of family and friends:

> Having that support, friends that I could call on, family that I could come back to and be supported and know that they loved me in spite of what everybody else might have thought about me, that was important.

These participants knew something was needed to balance their stress levels. "I walked a lot," Rose said. "I mean, that's how I would think and process, and I'd be talking to myself, and people would pass me and think I was losing my mind."

Shuggie had a routine before leaving school that helped her transition home:

> It was one or two staff that . . . were really close to me, and we always stayed [after school] till probably six-thirty, seven . . . and by then, after the day, we were

> calm, and we could walk to our cars and get home. . . . Otherwise, I was just usually really riled up, and I needed to decompress.

Leadership Moves

The principalship can be a lonely job and the job is too much to do alone. Each participant leveraged leadership moves that helped make the workplace a little easier to work in.

Collaborative Leadership. Each participant understood the benefits of collaborative leadership and sought out willing staff who shared their belief about educating students. Shuggie stated, "I worked with all the key staff that I could find and knew that I had to work through the staff because the district was not giving any support whatsoever." Mary described a similar focus on staff: "I found a few of the staff who were excited about making some changes, and I focused on those who wanted to make some changes."

Community Allies. Both Florence and Shuggie attributed much of their leadership support to community allies "Know your school community" was Florence's mantra, but Shuggie also spoke on it boldly.

> So, I think that you have to learn and you have to know your community. You have to be in your community. I've always lived in my community and by that, they've known me in and out. They've known me at school. They've known me at home. They've known me at church. They've known me everywhere, in the grocery stores. The kids see me; the parents see me. They knew that they could

> come up to my home, though I didn't appreciate it. They would, at times, come, but they also respected that, too. (Shuggie)

Florence spoke of community members who supported her, including one woman in particular:

> I had that support of a great Black family. . . . Whenever I would have a PTA meeting, I was so thankful that Dorothy Jackson (pseudonym) would always show up because she felt that I needed that support. Whenever she spoke, it was dead silent. (Florence)

Clean House. Sally and Shuggie demonstrated a bold leadership move to rid their buildings of naysayers. Mildred had the benefit of hiring staff for one of her schools from the ground up, creating a team well-suited to support all students.

Coping

Participants in this study coped with stress in both similar and varying ways. They understood the necessity for work-life balance for their physical and mental health. Some coping strategies were done privately, while others were in the open.

Religion and Spirituality. Faith and leaning into prayer were coping strategies shared by three of the six participants. The participants did not share details about their religious practice, but when they discussed this aspect of their coping strategies, they did so with boldness and unwavering confidence. Florence talked about how her faith kept her going, and Rose shared that she offered up "a lot of prayers, you know, to keep you going." Mildred revealed where praying happens for her:

> I think my mileage from my house to . . . Pike High School (pseudonym) is fourteen miles. . . . The first seven [miles] I would curse my way through the ride, and the second seven, I would pray that . . . tomorrow would be better and that I could function and do what I needed to do for the students. . . . It was always for the students.

Trusted female elders were an essential part of Florence's life. Not only did they make themselves available to her, but they also instilled in her and nurtured her belief in God and that God would help her.

> My faith kept me going. I had Godmothers . . . saying to me, 'Baby, call me anytime because your job is getting the best of you, and you need to know who's in charge of your life, and it's not man.' Those women were older, and they had experienced life, and they had had so many bumps going through life [and] on jobs that it kept me. But in the end, each one of them would say . . . God will take care of you. You just keep taking care of yourself and knowing who you are.

She adds, "But most of all, the takeaway, knowing yourself and making sure you are in a place where you need to be spiritually." Though Shuggie did not mention prayer or praying, she did reference attending the church in her school community that many of her community members also attended.

Whatever It Takes. Among the six participants, Rose stood out as one who had developed several ways of coping. For example, before she entered her school each morning, she had a couple of moves that helped get her ready for the day. "I remember getting out of the car several times and just standing there looking at the building. I go,

Oh! Took a deep breath and said, I go*, here I go."* Some mornings, Rose arrived with a song blasting:

> Music saved me a lot of times because I'd be driving to work and I'd think about the staff I had to deal with, and I played this song and I blasted it: *You all gonna make me lose my mind, up in here, up in here!* I would just blast that and pull up [into] the parking lot with that blasting. People would just be in there laughing.

At home, Rose took a different approach to coping:

> And I kept thinking, what can I do to balance myself so I don't totally stress myself out? . . . I got a punching ball at home, and I came home and put different people's faces on there. . . . I've used that punching ball . . . and I felt better.

Strategies Worth Mentioning

All participants did not use each of the coping strategies presented in the focus group. However, all coping strategies learned in this focus group are worthy of inclusion in this study. At least one participant claimed to have used the coping strategies below.

Positive Thinking /Reframing. Mary learned over the years to take what was meant for bad and make it for good. She explained that this is similar to the Bible scripture, Genesis 50:20 ESV, which reads, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Elaborating on the incident with a teacher shared previously, she said:

> When she called me her "servant," she meant it in a derogatory way. I was telling him this, and he [the superintendent] said to me, 'Well, Mary, you are.' and I thought about that. It took me a long time to understand that.

Time with Students. Another way of coping worth mentioning is spending time with the students you serve. Sally shared how this could have looked on a typical day in her school and what making time to do this meant to her:

> I sought out kids. I surrounded myself with kids because, no matter what, they knew you. They knew that you cared about them. Kids are very insightful. And so I spent a lot of time just seeking out, you know, building that relationship, or having that connection with the student, or inviting them into my office for lunch, or just to sit and chat so that they knew that I was only an arm's distance away and that I wasn't that distant principal. I think adults found that a little bit intimidating because I didn't need to reach out to them when it got really crazy. I reached out to those that it really mattered to, and those were kids.

Theme 5: Wanted: Intentional and Consistent Support

Like supportive relationships with the staff and the community, it is essential to have access and support from district personnel, including the superintendent. Participants shared their experiences with how this played out for them. These recollections could provide insight into future organizational moves that could support Black female principals.

District

Rose wanted to talk about district administrative meetings, which invited all principals, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent to come together. She remembered being the only person of color in attendance, and what bothered her most was when she shared an idea that was not recognized. When someone else repeated her

idea, that person would receive an "Oh, yeah, that is a good idea." Sharing her inner thoughts with us, she said, "[I am] sitting there like, did they not hear me? Am I invisible? It happened so many times." She said she had had enough and started calling it out whenever it happened in meetings. Rose pointed out that not only do Black female principals experience microaggressions from staff and families, but it happens at a district level as well. "Like we don't know what we're talking about. We're invisible. We don't matter. But if they're White, it matters." She added:

> Our scores had gone up and the superintendent there gave the new principal that came in credit for that, even though I was the principal there when that happened. . . . It's all those kinds of microaggressions that they don't want to acknowledge the work you're doing. They challenge every decision you make. You always have to keep proving yourself.

Shuggie assumed when she interviewed and was then hired that it was her that the teaching community wanted. She recalled the staff being shocked when she walked into the building to meet them for the first time. Soon, Shuggie was made aware that a group of staff already wanted her gone. In addition, only two Black families, along with an increasingly large population of Hmong families, joined the community. Considering the staff's reaction to her presence, staff already deciding she needed to go, and the community's makeup, Shuggie asked district leaders to move her. According to Shuggie, they [the district] left her there and gave her no support. Mary shared her understanding of how a new superintendent can impact a district's focus:

> What I didn't know at that time, being a relatively new principal, was that when the new superintendent came in, [he was someone] who had a whole different focus, who was more focused on pleasing the staff. . . . Doing the right thing for the students, I continued moving in the direction that I was moving with the previous superintendent with little to no support.

Rose had access to her superintendent and claimed he was supportive of her and the work she was doing in her building. She told of a time she called him to tell him how things were going:

> I called him [superintendent at the time]. And you know I always share things with him. He said, 'Keep doing what you're doing'. . . . After the first year, he left and we got a different superintendent who I clashed with pretty much the [entire] time that I was there. Because he just didn't get it.

Participants spoke of what it meant to have the support of the superintendent and the challenges that came when they did not. From a place of knowing the researcher personally, Florence declared,

> So that's key, to have a superintendent that you can go and talk to and that superintendent can understand where you are. You do not always have that, and you don't have it now. And I know you don't have it.

Sally, like the others, loved their job as a principal. Unfortunately, her situation came to a crossroads, and the decision to stay on or retire was before her. She shared:

> I got tired of the politics and the lack of support. It got so bad that people from the outside wanted to run the building as opposed to letting me run my own building.

> . . . But the reality is that our young people were failed by the district because of the allowing of this type of behavior to continue over decades long, where no one was willing to take the risk of saying, "You know this is not acceptable."

Summary

These participants reported that it was always about the children and that their belief in educating students sustained them in their position as principal. They identified their "Why" and would revisit it when the work got too challenging. Being Black and female, dealing with microaggressions impacted these participants personally and professionally in ways only they can report. The work experience was different for them than it was for their White counterparts.

When asked about coping or self-care choices, professional therapy was not mentioned or referenced in any participant's responses. However, all six participants could reference at least two close relatives or friends they spoke with regularly to help them decompress. All could speak to community and district leadership support or lack of support and their impact on their work. All participants agreed that the superintendent can be vital in supporting Black female principals.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As the role of school principals continues to evolve, encompassing increasing responsibilities and challenges, the need for sustained leadership amid daily pressures, compounded by the profound impact of events like COVID-19 and social justice unrest, becomes ever more crucial. In this context, understanding how principals navigate and thrive in their roles becomes a pivotal exploration. This study seeks to address these pressing questions by focusing on a specific cohort of educational leaders: Black women principals.

The decision to concentrate on Black women principals stems from the recognition of their underrepresentation and the unique challenges they face. With just 10% of principals being Black, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, and an overwhelming 80% of public-school teachers being White (Aldrich, 2019) the study aims to shed light on the isolation and structural exclusion often experienced by Black women in leadership positions. This underrepresentation also translates into specific challenges, such as leading predominantly White staff, where following a Black woman's direction may pose challenges.

Racial microaggressions further compound these challenges for Black female principals, affecting their personal and professional lives. The study aims to explore how these leaders navigate such experiences and what coping mechanisms prove instrumental for their success and longevity.

As a Black female principal in my ninth year, I have brought a personal perspective to this study. Motivated by my own encounters with microaggressions and the emotional toll in my role, I seek to understand the sustaining factors for Black women principals in their tenth year or more of service. The aim is not only to give voice to their experiences but also to learn how to foster longevity in the role and promote the well-being of Black women in educational leadership.

By grounding the findings in voices of color tenets of critical race theory, which state that systemic racism is pervasive and deeply ingrained in societal structures, institutions, and norms, and Black feminist theory, which emphasizes intersectionality and highlights the unique challenges faced by Black women due to the intersection of race and gender, the study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the experiences of Black female principals. The findings not only offer a nuanced perspective on coping mechanisms but also provide valuable insights for future research and interventions aimed at addressing the challenges faced by this specific group of educational leaders.

In examining the coping mechanisms employed by long-serving Black female principals in response to microaggressions, the study delves into their experiences, impact on personal and professional domains, and the strategies essential for maintaining sustainability. The research seeks to contribute valuable insights that could inform support structures and best coping practices for Black female principals, promoting their successful and healthy leadership journey in the years to come.

Summary of the Study

This chapter expands upon this phenomenological study's findings, exploring the impact of race and gender on Black female principals working with predominantly White staff and how Black women navigate and cope with racial microaggressions. In addition, this chapter puts forward recommendations for ways Black female principals can be supported and suggests avenues for future research aimed at comprehensively understanding and addressing the intersections of race and gender within the realm of education leadership. In this chapter, I will be supporting the following 5 themes:

Theme 1: Challengers: From Microaggressions to Straight-Up Racism

Theme 2: It Takes a Toll

Theme 3: It Was Always About Them All of Them

Theme 4: How I Got Over

Theme 5: Intentional and Consistent Support

Overview of the Problem

The research aims to investigate the challenges confronted by school principals, particularly amidst the growing responsibilities and the additional impact of events such as COVID-19 and social justice unrest. The focus is specifically on Black women principals, an underrepresented group in educational leadership, who navigate distinctive challenges due to their intersectionality of race and gender. The study endeavors to comprehend the coping mechanisms employed by these leaders to sustain themselves in the face of racial microaggressions, isolation, and structural exclusion. By exploring the lived experiences of highly regarded Black female principals with over a decade of leadership experience, the research aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform

strategies to interrupt marginalizing practices within leadership contexts. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance the support systems and promote best coping practices for Black female principals, fostering their long-term success and well-being in educational leadership roles. Through this research, the intent is to contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all school leaders, particularly those at the intersection of racial and gender identities.

Purpose Statements and Research Questions

The primary objective of this phenomenological research is to explore and elucidate the strategies employed by Black female principals to sustain themselves in long-term leadership roles within a large urban school district in the Midwest. By delving into the personal narratives and lived experiences of selected participants who navigate the intersectionality of being Black and female, this study aims to uncover the coping skills and mechanisms that have proven vital for their success and enduring commitment as K-12 principals. The specific research questions considered in this study were:

Research Question 1: What are Black women principals' lived experiences with racial microaggressions?

Research Question 2: What impact do racial microaggressions have on Black women principals?

a. Personally?
b. Professionally?

Research Question 3: What coping strategies do Black women principals use in response to racial microaggressions?

Research Question 4: What do Black women principals need to maintain sustainability as principals?

Review of the Methodology

This research employs the descriptive phenomenological approach, rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophy, to delve into the lived experiences of Black women principals facing racial microaggressions and to comprehend the coping mechanisms instrumental in sustaining their roles. This approach, based on the foundation laid by Husserl, emphasizes the suspension or bracketing of preconceived opinions by the researcher to maintain neutrality.

Acknowledging potential biases arising from my personal experiences, I emphasized a commitment to neutrality in analysis, ensuring a focus on participants' narratives and coping mechanisms.

Overview of the Sample, Data Collection, and Analysis

Participant Selection and Criteria. Creswell's (2018) description of the phenomenological approach was followed, wherein the research aimed to explore the phenomenon of coping with microaggressions. The group size for the study was six, and all were retired Black female principals with experience levels of 10 or more years in their roles. The focus of the discussion centered on their lived experiences with racial microaggressions, the effects of such experiences, and the coping strategies employed. The study's emphasis on ensuring participants' confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms aligns with ethical considerations in the research literature. This approach

reflects a commitment to protecting the privacy and identity of participants, in line with established research ethics.

Data Collection Method. The primary data collection method chosen was a semi-structured focus group interview, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the participants' lived experiences. With participants' consent, the session was both audiotaped and videotaped, ensuring a comprehensive capture of verbal and non-verbal expressions during the discussions.

Data Analysis. Phenomenological data analysis involved a meticulous review of statements within the interview transcription. The process included highlighting sentences and quotes that contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation—the experiences of Black women principals dealing with racial microaggressions, their coping strategies, and the resulting impacts. Horizontalization, a technique advocated by phenomenologists, was also applied to identify and extract themes across participants. The final step in the analysis was to encapsulate the essence of the phenomenon by crafting a descriptive narrative based on the experiences shared by the participants.

By adopting this systematic approach, the study endeavored to unravel the nuanced and collective experiences of Black women principals, shedding light on coping mechanisms and contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on educational leadership.

The findings of this phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of long-serving Black female principals with racial microaggressions and their coping

strategies align with existing research literature on educational leadership, critical race theory, and Black feminist theory.

Findings Related to the Literature

RQ1: What are Black women principals' lived experiences with racial microaggressions?

The experiences of Black women principals in the study align with the broader literature on racial microaggressions in educational leadership. Existing studies, such as those referenced by Bloom and Erlandson (2003), have already highlighted the limited research on Black women principals. The study's findings contribute to this sparse literature by providing nuanced insights into the day-to-day experiences of Black women principals, specifically in the context of racial microaggressions. The challenges faced by the participants are consistent with the broader theme of under-researched experiences of Black women leaders.

The discussion of stereotypes faced by Black women principals also aligns with existing literature on racial and gender stereotypes. The historical context provided regarding stereotypes like the "strong Black woman," "angry Black woman," and others resonates with broader studies on racial and gendered expectations. The study contributes by linking these stereotypes to the experiences of Black women principals, highlighting how these pervasive cultural narratives shape perceptions and impact the professional lives of Black women in leadership roles.

The participants in the study shared a range of experiences related to racial microaggressions during their principalships. These microaggressions occurred regularly

and encompassed interactions with both staff and families. Examples included subtle acts of resistance, challenges to authority, and overtly racist comments. The participants, who were the only people of color on staff in their respective schools, highlighted the recurrence of microaggressions in their initial interactions with White staff and families.

Participants described instances where their ideas were overlooked and not recognized during district administrative meetings. The repeated occurrence of their ideas being acknowledged only when repeated by someone else suggests a form of microaggression, reflecting the participants' feeling of being invisible and undervalued. The experiences extend beyond interactions with staff and families to include challenges at the district level, where the contributions of Black female principals were described as often undermined or attributed to others. This unveils how racial microaggressions permeate various levels of the educational hierarchy.

RQ2: What impact do racial microaggressions have on Black women principals?

The experiences of racial microaggressions had a significant impact on the participants. The microaggressions, ranging from subtle to overt, took a toll on their emotional well-being, causing stress and feelings of invisibility. The stressors associated with constant microaggressions affected their work-life balance and physical health. Participants reported developing health issues such as high blood pressure and, in one case, an aneurysm, attributed to the stress of dealing with microaggressions. The toll on mental health was evident, with participants expressing the need to find ways to cope with the emotional strain.

Instances where their achievements, such as improved school scores, were credited to others contributed to a sense of frustration and the need to continually prove themselves. The lack of acknowledgment for their efforts and the constant challenges to their decisions created a hostile professional environment. The participants expressed the challenges of working without support from district leaders, leading to stress, disappointment, and, in some cases, a crossroads where decisions about continuing or retiring were influenced by the lack of support and recognition.

The biological and physiological impacts of racial microaggressions on the well-being of Black women principals are supported by literature discussing the toll of discrimination on mental and physical health. Studies like Lomotey's (2019) review and examination of studies from 1993 to 2017 demonstrate the longstanding awareness of the challenges faced by Black women in leadership roles. The toll on health, as evidenced by participants developing conditions like high blood pressure and aneurysms, aligns with the literature that emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of the health implications of racialized experiences in professional settings.

RQ3: What coping strategies do Black women principals use in response to racial microaggressions?

Coping strategies varied among participants, but some common themes emerged. Participants highlighted the importance of having a supportive community, both within the school and external networks. Leveraging the support of understanding colleagues, family, and friends played a crucial role. Some participants emphasized the significance of knowing their community and actively seeking support from it. However, it was clear

that despite coping mechanisms, the impact of microaggressions persisted, affecting participants emotionally and physically.

The coping strategies and practices identified in the study, such as collaborative leadership, community allies, long walks, and faith-based practices, resonate with the broader literature on resilience and support systems for women in leadership. The scarcity of research on Black women principals, as highlighted by Bloom and Erlandson (2003) and Lomotey (2019), underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the coping mechanisms specific to this demographic. Existing literature on women in leadership provides a foundation for understanding the general challenges faced by women but falls short in capturing the unique experiences of Black women principals, making the study's findings especially valuable.

RQ4: What do Black women principals need to maintain sustainability as principals?

The findings suggest that sustaining a career as a principal, particularly for Black women, requires addressing systemic challenges and inequities. Participants emphasized the need for recognizing the additional challenges faced by Black women in leadership roles due to double standards. They expressed the importance of acknowledging the unique experiences of Black female principals and dismantling discriminatory practices. The study suggests that creating supportive environments, both within schools and communities, is crucial for the sustainability of Black women in principal positions. Additionally, the findings draw attention to the need for broader awareness and

understanding of the impact of racial microaggressions to inform systemic changes in educational leadership.

The call for Black women's self-definition and resistance against negative controlling images, as suggested by Collins (2000), aligns with the study's emphasis on coping strategies. The coping mechanisms identified in the study, such as positive reframing and seeking support from others, can be viewed as ways for Black women to assert their own identities and push back against harmful stereotypes.

In summary, while existing literature acknowledges the challenges faced by Black women in leadership, the study significantly contributes by providing a detailed exploration of these challenges in the specific context of being a principal. The findings reinforce and extend existing knowledge, emphasizing the urgency of further research and targeted interventions to address the unique experiences of Black women leaders in education.

Developing Themes

While each participant in the study had a unique journey, common experiences and themes emerged from their narratives. This section organizes their shared experiences within the identified themes and continues to relate the findings to the literature.

Theme 1: From Microaggressions to Straight-Up Racism

1. Being "Firsts" in Leadership:
    - Rose: First Black female elementary principal in her first district.

- Rose: First Black female principal in her second district, which had a strong Jewish population.
- Mary: Broke ground by addressing issues with an all-White female staff.
- Sally: First Black female principal in a traditional high school.

2. Resistance and Challenges:
    - Rose: Faced challenges from some staff questioning her authority.
    - Mary: Accused of reverse racism when initiating changes in her first district.
    - Sally: Experienced microaggressions from predominantly White staff and had to remove 40 staff in six years to detoxify the environment.
    - Shuggie: Encountered resistance from staff who wanted her removed and faced racism from White families.
    - Mildred: Endured challenges from predominantly male staff who questioned her leadership abilities.
    - Florence: Faced challenges in the 1960s but emphasized the importance of community support.
3. Microaggressions and Overt Racism:
    - Rose: Experienced microaggressions from staff and families in both districts.
    - Sally: Dealt with both covert and overt microaggressions from White female staff.

- Shuggie: Encountered less microaggressions from school parents herself, but dealt with racism from White families, whose racial microaggressions were directed towards Hmong students and their families.
- Mildred: Endured gender-based and race-based microaggressions from predominantly male staff.

4. Impact on Leadership and Decision-Making:
    - Rose: Felt the impact of her race and gender on staff challenges and decision-making.
    - Mary: Addressed issues with an all-White female staff and accused of reverse racism.
    - Sally: Boldly removed 40 staff to detoxify the high school environment.
    - Shuggie: Successfully navigated challenges in her second school with a staff makeup of 75% teachers of color.
    - Mildred: Faced challenges in proving her capability to lead as a Black woman.
    - Florence: Stressed the importance of speaking up and speaking out for change.
5. Community and Networking:
    - Mildred: Benefited from networking and support among the three Black principals in her first assignment.
    - Florence: Emphasized the importance of community support in the 1960s.
6. Longevity and Leadership Wisdom:

- Florence: Held the longest tenure with 45 years and emphasized the need for principals to speak up and speak out.

The study aligns with existing literature on racial microaggressions, emphasizing the pervasive and impactful nature of these subtle, daily slights. The findings underscore the insidious effects of microaggressions on Black women principals, causing stress, emotional harm, and physiological consequences.

The study concurs with researchers like Sue and Spanierman (2020) who assert that microaggressions contribute to silencing, invalidating, and humiliating individuals who are oppressed. The experiences shared by the participants align with the established definitions and classifications of microaggressions as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations.

While each participant's story is unique, their commonalities highlight the systemic challenges faced by Black female principals, ranging from microaggressions to overt racism, as well as the resilience and leadership strategies employed to navigate and overcome these obstacles.

Theme 2: It Takes a Toll

The literature on microaggressions aligns with the theme emphasizing the toll on participants. The psychological impact of microaggressions is explored, with the participants' commitment to students acting as both a source of resilience and an additional stressor. The identified coping strategies, such as long walks and faith-based practices, reflect the need for emotional release and support to deal with the toll of microaggressions.

The concept of intersectionality, specifically the combination of gender and race, is well-documented in literature as a significant factor influencing stress experiences. Studies, such as that by Crenshaw (1989), highlight how individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities may face unique stressors that differ from those experienced by individuals with a singular identity. Rose's description of microaggressions as constant stressors aligns with this understanding.

The study's focus on the internal impact of racial microaggressions on participants aligns with literature discussing the psychological and emotional toll of such experiences. The participants' detailed reflections and disbelief while retelling their experiences contribute to the understanding of the lasting impact of racial microaggressions on individuals.

The feeling of invisibility and the perception that one's contributions are undervalued based on race is a common theme in the literature on racial microaggressions. Scholars like Sue et al. (2007) discuss how microaggressions contribute to a sense of marginalization and invisibility. Rose's sentiment of "If you were White, it mattered" resonates with literature emphasizing differential treatment based on racial identity.

The impact on work-life balance due to stress from microaggressions is a widely discussed issue in educational leadership literature. Sogunro (2012) emphasized that school principals often experience high levels of stress, and the added layer of racial and gendered microaggressions compounds this stress, affecting personal time and family

life. Rose's comment about losing family time aligns with literature acknowledging the challenges principals face in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

The literature consistently highlights the relationship between chronic stress, racial microaggressions, and adverse health outcomes. The participants' reports of high blood pressure and other health issues due to the stress of dealing with microaggressions align with studies suggesting a link between chronic stress and various health conditions (e.g., Lewis et al., 2015). Florence's experience of developing an aneurysm attributed to delayed stress underscores the profound impact of long-term exposure to racial microaggressions on health.

Sally's description of the toll on her emotionally and her concern about losing her religion aligns with literature exploring the emotional and psychological impact of racial microaggressions. Researchers like Sue (2010) emphasize the cumulative psychological effects, including emotional exhaustion and feelings of despair, resulting from the persistent experience of microaggressions.

Florence's case of developing an aneurysm as a delayed consequence of stress aligns with literature emphasizing the cumulative impact of stress on health over time. Researcher William Smith coined the term "racial battle fatigue" (RBF), which represents the cumulative toll of stressors. This is a chronic state that taxes the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of Black women (Cyr et al., 2021). Dimsdale (2008), for example, discussed the concept of allostatic load, where chronic exposure to stressors, including racial microaggressions, can lead to serious health consequences.

The experiences described in this study align with the broader literature on the intersectionality of gender and race, the impact of microaggressions on stress and health, and coping mechanisms used by individuals facing similar challenges in educational leadership roles. The findings contribute to the growing understanding of the nuanced ways in which stressors affect the well-being of individuals with intersecting marginalized identities in leadership positions.

Theme 3: It Was Always About Them—All of Them

The experiences described by the participants in this study highlight a strong commitment to children, particularly Black students, and a dedication to providing a quality education for all. The research literature offers insights into similar themes, shedding light on the challenges faced by Black women educators and leaders, as well as their unwavering commitment to the well-being and success of their students.

Commitment to Students and Advocacy for Black Students

The experiences described in this study align with broader themes and perspectives found in the research literature on educational leadership, particularly concerning the commitment to students and the challenges of ensuring equity and belonging for all. The participants' advocacy for Black students and their efforts to ensure they receive a quality education resonate with literature on culturally responsive leadership. Researchers like Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasize the importance of educational leaders advocating for culturally relevant pedagogy and practices that meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Sense of Purpose

The participants' strong sense of purpose and commitment to students, especially Black students, resonates with literature on effective school leadership. Scholars like Leithwood and Riehl (2005) emphasize the importance of educational leaders prioritizing the well-being and academic success of all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

Equity and Belonging

There was an emphasis on creating an environment where all students feel they belong, which aligns with research highlighting the significance of fostering inclusive school climates. Studies by Payne and Biddle (1999) and Gay (2010) underscore the importance of educational leaders promoting a sense of belonging for students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups.

Removing Negative Staff

Sally's action of removing staff members to detoxify the school highlights the difficult decisions educational leaders sometimes face in addressing systemic issues. While drastic, such actions may be necessary to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students.

Resilience

These participants' resilience and persistence in advocating for students despite facing adversity reflect themes found in the literature on effective school leadership. Participants faced obstacles in their efforts to provide a quality education for Black students due to resistance from staff, inadequate support from the district, and systemic barriers rooted in race and gender bias. They also encountered microaggressions and

discriminatory behavior from staff and community members which created an unwelcoming environment for Black students.

In summary, these experiences reflect broader themes and perspectives found in the research literature on educational leadership, highlighting the importance of commitment to students, advocacy for equity and belonging, addressing systemic challenges, and the intrinsic rewards of educational leadership. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of school leadership and the ways in which educational leaders navigate challenges to promote student success and well-being.

Theme 4: How I Got Over

"How I Got Over" is a hymn that extends beyond its original religious context, resonating with the broader human experience of facing challenges and finding the inner strength to overcome them. It has become a symbol of hope, inspiration, and a testament to the human spirit's resilience. This song and its lyrics can serve as a reminder that one has the resilience to persevere through adversity and continue advocating for their students.

The literature on coping mechanisms for dealing with racial microaggressions includes a range of strategies, from seeking social support to engaging in self-care practices. The coping mechanisms mentioned in this study, such as exercise and maintaining physical activity (Rose), align with the broader literature on adaptive coping strategies (Burton et al., 2020; Holder et al., 2015). Strategies such as long walks, talking to trusted individuals, and engaging in activities like music or hiking resonate with the broader understanding of coping mechanisms.

Religion and spirituality as coping strategies align with research acknowledging faith-based practices as sources of strength in dealing with the psychological impacts of microaggressions. Positive reframing and spending time with students also reflect adaptive coping mechanisms discussed in the literature.

Theme 5: Intentional and Consistent Support

The coping strategies identified in this theme include the participants' efforts to call out instances of overlooked ideas during meetings. Rose, for example, decided to address the issue openly whenever it occurred. The theme also highlights the importance of having a supportive superintendent. Participants who had access to a supportive superintendent found it beneficial, emphasizing the significance of being able to share experiences and challenges. However, when faced with unsupportive leadership, coping mechanisms are not explicitly discussed in the theme, but the challenges faced by the principals become evident.

The participants' discussions about the importance of the right-fit superintendent and the inconsistency of district support echo existing literature on the critical role of district-level leadership in shaping the experiences of school principals. This resonates with research emphasizing the impact of district-level decisions on the professional lives of school leaders**.**

White Women Principals

Most of the staff in the schools in which these participants served were White women; therefore, most of the microaggressions were armed and deployed by White women. Regarding White female principals, when asked how similar or different their

leadership experiences were than those of their White female counterparts, several participants hollered and laughed while others reacted physically. “Let me put it this way,” Shuggie chimed in, “If we did half of what they did, we would have been fired a long time ago.” “Exactly, exactly,” agreed Mary. “If we didn’t do half of what they didn’t,” added Mildred. Shuggie wrapped it up with, “Either way, you cut it.” In addition, Mary inserted that “there is no comparison.” They all agreed as Mary continued:

> We have to do more than them to keep proving ourselves, which we shouldn’t have to do. We have to excel in the things that we do. I mean, there is no just being average, and that adds stress to our work.

The work of a principal is hands down challenging to start. Black women’s lived experiences are different from White women in that Black women have endured many more challenges simply for being Black. Black feminist theory helps to understand this. There is additional harm and stress placed on our Black females that their White counterparts do not have to experience. Participants understand that there are double standards that take the challenges they face to a different level. The firsthand accounts of these six participants reveal that this reality is unfair, hard, and stressful for them.

This theme emphasizes the critical need for intentional and consistent support from district personnel, especially the superintendent. Participants spoke about the positive impact of having a superintendent who understood and supported them. The absence of such support, as illustrated by Sally’s experience, could lead to burnout and a sense of powerlessness. To maintain sustainability, Black women principals expressed the need for district leaders who appreciate Black women principals’ efforts, understand

their unique challenges, and actively support their work. The theme suggests that sustainable leadership for Black women principals requires systemic changes at the district level, addressing the racial disparities and biases that impact their professional experiences.

In summary, the themes developed in this study delved into the district-level experiences of Black women principals, shedding light on how racial microaggressions influence their professional lives, the emotional impact of such experiences, coping strategies employed, and the crucial need for intentional and consistent support from district leaders for sustainability.

Implications

Health Implications

An implication of this study underscores the importance of recognizing the significant health impacts for Black female principals dealing and coping with racial microaggressions. These findings also confirm and expand upon the literature about the physical and psychological/emotional toll that race-based stress takes on both Black educators and Black people in general.

Physical Health Effects

The chronic exposure to racial microaggressions and overt racism experienced by the participants led to serious health consequences, such as high blood pressure and, in one case, an even more severe condition, an aneurysm. Despite efforts to maintain physical activity and healthy lifestyles, the stress accumulated over time, negatively impacting their health.

Emotional and Psychological Toll

Participants reported feeling constantly stressed and emotionally drained due to the racial microaggressions and racism they faced in their roles as principals. This emotional burden affected their work-life balance, leading to a loss of family time and heightened emotional distress, as expressed by feelings of invisibility and emotional strain.

These examples expose the profound impacts of racial microaggressions and racism on the holistic well-being of Black female principals, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and interventions to address these systemic challenges.

Coping Strategies Implications

Another implication of this study is the confirmation of the literature about coping strategies. The development of coping strategies comes from Black educators' need to preserve and protect themselves physiologically and mentally from the harms of racial microaggressions.

Coping Strategies

Engaging in activities such as walking, talking to someone, or spending time with students can help Black female principals decompress and manage stress. These activities provide a much-needed outlet for processing emotions and thoughts that arise from experiencing racial microaggressions and workplace challenges. Incorporating these coping strategies into their daily routines can contribute to better mental health and overall well-being.

Religious and Spiritual Practices

For some participants, faith and spirituality serve as important coping mechanisms. Prayer, leaning on religious beliefs, and seeking support from trusted elders provide emotional and spiritual strength during difficult times. These practices offer a sense of hope, resilience, and comfort, helping participants navigate stressors and maintain a sense of purpose and identity.

Community and Social Support

Having supportive relationships with coworkers, family, and community is important for dealing with stress at work. When you have someone to talk to, get advice from, or just spend time with, it can make you feel less alone and more reassured. These relationships are like a safety net, helping you feel better emotionally and mentally.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based upon the analysis and findings related to the themes in this study, several recommendations for further research have been identified.

Long-Term Health

One recommendation for further research is a study that focuses on the long-term effects of racial microaggressions on Black women principals and explores a deeper understanding of how chronic exposure to microaggressions impacts physical health outcomes over time, including cardiovascular health, mental health disorders, and overall quality of life.

Organizational Support Systems

Another recommendation is to evaluate the effectiveness of organizational support structures in addressing racial microaggressions faced by Black women principals. This research can assess the impact of district-level policies, leadership development programs, and diversity training initiatives in fostering inclusive and supportive environments for these leaders.

Comparing Black Women Principals with White Women Principals

A study examining the unique differences in leadership experiences between Black women principals and their White female counterparts in predominantly White educational settings could deepen our understanding of the implications of racial microaggressions on career progression and job satisfaction.

By addressing these research recommendations, scholars can contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Black women principals, identify effective strategies for addressing racial microaggressions, and advocate for equitable and inclusive leadership practices in educational settings.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings related to the literature and the themes identified in the study, several recommendations for district-level practices to support Black women principals can be made.

Provide Ongoing Training on Racial Equity

It’s imperative to not only recognize but also acknowledge the presence of racial and gender stereotypes that directly impact the professional environment for Black women leaders. District-wide professional development programs should include regular

training sessions focused on recognizing and addressing racial microaggressions in school settings. These sessions should be tailored to the experiences of Black women principals, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate and combat discrimination effectively.

Foster Supportive Networks

District leaders should establish support networks specifically tailored to the needs of Black women principals. These networks can serve as platforms for sharing experiences, offering mentorship opportunities, and advocating for systemic changes to promote equity and inclusion in educational leadership.

In addition, allies, including district leaders, colleagues, parents, and community members, should be encouraged to support and advocate for Black female principals actively. Allies can play a crucial role in amplifying their voices, challenging discriminatory practices, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect.

Create Inclusive School Environments

District policies and initiatives should prioritize the forming of inclusive school environments where Black women principals feel valued, respected, and supported. This involves promoting cultural competency among staff, fostering a sense of belonging for all members of the school community, and actively addressing instances of bias or discrimination promptly and effectively. These initiatives can help create more inclusive school environments, foster empathy and understanding among staff, and reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions.

Invest in Wellness Resources

District leaders should allocate resources to support the implementation of coping mechanisms for Black women principals to navigate the challenges of racial microaggressions. This may include funding for wellness programs, access to mental health resources, and opportunities for professional development focused on resilience-building and self-care.

Hold Leadership Accountable for Equity Goals

District leaders must hold themselves accountable for achieving equity goals related to the representation and support of Black women principals. This involves regularly monitoring progress, collecting data on outcomes, and adjusting policies and practices as needed to ensure equitable treatment and opportunities for all educational leaders.

These recommendations emphasize the importance of district-level actions in creating environments that empower and support Black women principals, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership.

Limitations

This phenomenological study concentrated on the lived experiences of six retired Black female principals. A larger sample size would allow for a broader population of Black women principals and a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Black women principals in educational leadership roles. The participants were retired, which means that the participants reflected on past experiences rather than providing real-time accounts of their experiences. Retrospective data collection may introduce recall bias and limit the accuracy of participants' recollections. Longitudinal

data collection could provide insights into how these experiences evolve over time and the long-term impact on individuals' well-being and career trajectories. Additionally, the study was conducted in the midwestern United States. The regional specificity may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized to Black female principals in different geographical locations, each with its distinct sociocultural context.

Conclusion

The research discussion explored the lived experiences of Black women principals regarding racial microaggressions, their impacts, coping strategies, and the support needed for sustainability in their roles. The study aligns with existing literature on racial microaggressions and underscores the significant toll these experiences take on the emotional and physical well-being of Black female principals. It highlights themes such as systemic challenges, resilience, commitment to students, coping mechanisms, and the importance of intentional support from district leaders. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Black women principals and provide recommendations for both further research and district-level practices to support their well-being and professional success. However, the study acknowledges limitations, including a small sample size and regional specificity, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

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