Listening to the Voices of African American Female Principals Leading "Turnaround" Schools

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LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PRINCIPALS LEADING “TURNAROUND” SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Vickie Pease Collins

June 2015

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Abstract

This narrative study focuses on African American female principals’ perceptions of the influence of gender and race on their roles as principals of turnaround schools. The work lives of the participants were situated in turnaround schools, schools receiving federal money to provide intensive interventions and leadership development support to break the cycle of chronic academic failure. Data included one-on-one interviews with the participants and a reflective journal. The basis for the data analysis was a three-dimensional space approach (that included the components of interaction, continuity, and situation or place). Black feminist standpoint theory (BFST), a revision of the earlier Black feminist thought (BFT), informed the analysis of data. The questions guiding this research study were: How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their leadership experience? and How do African American female principals believe the leadership experience as a turnaround school principal differed from their leadership experience as a principal of a non-turnaround school?

Comparing their work to that of non-turnaround principals, all three principals described their work as turnaround principals as being more transparent, and requiring more documentation and the management of work and systems mandated by the Federal
Government to continue to receive the funds from the School Improvement Grants. The themes that emerged from the study included instructional leadership expertise, educational and administrative expertise, accountability through data, transparency, family, and the church.

This research study revealed that although two of the women did not explicitly state that race and gender mattered to their professional experiences, their stories and actions provided a different narrative. Black feminist standpoint theory (BFST) resonated throughout their narratives; hence, race and gender do matter. The literature on turnaround leaders is not disaggregated by gender or race to reflect the lived experiences of women or people of color. The narratives within this study illuminate Black feminist turnaround leadership competencies.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge everyone who contributed to the completion of this project. First, I would like to thank God for Jesus. Next, I would like to thank my husband and my family for their prayers and words of encouragement. I would also like to express gratitude to everyone who believed in me and encouraged me with kind words and tough love. Special thanks to Dr. Susan Korach, my advisor, my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Hava Gordon, and my committee members, Dr. Michele Hanna and Dr. Ellen Brown, and for their time and commitment to this project. I also wish to thank Dr. Kent Seidel, my original advisor, who obtained another position. I wish to thank Pat Corwin for her relentless support and assistance. Thank you, Emmett Collins, my soul mate. Last but not least, thanks to my children, Ashlei and Emmett Arthur Collins, III, and my grandchildren, Ashton, Nicholas, Rhys, and Nicholette.
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Chapter One. Introduction

Background

Since the founding of the United States, teachers and schools have been critical to the future of this nation (Hirsch, 2007). Between 1852 and 1918, all states and territories in the United States passed compulsory attendance laws that mandated parents send children from ages 5 to 16 to school (Richardson, 2004; Walberg, 2007). Hirsch (2007) stated, “To equalize opportunity through schooling is to create competent and loyal citizens” (p. 3). However, year after year, the lowest performing schools continue to struggle, the achievement gap widens, and poverty prevails (Learning Point Associates, 2010).

Strong school leadership is a frequent variable in almost every list of successful school characteristics (Nadeau & Leighton, 1996; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010). When leadership is effective, there is a significant improvement in learning; school leadership is the second most important factor after classroom instruction that affects student achievement (Fullan, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The need for turnaround principals intensified as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2014 goal of grade-level proficiency for 100% of students approached and many failing schools faced the possibility of serious repercussions (Duke, 2006; NCLB, 2002; Neil, 2012). The turnaround principal is the leader charged with managing and leading the
turnaround in performance of failing schools. Salmonowicz (2009) compared the principal to “a professional stunt driver who must whip a car around 180 degrees in traffic, achieving a drastic change in direction without causing an accident or flipping the car” (p. 21). Turnaround is a documented, rapid, dramatic, and sustainable change in the performance of a school (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007).

Most failing schools are in urban areas and include large numbers of children of color (Le Floch et al., 2014). These schools usually are the ones that require a turnaround intervention from the federal government. Any organization that experiences significant change takes a toll on its members. Schools are no exception; turnaround schools experience significant change that can also take a personal toll on the members of the community. The principal of a turnaround school has to manage change under the expectations that positive results will happen. As strong towers of strength in the Black community, African American women as turnaround school principals have continued to serve the community. Along with the church, they have been the mothers, the providers, the wives, the doctors, the teachers, and whatever other roles were necessary to ease the suffering felt by members of the community (Bass, 2009).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to focus on the voices of Black women principals in complex environments to understand how race and gender influence the professional lives of others in similar situations. Black female school leaders have been characterized as the “clean-up” women when tasked with turning a chaotic school culture into a
positive, successful learning environment (Peters, 2012). What is this experience like from the perspective of those who live it? The following questions guided this study:

- How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their leadership experience?
- How do African American female principals believe the leadership experience as a turnaround school principal differed from their leadership experience as the principal of a non-turnaround school?

**Statement of the Problem**

Passage of the historic No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (referred to hereafter as NCLB) redefined the role and responsibilities of school board members, district superintendents, and school principals (Education Commission of the States, 2002; Provost et al., 2010). Prior to NCLB, even the individuals who saw the importance of school leadership did not include it on major school reform agendas (Mitgang, 2012). A Wallace perspective report emphasized that now is the time to make efforts that strengthen leadership in schools (Mitgang, 2012). The report continued, “Without effective principals, the national goal we’ve set of transforming failing schools will be next to impossible to achieve….With an effective principal in every school comes promise” (p. 14).

Minority students are presently the majority in elementary schools, forcing policy makers to encounter new problems, such as higher dropout rates than those of White students and lower scores on required standardized tests (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). In the
fall of 2014, almost 49.8 million students entered public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The demographics included 24.8 million White students, 12.8 million Hispanic students, 7.7 million Black students, 2.6 million Asian-Pacific Islander students, 1.4 million students of two or more races, and 0.5 million American Indian/Alaskan Native students. The percentage of White students was projected to be less than 50% in the 2014-2015 school year and is expected to continue declining at least through 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014).

As of 2012, about 21% of school age children lived in poverty, an increase from one in seven in 2000 (NCES, 2014). Before the end of the 2013-14 school year, the United States was expected to have spent an estimated $571 billion on public elementary and secondary education (NCES, 2014). In 2009, Secretary of Education Duncan (2009) reported that about 5% or 5,000 of the nation’s schools were chronically underperforming according to NCLB guidelines.

During the 2011-2012 school year, about 89,810 principals served in public schools in the United States. Among these public school principals, 80% were non-Hispanic White, 10% were non-Hispanic Black or African American, 7% were Hispanic, and 3% were another race or ethnicity (NCES, 2013). During the same school year, 52% of public school principals were females. Of these female principals of public schools, 64% were in elementary schools, 42% in middle schools, 30% in high schools, and 40% in combined schools (NCES, 2013). Currently, an estimated 6,000 Black females and 3,630 Black males work as principals in the United States (NCES, 2013).
In past years, the school leadership profile in our nation has included more women and people of color; however, there continues to be a significant discrepancy between the demographic of school leaders and that of the students and families they serve (Brown, 2005). Policymakers in such states as Texas and Georgia have acknowledged publicly that changing communities means a need to increase the diversity of the teacher and school leader populations (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Oliva & Menchaca, 2001).

Need for the Study

Even though policy makers in the passage of NCLB identified the importance of school leadership, they did not address the changing faces of the students in the United States or the unchanging faces of those who educate and lead them. The school population of public schools in the United States has become more culturally diverse; however, the population of school principals has not (Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2009). Long-standing barriers exist to diversifying the principalship in the United States, and listening to the voices of African American female principals might aid in expanding the recruitment of minority leaders and women and increase diversification of faculty and staff throughout schools in the United States. Research literature exists on women in school principal roles; however, few research studies exist about the influence of gender and race on the lived experiences of African American female principals (Horsford & Tillman, 2012).
Significance of the Study

Leading for equity, diversity, and social justice has increasingly become an area of interest and concern in the study of educational leadership. A better understanding of this phenomenon will contribute to educating a generation of school leaders who embrace and/or reflect the students they serve. This study also aimed to uncover perceptions of school principals to inform educational stakeholders of ways to support all principals, especially women and principals of color, in developing leadership skills that create and sustain the schools needed to get the desired results.

This research focused on three African American female principals’ lived experiences and the impact of race and gender on their professional lives. The study also included their perceptions about leadership in turnaround versus non-turnaround schools. These findings will inform policy implications in such areas as professional development, selection of school leaders, and principal training programs. Findings also add to the theoretical base regarding gender, race, and the work of turnaround school principals. A Black Canadian woman (Wane, 2009) so eloquently wrote,

As Black women, sharing our stories in the academy, will illuminate the path for the next generation and help them to assume responsibility for uniting, learning from each other’s strength, sharing our knowledge and skills and gaining wisdom from our diversity. There is a great need to carry out research pertaining to different aspects of Black women’s experiences in Canada and write about our stories. From hearing each other’s stories, we will come to appreciate and celebrate what we might otherwise have believed to be beyond our ability to achieve. (p. 75)
**Terminology**

In this study, the preferred terminology to describe the participants is *African American*. I am an African American woman who believes the term somehow adds to the identification of people of African descent who were born in the United States. I choose to connect to the continent because when our ancestors left Africa, the specificity of their countries and tribes was lost. However, the connection to the continent has never been lost; most of us wear it on our faces every day. In this study, I also use the term *Black* interchangeably with African American to avoid repetition; yet our blackness has changed and continues to change. Our assimilation has resulted in a spectrum of color that represents the faces of the world.

**Definition of Key Terms**

- *African American* is a term that describes an American citizen of African descent and especially of Black African descent born in the United States.

- *Black feminist standpoint theory (BFST)* or *Black feminist thought* is the theory or thought that centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender uniquely experienced in the lives of African American women.

- *Lived experience* is a process through which people assign meaning to make sense of what happens to them.
• **Narrative research** is an approach to qualitative research that represents a product and a method. This research is a study of stories, narratives, or descriptions of events that explain human experiences.

• **Non-turnaround school**, for purposes of this study, is defined as a school that has not been identified by the federal government as a school prioritized to receive a School Improvement Grant (SIG).

• **Principals** are the educational administrators who manage elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

• **Race to the Top Fund (RTTT)** refers to $4.35 billion in competitive grants rewarded to states, with turnaround being one of the key focus areas. Guidelines for the turnaround section of NCLB specify that local education agencies (LEAs) must implement at least one of four turnaround models. LEAs with nine or more turnaround schools must employ multiple models.

• **School Improvement Grants (SIGs)**, first authorized in 2001, are federal funds allocated to states by Title I formula; the funds are subsequently distributed competitively to school districts to improve low-performing schools. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) significantly increased the amount of money. Its guidelines align with the guidelines of RTTT.

• **Turnaround** is a term used to define a documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization in 1 to 3 years.
• *Turnaround school* is the term used to describe a school that is receiving federal money to provide intensive intervention and leadership development support to break the cycle of chronic academic failure.

• *Turnaround school leadership* is the kind of leadership necessary for turning around a school that steadily performs low according to student achievement as measured by standardized state tests.

**Organization of the Study**

This dissertation research study consists of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the study. The second chapter deals with the literature surrounding the concept of leadership, effective school leadership, turnaround school leadership, a historical view of education in the African American community, gender roles and educational leadership, and African American women in school leadership from a historical perspective. The next chapter explains the methodology of this qualitative research study, followed by the specifics of the methodology, framed within narrative inquiry. In the fourth chapter, common themes, providing the foundation upon which the dissertation stands, start to emerge, as the telling, retelling, and reliving of the narratives reveal the social and cultural plotlines of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly as referred to in Clandinin & Huber, 2002). This chapter also details the themes that emerged in the analysis of the data and connects or disconnects the themes to the theoretical framework and the extant literature. The final chapter discusses the findings and notes recommendations for future research studies.
Chapter Two. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the relevant literature surrounding school reform and effective leadership, followed by the history of school turnaround. Competencies of turnaround school leaders and common elements of successful turnarounds are presented. Next, gender roles in leadership are discussed, after which the history of education in the African American community is chronicled. Finally, the theoretical framework of the study, Black feminist standpoint theory, is reviewed.

School Reform

Reform of public education may be the single most important long-term challenge America faces (Gergen, 2007). For the past 30 years, the United States has adopted an extensive series of school reforms aimed at making public schools more rigorous (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). All states adopted standards-based education; then most states formed accountability systems to guarantee that students, teachers, and educational leaders would demonstrate “performance accountability” (Vernon, Baytops, McMahon, Holland, & Walther-Thomas as referred to in DiPaola et al., 2004; Thurlow, 2002). Subsequently, the results of “high stakes” tests determined significant milestones for both students and teachers in many school communities. For example, grade-level promotion, high school graduation, professional
tenure, and school accreditation are based on these “high stakes” test results (DiPaola et al., 2004; Giacobbe, Livers, Thayer-Smith, & Walther-Thomas, 2001).

**Goals 2000: The beginning of NCLB.** The 1994 Improving America’s School Act (Goals, 2000) introduced the concept of using state assessments to hold schools accountable for student achievement. States lacked the force to impose sanctions on schools that were not making progress. On January 8, 2002, when President George W. Bush signed the NCLB Act of 2001 as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1969 (ESEA), it was said to be “the most far-reaching reform of the nation’s public education system” (Keily & Henry as cited in Owens & Valesky, 2007, p. 24). NCLB operationalized the concept introduced by the of 1994 Act (Herman et al., 2008). The act deemed to be “the greatest achievement” of the U.S. Department of Education since its creation in 1979, “signified a clear shift for the department’s early role as data keeper and dispenser of student-aid funds to its emergent role as leading education policy maker and reformer” (Dodge, Putallaz & Malone as cited in Owens & Valesky, 2007, p. 24). NCLB placed focus on turnaround strategies by identifying low-performing schools with significant achievement gaps. The law set the goal of getting all students to grade level in math and reading by 2014 and required all states to set benchmarks of adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all schools and districts and hold them responsible for results.

**Intervention models of school turnaround.** The intervention models adopted under NCLB included transformation, turnaround, restart, school closure, and a fifth other option. The first intervention, the transformation model, required the replacement
of the principal and 50% of the staff and must include a research-based instructional program, extend learning time, and implement a new school leadership team that would provide operating flexibility and sustained support. The second intervention, the turnaround model, dictated that the school replace the principal and hire 50% new school staff, implement a research-based instructional program, ensure extended learning time and teacher planning time, and implement new governance structure. The third intervention, the restart model, required that the school transform or close and re-open under the new management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization. The fourth intervention, the school closure model, mandated school closure and the sending of students to higher-performing schools in the same district. The final intervention, the fifth “other” option, which in practice most schools chose, resulted in the least dramatic changes (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). These interventions do not align with the models under the later statute of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The fifth “other” option is no longer available (Taylor, Stecher, O'Day, Naftel, & Le Floch, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The four intervention models established under NCLB, minus the fifth “other” model, are currently available to school districts and their associates to receive Race-To-The-Top Funds (RTTT) and School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to improve chronically low-performing schools.

(ARRA) incorporated four areas. The first area required every classroom to have an effective teacher and every school to have an effective principal. The second area focused on empowering families to assess and improve their children’s schools and empowering educators to improve their students’ learning. The third area stressed the importance of applying college-and-career-ready standards and ensuring that assessments aligned with these standards. Lastly, the fourth area stated the need to provide meticulous support and effective interventions to improve learning and teaching in the lowest-performing schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

**School Improvement Grants.** Title I, section 1003(g) of the ESEA of 1965, authorizes School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds. Schools competed for funds intended to turnaround the lowest-performing schools. Title 1 schools are the ones in which at least 40% of the students who live in the attendance boundaries are from low-income families, or a school in which 40% of enrolled students are from low-income families. These schools qualify to receive Title I funds to increase achievement of low-income students (Trujillo & Renee, 2012).

Hurlburt, Therriault, and Le Floch (2012) noted that passage of the ARRA caused three major shifts in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. First, in the fiscal year 2009, the ARRA increased total SIG financial support by 6.5 times the original estimation through Title I of the ESEA. Usually states receive SIG funds based on formulas of each state’s Title I share; then state education agencies competitively award SIG funds to districts with eligible schools. Next, ARRA funded the schools in the bottom 5% of the state’s historically lowest performing. Finally, the federal government
mandated schools awarded SIG funds to implement one of four interventions believed to be more rigorous and thorough than the interventions adopted under NCLB.

ARRA awarded four cohorts of schools SIG funds as of the 2013-2014 school year. Cohort I schools started implementing reforms in the 2010-2011 school year. Cohort II schools began implementing reforms in the 2011-2012 school year, and Cohort III initiated implementing reforms in the 2012-2013 school year. Finally, Cohort IV started implementing reforms in the 2013-2014 school year.

**Adequate yearly progress (AYP).** The NCLB accountability system, adequate yearly progress (AYP), established targets that required 100% proficiency in literacy and numeracy by 2014. AYP became the most problematic part of the mandated systems created to support NCLB (Hickey, 2011). In 2011, many states started applying for waivers to opt out of 100% proficiency when they realized they were not going to meet the proficiency goal of AYP. To date, 35 states have been granted federal ESEA waivers (McEachin & Polikoff, 2012; Weiss & May, 2012).

The U.S. Department of Education allowed states to opt out with the understanding that these states would create their own accountability systems. These state-created systems included support teams made up of distinguished principals and teachers, and others with the expertise necessary to guide the school through the improvement process. Even though schools created extensive and rigorous support teams, resources became scarce as the number of schools needing improvement increased (American Institute for Research, 2011). Studies of the outcome of these statewide systems of support have shown little to no evidence of academic improvement (American
In an effort to transform NCLB and SIG, ARRA contributed a one-time amount of $3 billion. The goal was to support an aggressive reform strategy that centered on public schools in the bottom 5% in the nation (O’Brien & Devarics, 2013). These districts received 3-year awards to execute thoroughly and completely one of four intervention models. If the school showed growth, the school would qualify for 2 more years of funding to support the continuous improvement. To decide which schools qualified for the SIG program, states had to identify their historically lowest-performing schools based on the school’s absolute performance on state language arts and math tests and their failure to demonstrate growth over time. High schools with low graduation rates also qualified. Federal guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) mandated that states create three tiers of schools eligible for the SIG program. Finally, Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools, the state’s persistently lowest-achieving schools, received priority, and Tier 3 schools were eligible for SIG based on availability of SIG funds (Trujillo & Renee, 2012).

**Effective School Leadership**

Leadership, as with other complicated human behaviors, is hard to pinpoint (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Lambert (2003) asserted, “We still have few shared understandings about what it is” (p. 422). Stogdill (1974) surmised, “There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it” (p. 2). Burns (1978) stated, “Leadership is one of the most observed, yet least
understood, phenomena on earth” (p. 3). Leadership is a complex process that addresses
the behavior of both leaders and followers in relation to each other. Because it is such a
complex, challenging phenomenon, practitioners and researchers continue to seek ways
to understand its nature (Burns, 1978; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, &
Osteen, 2005).

Essentially all leadership definitions involve the process of influence and indicate
that all leaders must have one or more followers (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Northouse
(2006) defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of
individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Leithwood & Riehl (2003) maintained that
providing direction and exercising influence are two functions that are at the core of most
definitions of leadership. They maintain that stability is the goal of management, and
improvement is the goal of leadership. Lambert (2003) concluded that leading is
everyone’s job, and all stakeholders should be welcomed as complete members in the
community, because they commit to shared results and recognize that we, as educators,
are all owners, not tenants, of the schools. In summary, we may not know exactly what
leadership is, but we know what it “ain’t.”

Defining effective school leadership is essential in school reform at local, state,
national, and international levels. A Wallace Foundation (2013) report conceptualized
effective school leadership based on Jim Collins’ 2001 lessons from corporate life. The
report maintained that effective leadership, like corporate leadership, is “leadership that
focuses with great clarity on what is essential, what needs to be done and how to get it
done” (as cited in the Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 6). Research findings from many
countries have similarly concluded that schools led by effective principals make a significant, measurable difference to the academic achievement of their students and contribute substantially to the effectiveness of their faculty and staff members (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The role of the building principal includes expectancies for effective educational leadership and strong managerial practices (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Cray & Weiler, 2011).

Beauchamp and Parsons (2012) noted that effective school leaders exercised “very human skills” (p. 43), mostly focused upon creating solid relationships. Such leaders are principled, experienced, well-informed professionals who stress trust, honesty, communication, openness, and accountability (Sergiovanni, 1992). This type of leadership is effective in many organizations, because these leaders “model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 64).

**Characteristics of effective school leadership.** The relevant literature contained four characteristics effective school leaders should demonstrate (Fullan, 2001; Gurr et al., 2006; Leithwood, 2006; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). Characteristics of effective school leadership feature at some level these broad categories: setting direction, developing the human capital, achieving sustainable leadership, and managing the instructional programs (Fullan, 2001; Gurr et al., 2006; Leithwood, 2006;
Leithwood et al., 2007; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012).

Setting direction entails leaders who create a shared vision, establish goals to guide practices, and develop a culture of high expectations for everyone (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Leithwood, 2006). Developing the human capital refers to leaders who realize that people make the fundamental difference between success and failure. Conclusively, these leaders attend to the personal and professional needs of individuals; treat everyone with respect, dignity, and fairness; celebrate all accomplishments; and are highly visible in their demonstration of shared beliefs and values. Achieving sustainable leadership implies building relationships between the school, the public, and community institutions that surround them. It is a reasonable expectation that the people trained and trusted to educate the nation’s young people should build sustainable relationships beyond the four walls of the school building. Managing the instructional programs is a vital part of developing people; it includes leadership behaviors that focus on strengthening teaching and learning practices, data-driven decision making, and accountability (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000; Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

The History of Turnaround Schools

The definition of turnaround has been refined, defined, and redefined over the years. At the time of this study, turnaround in education referred to both the area of improving “school systems” and individual schools as well as the approach that the Department of Education has described as the “turnaround model” (Katas, Gorin, Nico,
Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). Kowal and Hassel (2005) expressed that turnaround refers to the restructuring options under the NCLB Act that require district-managed replacement of the school leader and staff significant to the school’s failure. Calkins et al. (2007) defined turnaround as “a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization” (p. 6). Fullan (2001) concluded, “The new world rains down on schools with disconnected demands, expecting that at the end of the day the school constantly should be showing better test results and ideally becoming a learning organization” (p. 139).

A vital part of the framework for realizing change and turning around failing schools, turnaround has long been associated with organizational improvement outside of education (Murphy & Meyers, 2009). Duke (2012) contended that the term turnaround first emerged in an educational setting in the 1990s in New York City. Turnaround for Children, Incorporated was established in New York City to focus on the psychological needs of young people. National governments throughout the world have focused on improving schools because of political, social, cultural, and economic views (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). Successful school turnaround yields significant gains in student achievement in a short amount of time (Calkins et al., 2007).

Steiner and Barrett (2012) reported that only 30% of turnarounds in education and other organizations succeed. In another analysis of turnaround outcomes, Peck and Reitzug (2014) found no widespread evidence of successful school turnaround, yet it is a
high priority of federal education policy. A 2010 study by Birman, Aladjem, and Orland (as referred to in Peck & Reitzug, 2014) found that 262 of 1,098 schools significantly increased academic achievement in one year; however, only 12 of the 262 schools were able to sustain their improvement for more than one year. Finally, research indicated that improvement in middle and high schools is rarely immediate and warrants sustained support for at least 3 years or more (Thompson et al. as referred to in Peck & Reitzug, 2014).

**Demographics of Turnaround Schools**

According to Hurlburt, Le Floch, Therriault, and Cole (2011), the available data among the 49 states and the District of Columbia revealed that 1,228 schools received SIG funds. Research findings also uncovered that schools receiving SIG funds were more liable to be high poverty and high minority (Hurlburt et al., 2011). For example, 68% of these students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch as compared with 45% of students across the nation, and 79% of students in SIG schools were students of color compared to 45% of students in the entire nation. In addition, 53% of SIG schools were located in urban areas, whereas only 26% of the nation’s schools are located in urban areas. Lastly, 40% of the nation’s high schools received SIG funds.

**Common Elements of Successful Turnaround Schools**

A synthesis of research uncovered five common elements of successful school turnarounds (Aladjem et al., 2010; Calkins et al., 2007; Fullan, 2006; Herman et al., 2008; Hess & Gift, 2009; Kowal, Ableidinger, & Public Impact, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2007; Murphy & Meyers, 2009; Papa & English, 2011; Peck & Reitzug, 2014; Portin et
al. as referred to in Peck & Reitzug, 2014). The common elements are (a) leadership; (b) instructional improvement; (c) challenging, engaging, culturally relevant, aligned curriculum; (d) a culture of high expectations, respect, support, and safety; and (d) parent and community involvement and support.

**Turnaround leadership.** Turnaround leadership is the kind of leadership necessary for turning around a school that continually performs low according to student achievement as measured by standardized state tests (Fullan, 2005). Martin and Samels (2010) asserted that the intent of the idea of turnaround is to give leaders the instruments needed to restore their frail institutions back to successful pathways.

Steiner, Hassel, and Hassel (2008) identified four competencies of turnaround leadership: driving for results, influencing for results, solving problems, and showing confidence to lead. *Driving for results* entails intentional actions and strategic behaviors that yield desired results. *Influencing for results* involves inspiring stakeholders to line up thoughts and behavior to achieve desired results. *Solving problems* involves using data to make instructional decisions; creating clear, rational plans that people can follow; and confirming that the learning goals of the school are realistically connected to the classroom activities. *Showing confidence* to lead means behaving ethically and courageously while making focused decisions on the front line of change (Steiner et al., 2008, p. 8). These competencies, which are “the habits of behavior and the underlying motivations” (Steiner & Barrett, 2012, p. 26), provide a framework for comparison with the themes that emerged from the narratives of the three Black female principals in the present study. These competencies are also used in the hiring process of turnaround
leaders who are the most skilled to change persistently failing schools. Because only 30% of turnarounds in education and other organizations succeed (Beer & Nohria as referred to in Steiner & Barrett, 2012), it is essential to get the right people in the right seats.

In addition to these competencies, turnaround principals must combine the effective characteristics of successful principals, discussed earlier, with other characteristics to make dramatic changes that improve student learning. These principals must function as the instructional leader, facilitator of inclusiveness, and manager of operations. As the instructional leader, the goal is to improve teaching and learning. The facilitator of inclusiveness influences all teams of stakeholders to work together to carry out the vision. Finally, the manager directs the school’s non-academic functions (Ratner & Neill, 2010).

Of major importance, a successful turnaround principal cannot and usually does not provide all the leadership or make all the decisions (Day, 2014). Other stakeholders, lead teachers, administrators, other staff members, parents, and community members take responsibilities for leading change in their areas. Distributed leadership is important because it sends a message that many people, not just one, have the ability and responsibility to lead change. It also demonstrates the confidence and trust that a principal has in all faculty and staff members (Day, 2014). Herman et al. (as cited in Learning Point Associates, 2010) noted that the characteristics that define effective turnaround leaders are “superior instructional leadership, attention to the system, and the capacity to identify and leverage (at the right time) key points within the system to
advocate for and deliver a well-aligned, well-articulated transformation plan” (p. 2). Turnaround principals should also have the will, skill, and authority to drive change (Kowal et al., 2011).

**Instructional improvement.** Successful turnaround principals concentrate on instruction. They strive to achieve results with a sense of urgency and help teachers develop their capacity for teaching and learning (Fullan, 2006; Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009). The goal is to create a culture of continuous improvement though peer collaboration and a school-based professional community. Ratner and Neill (2010) suggested that a key element of improving instruction is to bring teachers out of isolation in their own classrooms and get them working together with other teachers. They examine data on student performance, analyze student work, and develop lessons that align with assessments and curriculum.

Another strategy to improve instructional practices is to incorporate peer mentoring or coaching to novice teachers or struggling experienced teachers. This mentoring and coaching includes demonstrating best practices that expand teaching and learning. This also entails specialized professional development that meets the needs of these teachers (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

It is also important for turnaround schools to engage in systems thinking. A school-wide system of effective teaching practices that engage students in higher order thinking, problem solving, and communications involves student work and analyzing student learning. It is essential to use multiple assessment tools to collect data and inform instruction (Ratner, 2007). Fullan (2006, 2008) maintained that learning is the work of
the organization. He stressed that learning in context and learning everyday are key experiences that build capacity by developing skills, clarity, and motivation.

A strong, data-driven base is one of the “super levers” for struggling schools (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012, p. 50). Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) claimed there are four fundamental keys to successful data-driven instruction. These include assessment, analysis, action, and systems. Assessment involves defining the roadmap to rigor. Leaders should examine state or national standards, then define how to assess them starting with backwards design. Analysis entails determining where students are struggling and why they are struggling. Action means implementing new teaching strategies tightly aligned with the analysis. Systems require creating systems and procedures to guarantee ongoing improvement driven by data.

Observation and feedback represent an effective device for school improvement (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Ratner, 2007). Weekly observations and feedback are essential to teacher growth. Feedback is effective when used to improve teaching practices. Observation should not be used to judge the quality of teaching but as a tool to help teachers improve student learning. Developed systems should include frequent observations and feedback. The feedback should include action steps for improvement (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). Teachers should also be encouraged to collaborate with other teachers to improve teaching practices continuously. Motivated ineffective teachers should be supported, and ineffective unmotivated teachers should be removed (Ratner, 2007).
**Challenging, engaging, culturally relevant, aligned curriculum.** To turn around a failing school, it is important to teach an engaging, challenging, culturally relevant curriculum that includes both core subjects and specialist classes. Core subjects include math, literacy, science, and social studies. Specialist classes include music, art, theater, physical education, languages, and classes that are culturally relevant, engaging, and age-appropriate (Ratner, 2007).

Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) wrote that it is important for teachers to work with an instructional leader before the first day of school. They should plot out the year and review a comprehensive curriculum plan. These meetings focus on what students should learn and how teachers get them to learn it. Bambrick-Santoyo discussed a school in Massachusetts, Roxbury Prep, which made phenomenal gains. The principal of Roxbury Prep highlighted systematic, effective planning. The distinguishing factor was that a systematic approach was put in place to continuously drive teachers to make difficult decisions and catch problems early enough to improve instruction. Finally, the quality of instruction improves when teachers are intentional about what they teach; they have more time to teach deeply and more thoroughly, and students learn more.

**Culture of high expectations, respect, support, and safety.** The establishment of a school culture is important so that safety, order, respect, support, and high expectations are the norms. The establishment of a student and staff culture should originate from the first day. The student culture should begin with a vision based on what adults and students should be doing in school. Next, it is important to turn the vision into rituals and routines that make the vision a reality. Then it is essential to create
opportunities to practice before going into the classroom. Finally, it is necessary to monitor and maintain progress by evaluating with a measurable instrument (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012).

The staff culture should also begin upon the first interaction. According to Bambrick-Santoyo (2012), there are five essential strategies. First, setting the vision means wisely designing a clear and tangible one based on the work environment in your school. Second, it is important to fill the seats with the right people. People should be hired based on the vision of the school, because they are the ones who help the vision come alive. Third, first interactions of the year should entail commitments that develop a strong staff culture. Fourth, the culture should be monitored regularly for signs of negativity. The final strategy is to intentionally and continuously build, maintain, and communicate your staff culture.

The culture sets the expectation that everyone will succeed. Support systems should align with the needs of the population. Daily practice of positive behavior interventions and supports should be evident throughout the school. Curriculum aligns with instruction and assessment. Mental health teams meet regularly with the administrators to address and support the needs of the students and their families. Caring faculty and staff members are devoted to continuously improving to carry out the vision and mission of the school. Lastly, everyone feels they belong, and accountability for their actions or lack thereof is evident (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenoweth, 2010).

**Parent and community involvement and support.** Both academic and non-academic involvement and support are available to parents, guardians, and the
community. Classes are available to provide and empower parents and families. To strengthen the capacity of parents and families, parenting classes are offered. Community partnerships are established and celebrated to meet the needs of the students and their families. Volunteers are welcomed. These volunteers can provide and enrich services in the classroom, in the main office, in the classroom, or on the playground. The school environment truly demonstrates the village raising the children (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenoweth, 2010). Papa and English (2011) reminded their readers that turning a school around is a community project. The goal is to help adults and children “embrace the joy of learning and the sense of purpose that makes coming together important” (p. x).

**Lessons From Turnaround Schools in the United States**

In the 2009-2010 school year, the School Board of Denver Public Schools (hereafter referred to as DPS) approved the turnaround of four schools. These schools included an elementary school, a middle school, and two high schools. The schools have not fared well. The elementary school continues to perform poorly and has had three principals in the last 6 years. Of this cohort, the district closed the middle school and one of the high schools. They replaced the high school with four schools. Of the four replacement schools, two of the schools had three principals in 4 years, one school had two principals, and one school has had the same principal for the last 2 years. Three of the schools continue to perform in the bottom tiers (Schimel, 2014).

In 2011, the DPS School Board authorized a comprehensive turnaround in West Denver and the northeast part of the city. The turnaround approach, funded mainly through a Tiered Intervention Grant, gave the district nearly $15 million. The funds were
dispersed to the nine lowest-performing schools, with a total of 14 turnaround schools scheduled for 2012-2013. There were five elementary schools, one K-8 school, two middle schools, two schools grades six through twelve, and four high schools. Additional turnaround funding was accessible through the district’s general fund and $4 million in philanthropic funds (Whitehead-Bust, 2011).

Presently the 14 schools included in the second cohort of DPS turnaround schools have mixed reviews. Susana Cordova, the DPS Chief Academic Officer, recently commented on the far northeast turnaround:

Our results for turnaround have been fairly mixed, so without a sense that we know what to do different or better, it’s hard to take the level of disruption that happened in far northeast and replicate it....Right now, we are really trying to dig into what we learned (as cited in Robles, 2014, p. A8)

Findings based on a study of four high schools in Texas revealed that a decade later, an increasing number of failing schools are still facing closure (Duke, 2012; Hamilton, Heilig, & Pazey, 2014). The Texas study found that turnaround did not immediately increase student achievement, influence grade retention, or reduce student dropout rates. On the other hand, a study examining turnaround practices in elementary schools in North Carolina discovered the following characteristics of high-growth schools. First, high-growth schools developed the commitment, climate, and culture impacting student achievement; then, they increased the knowledge and skills of the leaders, teachers, and other staff members; next, they improved structures and processes that supported instructional practices; and lastly, high-growth schools strengthened the
relationship between the school, the district, and the community (Walston, Proto, & Brown, 2013).

Finally, support from the district of the school is paramount in a successful school turnaround (Steiner & Hassell, 2011). To make such a dramatic change, the leader must have support from the district, as well as the state and other governing powers. The support must be coupled with actions of the leader to succeed in turning around a low-performing school. Steiner and Hassel (2011) also suggested that districts could use performance competencies to hire effective turnaround principals, evaluate principal performance, and provide specialized professional development for turnaround principals. Performance predictor competencies used at each stage can increase the probability of successful actions in key areas (Steiner & Hassel, 2011).

**Education in the African American Community**

A practice of excellence and a blueprint for Black education dates back to the 1860s (Foster, 1997; Pollard, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 2000, 2003; Tillman, 2004). The school was the hub of the Black community, symbolizing the culture and reinforcing community values. Educational philosophy for Black educators was deeply rooted in the community belief that education was the key to a better future for their children (Tillman, 2004). An obstacle occurred in the Black community when many Southern states passed White supremacist laws designed to prevent Black citizens from improving their status or achieving equality. These statutes, known as Jim Crow laws, were in place and enforced from the end of the Civil War in 1877 to the mid-1960s when the Civil Rights Movement began. Named after a popular 19th-century minstrel song that stereotyped African
Americans, “Jim Crow” personified a government system that legalized racial oppression and segregation in the United States. Although Jim Crow was not a person, its presence affected the lives of millions of Americans. Even though it was an inhumane and repressive era in American history, during this time, large numbers of African Americans and a myriad of influential Black leaders bravely fought against the status quo, amazingly gaining the opportunities of education, business, land ownership, and a true spirit of community for African Americans (Jersey, Pollard, & Wormser, 2002).

In 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States rendered a landmark decision whereby racial segregation was ruled unconstitutional in public schools. The historical Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas was actually a consolidation of five cases under one name. The cases, which were a result of legal groundwork laid by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), were from Kansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Virginia. One of the justices later commented that the Supreme Court thought it would be better to have representative cases from different parts of the country and decided to put Brown first “so that the whole question would not smack of being a purely Southern one” (Maruca, 2003, p. 1).

The literature revealed that the Brown decision profoundly influenced education in the United States, particularly for African Americans (Tillman, 2004). The years between 1954 and 1965 were the most troubling for Black teachers and principals (Ethridge, 1979; Tillman, 2004). Hudson and Holmes (1994) and Tillman (2004) discussed the impact of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas (referred to
henceforth as Brown) on Black teachers and the teaching profession. In 1954, an estimated 82,000 Black teachers educated 2 million African American public school students. Ten years later, over 38,000 teachers and administrators had lost their jobs in 17 Southern and border states. Ethridge (1979) revealed five factors that aided the loss of employment for Black educators after Brown. First, judges faced with questions of inferior schools perceived Black teachers as inferior. Second, judges were hesitant to intervene with local school board policies and practices about segregation. Next, the courts were not prepared to handle the massive resistance to the mandate to desegregate schools. Then, the failure to monitor adequately the court orders and ineffective data collection were prevalent after the decision. Lastly, the Brown decision appeared to be more a civil rights decision than an educational decision. The lack of data prevents the true impact of the decision on Black educators; however, history reveals that many African American teachers, principals, and superintendents lost their jobs because of the decision (Ethridge, 1979; Tillman, 2004).

After the Brown decision, most Black principals were dismissed immediately, demoted, or reassigned (Irvine, 1988). According to Picott (1976), data from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History revealed that in the South, the number of Black principals decreased by 90%. Alabama went from 134 Black secondary school principals in 1964 to 14 in 1970. Kentucky in 1964 had 350 Black principals and in 1970, only 36. In Texas, the number of Black principals decreased by 600 from 1964 through 1970. In 1964, in Virginia, 107 Black principals headed secondary schools; in 1970, there were 16. Delaware employed 50 Black principals in 1964 and 16 in 1970.
(Coursen, 1975; Irvine, 1988). Most of these displaced Black principals became assistant principals in charge of disciplining Black children in these newly constituted, integrated schools; many other principals became classroom teachers or special project directors with little or no decision-making power (Irvine, 1988). After the huge decline in the number of African American school principals immediately following Brown, employment numbers stabilized, then increased in 1982 by 7.7% Black principals (Brown, 2003). After reaching a plateau in the 1980s, leadership appointments have regressed severely in recent years (Brown, 2005; Valverde, 2003). For example, in the school year 1990–1991, approximately 11,096 minority principals worked in the approximately 79,885 public schools in the United States (NCES, 1993/2014). In the school year 2012-2013, 13.4% of public school principals were Black or African-Americans (NCES, 2013).

Most historical literature on Black principals focused on the era before Brown and the years immediately following it (Tillman, 2004). The role of the 21st century principal still includes the duties of the principal teacher; however, in this age of accountability, the expectation is that school leaders possess and demonstrate deep knowledge of teaching, learning, and managerial/operational skills, and additionally make evident bottom-line results (Hess & Kelly, 2002).

There is a need for more research surrounding pre and post Brown v. Board of Education. For example, Fairclough (2004) argued that the “celebratory, often hagiographic” (p. 45), post-integration literature on segregated schools must be treated with caution for three reasons. First, some of the changes teachers regretted were
happening in public schools everywhere and not connected to integration. Fairclough used the example of former teachers interviewed in the 1990s, pointing to a deterioration of classroom discipline, but they quickly noted that during their school days, corporal punishment had boosted teachers' authority. Similarly, the decline in the status of both Black and White teachers is the result of several factors, especially the increase of white-collar jobs and changing attitudes toward professionals, among which integration is relatively unimportant. Secondly, even though some Black teachers deeply resented the claim that Jim Crow schools had been sanctuaries for incompetent teachers, both supporters and non-supporters of integration agreed that systematic discrimination had left many Black teachers, especially older ones, poorly educated and inadequately trained. Some teachers felt integration might raise standards. Lastly, the third and most profound reason begs to question whether segregated schools were as effective as the memories and beliefs former teachers have described. Most teachers usually have had positive experiences in school. Conversely, social scientists in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, John Dollard, and Allison Davis, concluded that many Blacks associated schools with disappointment, not with victory (Fairclough, 2004). Fairclough also alleged that even before claims of inferiority feelings related to Brown, Black teachers seemed to have preferred middle-class children and did not treat children with darker complexions very well.

**Gender and Educational Leadership**

The word “principal” connected to school leadership in the 1800s as an adjective before the word “teacher” (Pierce as referred to in Mendels, 2012). The “principal
teacher” was the lead instructor who accepted leadership duties as schools grew beyond one room. The principal teacher’s focus was to guide teaching and learning throughout the school; this role evolved into the position of the building principal (Marzano, Livingston, & Frontier, 2011; Mendels, 2012). Traditionally principals were males in a female-dominated profession. They occupied the top rung in a hierarchical structure, and many thought they were aristocratic, aloof, unapproachable males who answered only to those above them (MetLife Fellows, 2005).

Gender issues as they relate to women in educational leadership have been a major topic of discussion in educational research for many years. Because of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor created the Glass Ceiling Commission. The goal of this commission was to investigate and propose ways to eliminate barriers and discriminations that women and minorities encountered when trying to get into management positions (Morrison, 2012). Even though the Glass Ceiling Commission sought to increase positions for women and minorities in upper management jobs, the theory never became a reality for those whom it was intended.

A study by Livingston, Rosette, and Washington (2012) revealed that dominant Black women leaders did not experience the same backlash as dominant White women leaders. Their findings confirmed that lower status was assigned to White females and Black males when they displayed dominance instead of communality, whereas Black women and White men were not. These findings stress the significance and the complexities involved when studying the pros and cons of dominant behavior of women leaders.
Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger (2007) analyzed research studies conducted since 1985 to understand better how to achieve gender equity in early childhood education (ECE) through 12 leadership positions. They found that although the number of women in school leadership positions has increased, it still relates disproportionately to the number of women eligible to become administrators. These researchers also examined the pools from which administrators were chosen (teachers, certificated administrators, or those with master and doctorate degrees) and discovered that both White and women of color were still underrepresented in school leadership positions. The findings revealed that many of the barriers women aspiring to the principalship faced in the 1980s are still widespread today. For example, sex role stereotyping and overt discrimination still exist and continue to hinder progress in women’s careers. Family and home responsibilities continue to influence women’s paths of careers more so than the paths of their male counterparts. Lastly, the researchers noted that women continue to experience hostile work environments that dissuade participation and leadership. On the other hand, Shakeshaft et al. discovered that women have higher self-confidence, aspiration, and motivation to become educational leaders.

**African American Women in School Leadership**

African American women have always been a major power and influence in the advancement of education in the Black community. Reed (2012) declared that Black women were influential in the development and leadership of an educational system deeply engrained in racism and sexism. The historical relationship of the African
American woman to the Black community links directly to African American female principals’ maternal approaches to urban school leadership (Loder, 2002; Perkins, 1989).

Prior to the Brown era, educated Black women opened schools in the North and the South. They served as “Jeanes Supervisors” or female principals who worked in dual roles as principals and teachers (Tillman, 2004). Sarah Smith, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary MacLeod Bethune were among the famous African American principals who served in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Marie Stewart, born Marie Miller in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803, is said to have been the first African American woman to publically lecture and advocate equality for all, notably Black women. Stewart charged Black women to advocate for education. She advised, “Turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power” (as cited in Richardson, 1987, p. 41).

In the 19th and early-to-mid 20th centuries, the expectation was that principals and teachers would provide leadership in African American communities. Many viewed teaching and leading as social activism (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2001; Fultz, 1995; Loder, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 1996, 2000, 2003). During this time, Black women educators developed self-help programs and women’s clubs whose missions involved providing food and clothing to the poor, childcare for poor working mothers, and housing for orphans (Loder, 2002, 2005; Perkins, 1989). Wane (2009) added that as a transformative tool, education is one of the ways to change and disassemble social and political barriers. For many Black women, education was the tool that prepared them to
uplift the Black community (Shaw, 2004). In 1950, approximately half of all Black professionals were teachers (Cole, 1986; Irvine, 1988).

Research on a multigenerational sample of African American teachers suggested that the experience of being born in different periods, especially pre and post Civil Rights Movement, distinctively forms the perspectives of African American educators (Foster, 1997; Loder, 2005). Consequently, research also revealed that the educational pathways of African American women principals who were born on opposite sides of the Civil Rights Movement were different. These differences included the availability and quality of professional job opportunities and chances for advancement, and their experiences with racism and sexism in the profession (Loder, 2002, 2005).

To further support these findings, Tillman (2005) conducted a study of a subset of Black women who became school principals after the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. Many of these women compared their roles as principals to being like “community other mothers” (Collins, 1991; Tillman, 2005). These women felt they owed the community and struggled to reconstruct schools and communities through nurturing, teaching, and leading (Case, 1997; Tillman, 2005). Maternal approaches to school leadership have received mixed reviews and are often regarded as problematic when compared to traditional White male-oriented approaches (Loder, 2005). Consequently, the enactment of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 complicated the other-mothering view by redefining a long-standing relationship that had existed between African American principals and parents. Tillman (2005) contended that prior to segregation, the community viewed Black principals as liaisons who served as an
important connection between the school and the community. From the view of some of the Black principals in Chicago in 1988, Black parents were now accountable to a constituency who had no knowledge of the prior relationship between principals and schools, and therefore, was not adequately equipped to assume these newly granted rights and responsibilities (Loder, 2005).

**Black Feminist Standpoint Theory**

The theoretical framework of Black feminist standpoint theory (BFST) guided this study. BFST involves knowledge and practices that actively seek to answer questions that intellectual Black women face. This critical social theory mirrors the interests and standpoints of those who created it. Tracing the origin and dispersion of BFST or any theoretical framework demonstrates its relationship to the power of the group that created it (Mannheim as referred to in Collins, 2000). In other words, exploring the origin and distribution of BFST demonstrates the validation of the knowledge claims regarding how Black women view their lived experiences. Because of the exclusive, elitist group of scholars who have controlled the dispersion of what counts as knowledge, the experiences of African American women have not been included in constructed knowledge.

Race, class, and gender may not be the only oppressions that people encounter; however, one cannot deny that race, class, and gender have deeply affected African American women (Collins, 2000). BFST reflected the revision of the earlier definition of Black feminist thought to include the categorization of standpoint theory. Standpoint feminism hypothesizes that because women's storied lives and their roles in most
societies are different from men's storied lives, women experience a different type of knowing than do men. BFST integrates race into the conversation and remains important because Black women in the United States constitute a twice-oppressed group (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist thought describes the unique standpoint of African American women as they experience numerous forms of oppression in certain social settings (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Collins, 1991). Collins (1997, 1998, 2000) also added that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class affects the day-to-day activities of personal and professional experiences of African American women. The term *intersectionality* was conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), and then coined upon her realization that people who represent multiple forms of exclusion (e.g., race and gender) will regularly encounter at least two of these forms. Standpoint theory focuses on the view one has, based on where that person stands in a particular place in time. The two theories—Black feminist thought and standpoint theory—emerge to explain one way to view the reality of the existence of African American females as they maneuver through the workforce in 21st-century United States of America.

Black feminist activist, Cleage (1993), reminded us, as African American women, “We have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges” (p. 55). Simien (2004) defined Black feminist consciousness as the acknowledgement that African American women are status deprived because they encounter discrimination based on race and gender. She asserted that African American women are twice as deprived in social, economic, and political arenas.
BFST is a theory that recognizes Black women in the United States as one of many groups positioned distinctively within situations of injustice. It is a critical social theory because of its commitment to justice—for everyone in addition to one’s own group.

Collins (1991) proposed four core themes within BFST. The first theme, “the lived experience as a criterion of meaning” (p. 266), signifies the knowledge that Black women acquire because of their life experiences. “A heap see, but a few know” (Gwaltney, 1980, p. 83). This saying from the aunt of an inner city Black woman, Carolyn Chase, describes two types of knowing: knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge suggests the information we acquire, and wisdom indicates the application of the acquired information. The African American community has often valued “mother wit” or “street smarts” and quickly ridiculed “educated fools,” meaning knowledge without wisdom is a dangerous thing. “To black people like me, a fool is funny…people you can’t tell anything to, folks that would take a shotgun to a roach” (Gwaltney, 1980, p. 68).

Collins (2000) advised Black women to learn to deal with “educated fools” who would take a “shotgun to a roach.” Black women should intentionally be well informed to survive in a world where they are viewed as subordinates. Knowledge minus wisdom suffices for the powerful; however, wisdom is essential to the survival of the oppressed. Central to this theme is that people who came to be experts though lived experiences are more credible and believable than those who have only read or thought about these same experiences.
The second theme, “the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims” (Collins, 1991, p. 266), focuses on the importance of creating ties and relationships, because unjust and antagonistic happenings are seldom solved in isolation. Dialogue is an engaging conversation between two people; “it is challenging and resists domination” (hooks, 1989, p. 134). Dialogue with other members of the community is often used by Black women to explore new knowledge claims. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) stated that a major epistemological assumption that supports using dialogue to assess knowledge claims indicates that connection rather than isolation is an essential part of the process of validating knowledge. When their interactions, connections, and meetings promote harmony, dialogue allows people to connect with other humans and become invested members of the community. Dialogue is a way of learning. This use of dialogue differs from argumentative debates. Rooted in African-based oral tradition and used in the African American culture, this was a key way of separating truth from lies. Enslaved African Americans listened and could hear a lie as they repeatedly forced people to tell their part. They would “find a lie if it took them a year….They believed that a liar should suffer the pain of his lies, and they had all kind of ways of bringing liars to judgment” (Gwaltney, 1980, p. 32).

Third, the “ethic of caring” theme (Collins, 1991, p. 266), combines the use of self-expression, feeling, and empathy as a means for better understanding the Black woman’s unique experiences. This theme suggests that when ideas come from the heart, they cannot be separated from the people who share them. Personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are the three components at the center of the ethic of caring. The
first component, woven into African humanism, is personal expressiveness or individual uniqueness. The thought exists that because everyone is individually gifted, he or she should connect to the higher call from which the gift comes. The second component concerns the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue. The presence of emotion means that a speaker believes the validity of an argument. It is in contradiction with the Western belief that “sees emotions and intellect as different faculties” (Tate, 1983, p. 156). The third component, the capacity for empathy, entails an increased understanding of each other’s position. One 16-year-old told her interviewer why she chose to open up to him: “Some things in my life are so hard for me to bear, and it makes me feel better to know that you feel sorry about those things and would change them if you could” (Gwaltney, 1980, p. 11). Rooted in the Black community, these components re-emerge often in various combinations.

Lastly, “the ethic of personal accountability” (Collins, 1991, p. 266) also characterizes the epistemology of BFST. Discerning that individual morals affect knowledge, this fourth theme, the ethic of personal accountability refers to knowledge statements that are not objective. The expectation is that people develop what they claim as knowledge through dialogue and present those knowledge claims in a way that substantiates their concern for their ideas; the expectation is that people own and maintain responsibility for their knowledge claims. When discussing slavery, Zilpha Law maintained that each idea has an owner, and the identity of the owner matters. Law claimed that every single case has an oppressor, the oppressed, and the oppression (Andrews, 1986). Many Black communities stressed that people should have definite
positions on issues and take full responsibility for defending their knowledge claims. The notion exists that all views and actions are personal because they come from a set of core beliefs. Collins (1991) pointed out that these themes are expressed differently based on the influence of class, region, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

**Conclusion**

The relevant literature includes the concepts and ideas of effective leadership and school improvement, notably turnaround school leadership. The literature also captures the plight of the history of Blacks in education before and after the historical case of Brown. However, there is a need to probe deeper into gender and race in schools. The voices of African American female principals are seldom heard regarding their perceptions of the influence of race and gender on their professional lives. This research will increase the understanding and add to the research literature of an underrepresented group of school principals.
Chapter Three. Methodology

Background and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study was to investigate three African American female principals’ perceptions of the influence of race and gender on their leadership experiences. The study also explored how these principals compared their experiences in a turnaround school to that of a non-turnaround school. Black feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 2000) and the four competencies of turnaround school leaders (Copeland & Neeley, 2013) provide the analytical framework for this study.

More specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

- How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their leadership experience?
- How do African American female principals believe the leadership experience as a turnaround school principal differed from their leadership experience as the principal of a non-turnaround school?

Qualitative Research

This study used a qualitative research design to describe the leaders’ experiences as African American female principals in turnaround schools. Yauch and Steudel (2003) defined qualitative data as “the ‘words’ collected through interviews, focus groups,
participant observation, or related methods” (p. 465). Creswell (1998, p. 74) referred to qualitative research as “naturalistic” or “post-positivist” research, hence working from a certain paradigm or worldview; qualitative research happens within an entire set of beliefs, values, and methods. Creswell (2007) maintained that it is appropriate to conduct qualitative research on unexplored problems that we do not yet soundly understand.

Creswell (2007) provided a working definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (p. 37)

Validity and trustworthiness are two issues that qualitative researchers should take into consideration when designing a study, analyzing results, and deciding the quality of the study; this usually means research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and defendable (Patton, 2002). Therefore, in qualitative research, when considering issues of validity, it is important to investigate strategies established to maximize validity (Maxwell, 1996). Validity concerns whether the discoveries of a study are true and certain, true meaning that the findings of the research precisely reflect the condition, and certain indicating that evidence supports the research findings (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Carlson (2010) claimed that trustworthiness involves the level of trust that “the researcher did everything possible to make sure that the data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported” (p. 1103). To this end, member checking
increased trustworthiness in this study. Carlson (2010) declared that *member checking* is a single event that allows participants to verify the accuracy of the transcripts or early interpretations. In this study, member checking allowed the participants to check or verify the accuracy of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010; Doyle, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

**Narrative inquiry.** Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost, a way of thinking about experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). It is a way that “we collect, analyze, and represent people’s stories as told by them” (Etherington, 2002, p. 167). Although scholars have disagreed on the origins and precise definitions of narrative inquiry, they have agreed that narrative inquiry is embedded within realist, modernist, postmodernist, and constructivist strands, and centers on complex, constantly changing lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kohler Reissman & Speedy, 2006). This approach entails many forms, has several analytic practices, and is represented in diverse social and humanities disciplines (Creswell, 2007; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Czarniawska (2004) informed us, “Narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). The purpose of narrative inquiry is to understand experiences and tell the stories that result from these experiences. The telling of the stories is the closest we can get to the experience and increases our understanding of the human condition (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
Recruitment of the Participants

The target population for this study was defined as a group of African American female principals who have worked as turnaround school principals at elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Permission was directly requested from each principal to participate in the study. For purposes of this study, the names of the selected schools and principals were changed to maintain confidentiality. The school locations were described in general terms. Approval was obtained from the University of Denver Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants received a project information letter (see Appendix A) and a letter of consent as an attachment, explaining the study and their right to withdraw at any time (see Appendix B).

I identified the participants from the 2013 USA Government Open Data website that listed all schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIGs) and divided the schools into the four interventions. First, I reviewed the Open Data website for the schools in turnaround and created a database that included the name of the school, the name of the principal, the address, the phone number, and the email address. Using the database, I identified 160 turnaround schools receiving SIG funds. Then I narrowed the list to female principals, based mostly on names and subsequently narrowed the list to African American women principals, using phone calls or photos on school websites. Lastly, I contacted the principals via email or telephone and explained the study. If they expressed interest, I emailed the letter introducing the study (see Appendix A) and the informed consent (see Appendix B).
The recruitment of the three participants started via phone calls. After IRB approval for the research was granted, I called schools that I had located on the Data.Gov website and asked to speak with the principal. If the principal was not available (and usually she was not), I introduced myself using the prepared interview script. I either left a voice mail or was given the email address of the principal and told to email the information.

During the months of May and June 2013, I contacted, via phone and email, 22 potential participants. Five potential participants agreed to the study but we never connected for various reasons. In the end, I selected 3 participants, and the interviews were conducted by phone and electronic mail in June and July. The first participant agreed to be in the study after I had spoken with her secretary and emailed the informed consent; the interview was conducted via phone on the third of June. The second participant agreed immediately. I emailed her the informed consent and interview protocols, and we started the interview. She subsequently received a phone call, interrupting the interview, and she called me back. I realized the interview had not recorded, so we started again from the first question. I interviewed the third participant in July. The average length of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes. Table 1 depicts the time line for data collection.
Table 1

*Time Line for Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>Why</th>
<th>How</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07/22/13</td>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 1</td>
<td>Conduct/record interview</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/31/13</td>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 2</td>
<td>Review transcription of Interview 1</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/31/13</td>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 3</td>
<td>Review of formulated themes and meanings</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/20/13</td>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 1</td>
<td>Conduct/record interview</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/08/13</td>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 2</td>
<td>Review transcription of Interview 1</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/08/13</td>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Interview Protocol 3</td>
<td>Review of formulated themes and meanings</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Participants

In this narrative research study, purposive sampling was used; the sites and individuals were chosen because they “purposefully inform[ed] an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Inclusion criteria stipulated the following: (a) African American female, (b) principal of a public school whose experience included 1 to 3 school years in a non-turnaround school, and (c) principal whose experience included a minimum of one school year as principal of a school using the turnaround approach because of failure to meet NCLB guidelines.

All participants met the inclusion criteria. Eloise, who identified as an African American female, had been an educator for 16 years, four of which she served as a principal. Three of her years as a principal were in a turnaround school and one year was in a non-turnaround school. Prior to that, she was an assistant principal for three years,
during which she also worked as a District Coordinator of Staff Development. She had worked as a national staff developer for a private company, a literacy coach for two years, and a classroom teacher for seven years. Recently, the district promoted Eloise to Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and she was starting her second year in a doctorate program.

Bonnie, an African American female, was the principal of a turnaround middle school. She has been an educator for 24 years. At the time of this study, she was starting her third year as the principal of this school. Bonnie served as an elementary principal for nine and one-half years and a director of district programs for one year. She also taught middle school for 12 years and had a master’s degree.

Deborah, an African American female, had been an educator for 25 years. At the time of the study, she was the principal of a turnaround elementary school in the district where she had served as principal for 10 years and assistant principal for six years. One of the schools formerly under her leadership recently was recognized in two national publications for successfully using unorthodox methods to improve a low-achieving school. Deborah had a Doctorate in Education, an Educational Specialist Degree in educational leadership, a Master of Art’s degree in Middle Grades Education, and a Bachelor of Science in Special Education. In addition, she was certified in Public School Administration and a Curriculum Instructional Specialist, with a concentration in English. Table 2 presents the demographics of principals’ schools included in this study.
Table 2

Demographics of Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Eloise Grades</th>
<th>Bonnie Grades</th>
<th>Deborah Grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>1,218 Pre K – 6th</td>
<td>702 6th – 8th</td>
<td>358 Pre K – 5th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>03%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomically disadvantaged</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English learners</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student with disabilities</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Interviews

In this study, in-depth interviews were the source of data (see Appendix D).

Three contacts, comprising the interviews, were made with each of the participants, including an informational interview and two member-checking interviews. The data collection methods were continuously analyzed and interpreted.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The purpose of the first interview was to collect demographic data and ask and record the responses to eight open-ended questions (see Appendix C). The first interviews were conducted via telephone and recorded. The recordings were then downloaded to a jump drive for confidentiality.
The second contact served as a member-checking interview. The participants were emailed a copy of the transcription of the first interview; they were instructed to make corrections or any clarifications they deemed necessary. This process helped clarify the data and increase my understanding of the principals’ beliefs of their leadership experiences. At this time, the coding of themes was started. The third and final contact involved my sharing of the narratives and coded themes with the participants to ensure that this was the true representation of their lived experiences. This contact also involved identifying significant statements and formulating meanings. This document was emailed to the participants for member checking.

**Reflective Journal**

I kept a journal to document reactions from the in-depth interviews. These comments added to the triangulation of the study and therefore the validity of the research method. The *reflective journal*, a common practice in qualitative research, is a strategy the researcher uses to discern personal beliefs and ideas, and explain individual worldviews and prejudices (Ortlipp, 2008). The journal allowed me to reflect on experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and might inform research design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation, causing the researcher to make changes as new information unfolds. Using and keeping reflective research journals can make transparent to the researcher the messiness of the research process and expose the myth that research is a neat, linear process (Ortlipp, 2008).
Data Analysis

Once the narratives were constructed, both holistic and focused coding approaches (Saldaña, 2009) were used to analyze the narratives. Coding enabled me to move beyond concrete data and make logical interpretations (Boeije, 2009; Liamputtong, 2009; Saldaña, 2009, 2013). Saldaña’s (2009) Focused Coding was utilized to uncover emerging themes and understand the perceptions of the beliefs, challenges, and motivations of the three principals regarding race, gender, and turnaround leadership. Graphic organizers helped identify, code, sort, and group the data (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), and focused coding guided the categorization of themes and patterns (see Appendix E). Finally, the codes and themes were analyzed across the three narratives.

To conclude, the participants’ narratives were examined through the lenses of BFST: (a) the lived experience as a criterion of meaning of life experiences, (b) the use of dialogue, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000), along with the aforementioned competencies of turnaround principals: (a) driving for results, (b) influencing for results, (c) engaging in problem solving, and (d) showing confidence to lead (Steiner et al., 2008).

Statement of the Researcher Bias

Britzman (1991) has reminded us, as researchers, that as we enter into the lives of the participants, sympathetic participation is important and should reflect “a delicate balance between probing the motivations, intents, investments, and practices of persons,
and respecting their boundaries of privacy and vulnerability” (p. 16). As the research project evolved, I wrote in my journal,

In the beginning, this was a project to satisfy a course requirement; however, I now realize that because I have been trusted to enter into their storied lives, it is essential that I honor and protect these women as if they were my biological sisters (I have three), while at the same time I must stay true to my role as the researcher.

The desire to tell this story emerged from my work as vice principal, then interim principal of a public charter school hurled into a turnaround process. The school’s student body included 459 students, with two sections each of kindergarten through eighth grade. The faculty and staff consisted of about 70 people, including 25 teachers, 25 educational assistants, support staff contracted through the school district, a vice principal, and the principal. When the charter came up for renewal, members of the local school board directed the governing board of the charter school to select an education management organization (EMO) to help the school improve student achievement and school performance. The EMO staff recommended firing the principal of the school, and the governing board took this action. As a result of this action, I served as the interim principal from February until June of that school year. During this short time, I experienced a gamut of feelings: angered to the point of being enraged, scared, betrayed, and lost. I did not know whom to turn to for assistance.
In this study, I committed to stay close to the stories of the participants by fact checking in order not to allow my experience to bias or inform the lived experiences of the participants. I read and re-read the stories to assure that I captured their voices.

**Limitations**

Limitations outline boundaries for qualitative research studies. Delimitations narrow the scope of a study, and limitations also refer to potential weaknesses in the study (Creswell, 2003). This research was limited to the three African American female principals in turnaround schools who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate in the study. Moreover, it did not include any non-Black female principals. Findings gathered from this research study will inform school leadership practices; however, due to the nature of qualitative inquiry, these results cannot be generalized to all principals.
Chapter Four. Findings

This narrative inquiry was designed to understand three African American women’s perceptions of the influence of race and gender on their leadership experiences as principals in turnaround schools. I chose a qualitative approach to listen to the voices of the participating principals. I used holistic and focused coding to move beyond the concrete data, then analyzed the codes and categorized themes across the three narratives. Graphic organizers also helped to identify, code, sort, and group the data. Finally, I sought to uncover themes that emerged through the lived experiences of the three African American female principals of turnaround schools.

The following presentation of findings centers on the understanding that there is no universal experience of being an African American female principal of a turnaround school. Research on turnaround school leadership is mainly descriptive and does not disaggregate the experiences by race and/or gender. In the following section, I retell the stories of others by sorting out the “structures of feeling” or frame based on the specific perception of the social life created by those who lived it (Britzman, 1992; Williams, 1997).

In a discussion of teachers, Clandinin and Roseik (2007) asserted, “Understanding teaching requires that we pay attention to teachers both as individuals and as a group, listening to their voices and the stories they tell about their work and their lives” (p. 359).
The same can be said about principals leading schools. To understand leadership, researchers should pay attention to principals individually first and then collectively, as we listen to their personal and professional stories. Narrative inquiry usually starts by concentrating on the individual and her or his “personal understandings.” However, to understand fully the individual, it is essential to position the individual in the chronology of the story, while taking into account the school, the district, the community, the teaching and learning environment, the philosophies, the reforms, the trends, and anything that impacts the work (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007).

In starting the process of narrative inquiry, it is extremely important to capture the voices of all the participants. Elbow (1994) suggested that researchers play the “believing game” (p. 289). The believing game is a process of building a working relationship that personally connects the knower to the known. It involves a process of self-assertion into another’s life story, listening and giving voice to that person's story. Elbow continued, “The believing game…is essentially cooperative or collaborative. The central event is the act of affirming or entering in someone’s thinking or perceiving” (p. 289). I inserted myself into the lives of these women when I contacted them and invited them to participate in this research study. When Eloise left a message saying she would participate in the study, for me, the return of this phone call validated and breathed life into this dissertation. I adjusted the dialogue to honor and protect the anonymity of the participants.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their
leadership experiences? and (b) How do African American female principals believe the leadership experience in a turnaround school differed from their experience as the principal of a non-turnaround school?

The Narratives

Three African American female principals who had experience as school heads in both turnaround and non-turnaround agreed to participate in this study. I assigned pseudonyms to the principals: Eloise, Bonnie, and Deborah. See Table 3 for participant demographics.

Table 3

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Region of USA</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years as Educator</th>
<th>Years in Educational Administration</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Years as Turnaround Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eloise</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experience and Skill Prevail: Eloise’s Standpoint

Eloise grew up in a large city on the West Coast of the United States. She was reared in a Black household with both parents. Her family consisted of many races; both of her parents were considered Black, but her grandfather was White. Eloise’s parents were working professionals. Her mother worked as a director in human resources, and
her father was a business consultant and a restaurateur. She described her mother and
father as being supportive, very good parents. As a child, Eloise attended predominately
Black churches and neighborhood schools in the Black community. This changed during
sixth and seventh grades when she participated in a program that bused Black children to
a predominately White neighborhood, and in exchange, the White children were bused to
the predominately Black neighborhood. She described the difficulty of entering unknown
territory:

Then all of a sudden, you are bused, put on a bus (really, I was about 40 miles
away) to a community that was primarily Caucasian. It was like, here come the
Black kids to the White school….It was difficult, but with regard to overcoming
it, I had very, very good parents. I still do.

In 1998, Eloise began her educational career as a classroom teacher in the same
school district that she attended as a child. The school district had more than 655 schools
for more than 710,007 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). For the past 15
years, she worked in two districts at both the district office level and the school site level.
She has been a literacy coach, a national staff developer for a private company,
Coordinator of Staff Development at the district level, assistant principal, and principal.
Prior to her assignment at the time of the study, Eloise had been a principal of Johnson
Elementary, a school that was closed due to budget cuts and funding. She emphasized
that Johnson Elementary was one of three schools the district closed due to financial
problems and this was in no way related to her role or reputation as a school leader.
Because her school was closing, Eloise was looking for other opportunities in the district.
Moore Elementary, a persistently low-performing school with 1,281 students in grades pre-kindergarten through sixth, was continuing to decline. Due to the declining achievement at the school, the district took action by firing the principal. The closing of Johnson Elementary occurred at the same time that Eloise was looking for a new position in the district. She decided to apply for the principal position at Moore Elementary, and she was offered the position because of her “background in curriculum and instruction and staff development.” Throughout her career in the district, Eloise had earned a strong positive reputation due to her multiple roles and her work as a staff developer with a national company.

At the time of her selection as principal, Moore Elementary was not technically considered a turnaround school. When Eloise was hired, the district decided to implement the turnaround model and gave her the responsibility to lead the process of writing the School Improvement Grant. Her proposal was approved, and the school received $6 million to implement the turnaround model. One of the first things she did was to “handpick all teachers and classified staff.” She said that this type of personnel change was “unheard of” in her district. This process of selecting all teachers and staff meant that everyone at Moore Elementary was there because they had chosen to work there.

Eloise continued her work as a national staff developer and was in her third year as the principal of Moore Elementary, a kindergarten thru sixth grade elementary turnaround school. She managed over 100 certificated and classified staff, serving over 1,200 students. Eloise defined her role as being a “participant” in the learning
community. She saw her role as working with other staff members to make decisions about what worked for kids. Because she was able to receive the School Improvement Grant, she was able to build her team, and she described her leadership as shared, transformational, and instructional. Over two and one-half years, the test results of the school grew by “leaps and bounds.” This success created a condition of high morale amongst the teachers and staff; in fact, she stated that this high morale was much higher at West than at any other district school.

The majority of Eloise’s career centered on service to the district that educated her. She shared that the busing experience prepared her to work and deal with diverse races, cultures, and every socioeconomic level. She also believed that her self-acceptance and self-confidence allowed her to embrace and celebrate other cultures, classes, and races. Eloise discussed being unsure about the reasoning that led to the busing experience that bused White students into Black neighborhoods and Black students into White neighborhoods. This experience gave her first-hand knowledge of what it was like to be different and labeled as an outsider. She surmised that it must have been difficult for the White children as well because they, too, were going into unfamiliar territory. Eloise moved inward to her own feelings as she thought about how she felt and realized the White children possibly felt the same way. Eloise said, “I am sure it was difficult for the Caucasian kids too, coming to the Black neighborhoods, because they were probably treated similarly to the way we were treated in their school.” Eloise shared her own personal experiences when she discussed the challenge that comes with learning different cultures and different dialects, and leaving the comfort of your own
neighborhood. She concluded that this experience had contributed positively to her professional endeavors.

Eloise shared strong connections between her experiences as a Black woman in a community grappling with integration and her work as a leader, but she did not make strong connections between her perceptions of the role of gender in families and her work as a school leader. She shared a traditional perspective about gender roles, with males heading households. In her telling, she shared that “many circumstances and historical events led to the removal of Black men from the home,” hence creating mostly female-led households. “There is usually a matriarch, a grandmother, or a mother that is really in charge of the household, not only finances but also the day-to-day running of the home.”

Eloise said she was not sure if gender had played a role in her professional life and expressed that the people who hired her might have a different opinion. She commented, “To be honest with you, I don’t think that it has really played a part much at all….I think I was hired because of my expertise or my knowledge base as opposed to me being female.” The descriptions of her work history reflect Eloise’s belief that her choices shaped her professional life. She sought opportunities to improve her education and her skills; she recently became a doctoral student. She said, “I don't believe gender has played a role in my career directly. Being a working mother, attending school while working are choices that I made early in my career. But they had nothing to do with gender...just choices.” She shared that her own school experiences influenced her work as a leader, but the skills she has developed through her multiple roles and educational experiences have made her suited to be a turnaround leader. Eloise declared, “You really
need to know instruction, what works for kids and be willing, if you don’t know, to ask questions and learn as much as you can.” She concluded that it is important to learn continuously and build relationships with teachers, families, and students. Eloise stated that as a turnaround leader, it is important to be consistent, invested in the work, and be both a transformational leader and an instructional leader.

Eloise used her values about instructional expertise to guide the selection of her faculty and described herself as a leader of an instructionally focused team. Because of her respect for the teachers and the school community, she saw herself as a participant in the learning community that centered on what was best for kids. Eloise’s description of her story and path to be a turnaround leader indicated that she believed her career and success resulted from her skill, experience, and commitment to learning. She did not see her race or gender as inhibiting or contributing to her career, but she did share that it influenced her development as an educator and leader. Eloise was matter-of-fact, business-like, and to the point in our interviews. She seemed driven and focused, yet somewhat distracted because of her many responsibilities. As a single, divorced mom starting a new position and being a doctoral student, her plate was full.

**Race and Gender Matter: Bonnie’s Standpoint**

Bonnie grew up in the southern region of the United States and had served as an educator there for 24 years. She began her career in education as an elementary classroom teacher and taught for 12 years in the same district before becoming an elementary principal at Lincoln Elementary. After a brief period at Lincoln, the School Board asked her to take the helm of another elementary school, Davis Elementary, which
was having problems. I heard the pride in her voice when she said that within three years of her service as principal at Davis Elementary, the school improved significantly and has continued to perform well even to this day.

After nine years at Davis, the School Board decided to transfer Bonnie from Davis into the role of Director of 21st Century Programs at the district level. Her transfer resulted in the community’s refusal to accept her. Bonnie was evasive about why the community refused to accept her and hinted at her deep emotional reaction. She said, “People know that professionally you are the right person to do the job, but they know you are not the person that the community will accept.”

Upon completing one year as Director of 21st Century Programs, the Board of Directors offered Bonnie the chance to lead a turnaround school. From her performance at Davis Elementary School, they believed in her skills to bring reform to a school. Bonnie accepted the offer to serve as principal of South Middle School, where early in her career, she had taught history for three years. At the time of this study, Bonnie had just finished her first year at South Middle School. South Middle School included 702 students in Grades six through eight. The student body was 84% Black, 12% White, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Asian, with 75% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

During our interview, Bonnie seemed cautious and chose her words very carefully. As I started to ask the second question, she abruptly said, “I need to call you back.” In my journal, I noted this dynamic and wondered if it had something to do with the topic of my research. Bonnie did not share anything about her upbringing, as did the
other two principals. All she shared was that she was married and had two sons in college.

Bonnie described instructional leadership as the focus of her work, but her roles included behavior specialist, manager of budget, leader of professional development, and leader of community relations. Bonnie said, “South Middle School, when I came in 2011, was not in very good condition, but at the end of 2011-2012 school year, we met all of our goals, and now we are hopeful to make our goals for the end of the 2012-2013 school year.” This had not happened at the school before Bonnie became the principal. She characterized her role as “building policies and procedures to ensure that student learning took place.” The turnaround of South challenged Bonnie with a new context. Bonnie had experienced turning around an elementary school, not a middle school, so she noted the additional complexities of middle school. Many extracurricular activities exist, hence requiring more time and public relation skills. She also attributed some of the complexity to the age of the students: “Children are more demanding as they get older.”

Bonnie discussed the differences between leading turnaround and non-turnaround schools. She commented that the atmosphere is more relaxed in a traditional, non-turnaround school. She described the environment in a non-turnaround school, when you already have the students who are coming to you prepared and you have teachers who know what they are doing as teachers. You do not have that extra pressure of having to produce, having to prove, and having to document every little thing.
On the other hand, in a turnaround school, pressure to perform and produce is present because of the urgency to increase achievement. Bonnie noted, “You have to be able to document things that you’re doing; and when they work and when they don’t work, you have to talk about why, why it worked, or why not.” Accountability increases. Schools face closure if they do not increase test scores. The SIG interventions require extra documentation, evidence of student learning, and deadlines, which add extra pressure. She has to manage additional staff members and programs that support school turnaround. There were significant differences between turnaround and non-turnaround schools and elementary and middle schools.

Bonnie commented that expectations were very high for her; however, they were different for her White counterparts. She felt that for her, a Black woman, it was essential to perform. She felt as if she always had to have an answer whenever her decisions were questioned, and she always needed to document her actions. Bonnie alluded to the fact that it was necessary to be “prepared at all times,” and sometimes her superiors expected her to take the blame even if it were not her fault. Bonnie stated,

The expectations are very high and you do not get many breaks as far as making mistakes. People look for you to produce when others will not. You are held to a different criteria many times than your counterparts. There are things that you may do that are looked at quite differently than when a colleague may do it. The repercussions are different. We know that we have to perform, we have to be ready with an answer, we have to be able to document what we do….We just have to be ready sometimes to take a hit when maybe it’s not your fault, or
whatever, but people sometimes see things differently because they see that you’re seeing it.

Bonnie spoke about the relationship between perception and performance. She advised that one must be careful because often people realize that you are the person who is “qualified to do the job”; however, that does not necessarily mean that the community will accept you. She feels “White people often want Black people in the background doing the work while the White people get the credit and they appear publicly as the face of the achievement.” Bonnie said she had experienced this on more than one occasion. Overall, Bonnie believed race had influenced her interactions with others in her professional experiences.

On the role of race in her professional life, in her telling, Bonnie commented that traditionally people look for White people to be in leadership roles, adding that she observed this phenomenon across all socioeconomic statuses. Bonnie spoke frankly of the times she had been asked to do things to support her White peers, and they would get full credit for the work she had completed. She noted, “There have been many times when I have been asked to do things to support another Caucasian person for them to get the credit rather than I.” Bonnie cautioned that it is imperative to be very patient and carefully determine what intention people have when they want you to complete a task. She commented guardedly, “Do they want you to complete the task or do they want you to be another face on the job?” I interpreted this statement in two ways: Are you the person who will actually complete the task and others will get the credit, because some people will not accept a Black woman’s ideas or opinions? Or, Are you the token Black
who is expected to be on the committee, but not actually participate in the decision making, and just be the face that represents Blacks and women?

When discussing race and gender roles in the Black culture, Bonnie observed that many Black parents are still expecting White educators to be in leadership roles. She commented, “Blacks often accept their answers better.” Bonnie commented that Black parents were always looking for the next person in charge because they did not trust the information she gave them. She said she found this to be true in all socioeconomic statuses. She went on to say the Black community, specifically the church, still has certain expectations for men as well. Many often expect to see men in leadership roles and have started to expect more women in nontraditional roles.

Regarding gender roles in her professional life, Bonnie believed that most people seek men for middle school principal roles. In fact, she discussed relying on her male assistant principal to cover areas traditionally covered by men, such as discipline issues and athletics. She added that because so many people expect to see a male principal, she listens and uses her resources wisely. Bonnie maintained that working collaboratively with others is essential. She stressed the importance of working as a team. Finally, from her standpoint, Bonnie concluded that gender and race had significantly influenced her professional experience as a principal.

Even though Bonnie had been impacted by race and gender, she felt competent and confident in her abilities to serve at the helm of a turnaround school. The concerns she expressed about having to document and be more prepared than others because she
was a Black woman may have contributed to her ability to be successful and resilient leading a turnaround school.

Called to Serve: Deborah’s Standpoint

Deborah grew up in a home in the southeastern region of the United States with both parents. Her parents had been married over 50 years when her mother recently passed. Growing up with both parents in the home, Deborah reflected that she always had both positive male and female role models. She had been married for 24 years and has two children. She shared that she sometimes uses the techniques that she learned from her parents to support her children as well as her students. Deborah shared perspectives on gender and communication by commenting on how her son understands things that her husband shares, but he does not understand when she shares the same thing.

Deborah had a 25-year career within one school district at the time of this study. She had been in administration for 16 years. In addition to her school-based work, she also worked as an instructor at a math and science academy at a local university.

Deborah said she loves learning, which has resulted in multiple degrees. She has a Doctorate in Education, an Educational Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership, a Master of Art’s degree in Middle Grades Education, and a Bachelor of Science in Special Education. Deborah is certificated in Public School Administration and as a Curriculum Instructional Specialist, with a concentration in English.

Deborah began her teaching career at East Elementary and then moved to a teaching position at Northeast Middle School. She then served as an assistant principal
for 6 years before becoming the principal of West Elementary. Deborah described West Elementary as the largest Title I equity plus highly impacted student body in the county. She had over 800 students and 113 staff members. When she arrived, she was warned of the gang members because it was an inner city school. There was no PTA, and discipline was out of control. Deborah served as principal at that school for eight years. When she left West Elementary, the school had made consecutive growth for five years. They had come out of school improvement status, established a PTA, and won many reading awards. As a final point, under her leadership, West Elementary was recently recognized in two national publications for successfully using unorthodox methods to improve a low-achieving school.

Deborah left West Elementary in the middle of the school year. Deborah vividly recalled the day she felt a higher call to go to this school and positively influence the community. The District Superintendent sent an email that the district was looking for a principal to go to East Elementary. Deborah recalled thinking,

I wonder who is going to East, umm sure won’t be me….About two or three days later, I was in my car driving to work and something just came over me. I picked up my Blackberry and actually read it, the email from the superintendent again and realized that somebody (God) was speaking to me and said you must go there and you must impact the school in a positive way. It was like a calling on my life to come here and really impact this community and this school. I picked up the phone and called my superintendent (actually I emailed him) and said I would like to come in and talk with him about the possibility of serving at East Elementary
School. He decided it was a great move based on my impact at the previous school.

Deborah became principal of East Elementary in the middle of the school year. She had to hire two instructional coaches, a music teacher, a school counselor, and a few other positions. She remembered thinking that school had already been in session a half year, and they are trying to make improvements with only a portion of the school year left. Nonetheless, they actually exceeded growth in science and maintained growth in reading and math that first year. East was two times smaller than West, but its performance in the lowest performing 5% in the state reflected years of neglect. East qualified for a School Improvement Grant (SIG) because it was a historically low-performing school.

About 73% of Deborah’s current student population is Black. Deborah shared that many of the Black boys do not have fathers in their lives; however, she has many young males working and volunteering in the school community. Her outreach to the community has created a partnership with the church and other community organizations. For example, there are mentors for the Black boys provided through churches and other community organizations. She clarified that the focus is on need, not gender. In many classrooms a male and a female work together as teacher and teacher assistant, and it appears as if parents are taking care of the students. In my journal, I wondered if she had intentionally established this staffing pattern or was it just happenstance. Deborah did say that she has received many positive comments from visitors about male and females working together in the classroom.
Deborah mentioned leading a highly impacted school when NCLB was passed and the opportunity to make a difference. She talked about doing awesome things with the students and the positive impact this had on students. Deborah shared that accountability is prevalent in both turnaround and non-turnaround schools; however, the stakes are greater in turnaround schools. Money, technology, building human capacity, and doubly reporting are major components in turnaround schools. She further explained,

Accountability seems tangible. Meetings double in this role. Public relations are colossal. Everything is transparent, student data, student work, assessments, and discipline data. There is constant observation of the instructional core—the teacher, the student, and the learning.

When asked to address her lived experience as an African American female leading a turnaround school, Deborah’s answer focused on being a turnaround principal, not a Black female principal; hence, she responded, “It is a steep learning curve. Creating and building sustainable systems is very important.” For example, Deborah said she had to re-create a PTA that involved parents and had to hire teachers in the middle of the school year. As a reminder, she also remarked that “progress takes time.” Deborah pointed out that how leaders implement initiatives like Common Core makes a difference. She added that leaders should be transparent, honest, and reflective, and have compelling conversations with teachers; one must be mindful of the rate of turnover in turnaround schools as a whole. Finally, Deborah concluded, “It is essential to actively monitor and address personnel issues promptly. This job is not for new principals.”
Deborah’s strong work ethic was evident. She said anything is possible if you work hard, work as a team, and face your challenges. She mentioned believing in the children and being accountable. She discussed that she was using the summer to be reflective and make necessary changes to increase student growth. She was digging into the data to inform instruction, thinking about her leadership style, and making essential modifications to assure continued growth. She realized the importance of addressing personnel issues, saying, “If you have a teacher that is very incompetent, they expect that you are going to address that person, to help them to grow, put them on an action plan, or maybe help them to select another profession.” Deborah also discussed the importance of being open and honest:

There is no way that you can conceal all the information, because if you are all about making a change, making a difference, making a positive difference and impacting the entire school, then you want to share good, bad, or indifference; you’re going to figure out a way to make it better.

Deborah remarked that we cannot ignore the fact that racism and prejudice exist; however, she stressed, “Character is more important.” She emphasized the importance of creating a positive environment and teaching her students as well as her own children how to deal with and solve any challenges that they may encounter now or in the future. Deborah also mentioned the importance of trusting in God, walking in faith, and building strong family relationships.

Deborah commented that she has not felt the impact of gender in her professional environment. She felt that their system looks for people of high quality who have the
credentials, saying she did not think gender plays a role; however, “I try not to be naïve.” Yet she did not feel gender played a role in her selection as the principal to turn around East Elementary School.

When Deborah took on East Elementary School, she was returning to the school where she began her teaching career. She made intentional decisions to address the learning and social needs of her students; her decisions were supportive of gender and race, but she did not articulate these attributes as part of her decision-making process as a leader. Her story was full of faith, emotion, and passion for the community and students. Deborah’s faith was very important to her. She talked of believing and having faith that things would change. Deborah’s faith and beliefs allowed her to create partnerships with churches and realize the importance of aligning faith and hard work to create change. In my reflective journal, I noted that Deborah persisted in the face of challenge; she stayed focused and was willing to share her story.

**Research Questions and Themes**

This qualitative study is guided by the following two research questions: How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their leadership experience? and How do African American female principals believe the leadership experience as a turnaround school principal differed from their leadership experience as the principal of a non-turnaround school? The stories of each woman reflected the lived experiences of individual African American female principals. Even though these principals had different types of families, were raised and worked in different communities, and led different types of schools, their stories uncover
several recurring themes that reflected their experiences as African American female principals of turnaround schools. The themes that tied these stories together were (a) instructional leadership expertise, (b) educational and administrative expertise, (c) accountability through data, (d) transparency, (e) the family, and (f) the church.

**Instructional leadership expertise.** All three principals named instructional leadership as their area of expertise. This focus on the core element of the educational enterprise reflected their value for teachers and instructional expertise. Eloise said, “It really is important to not only be a transformational leader but you need to be an instructional leader and you really need to know instruction and what works for kids.” Bonnie said, “As a school principal, my main job is instructional leadership. I am the instructional leader, but within that job falls many roles.” Deborah talked about being an instructional leader, as well as about the support and meetings:

Even though I had to meet with Instructional Services in my previous role, it is more now—more meeting, more reporting, more of just showcasing what you’re doing, constantly, all the time. We have what is called instructional coordination meetings, and we probably have those more here than elsewhere.

All three women characterized their work as leaders who value and seek expertise but who are also relationship-oriented and adaptive to the needs of the community. Eloise spoke about the importance of being both a transformational leader and an instructional leader. She talked about the importance of knowing instruction in order to make decisions about what works for children. Eloise spoke to the importance of self-assessment and being transparent: “Be willing, if you don’t know, to ask questions….It
has helped me in my role with dealing with my teachers…the families and students.”
Bonnie added the necessity of directing policies and procedures to ensure “that student
learning takes place.”

**Educational and administrative expertise.** These women became turnaround
principals after long careers in education; they had worked a total of 67 years in
education, or an average of 23.3 years. To reiterate, Eloise has been an educator for 18
years. She served as a building principal for four years, an assistant principal for three
years, classroom teacher for seven years, an instructional coach for two years, and a
coordinator of staff development at the district level, and simultaneously at times as a
National Staff Developer for a private company. Bonnie has worked as an educator for
24 years; she worked as a classroom teacher for 12 years, 11 years as a building principal
and one year in central administration. Deborah has been an educator for 24 years, 10
years as a building principal, six years as an assistant principal, and served as a classroom
teacher.

Accordingly, the actions of these leaders support the literature regarding effective
school leaders in any school setting. For example, Brookhart and Moss (2013) contended
that the learning principal is one who actively engages in the learning community and is
“best able to lead a shift toward a culture of learning in the school,” (p. 11). Leaders who
were unable to see themselves as active learners in the school community continued to
focus on their roles as supervisors, and evaluations continued to drive the culture
(Brookhart & Moss, 2013).

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I also observed this value on educational expertise in the participants’ service in a variety of roles over the course of their careers; all had been classroom teachers, assistant principals, and principal for a least one year before becoming a turnaround school leader. Eloise and Bonnie worked as directors at the district level, and at the end of the 2012-2013 school year; Eloise received a promotion to return to a district-level Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Lastly, Deborah spoke of her returning to school and receiving an Educational Specialist Degree in 2008 and a Doctorate in 2012.

**Accountability through data.** The use of data to make instructional decisions was a recurring theme. The literature revealed that the use of data as a tool to guide instruction is a strategy used by effective school leaders and turnaround leaders (Copeland & Neeley, 2013; Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000; Steiner et al., 2008). Eloise talked about “looking at instructional strategies as well as data to inform our instruction.” Bonnie discussed the significance of showing evidence of student learning: “You have to justify, prove, and show what you are doing to move the students.” Deborah remarked, “You just have to be more intentional about your data, whether it is classroom walkthrough data, whether it is discipline data, whether it is academic, the K-2 assessment data, whether it is 3, 4, 5 integrated data.”

Each of the principals spoke to the increased level of stress and accountability of leadership in turnaround schools. Bonnie provided this insight:

To be honest, I have worked in schools that were not turnaround schools and the atmosphere is relaxed. In a turnaround school, you feel the pressure of having to perform and produce….You have to be able to justify, prove, and show what you
are doing to move the students, and you have to be able to do it in a timely manner. You have to be able to document things that you’re doing; and when they work and when they don’t work, you have to talk about why, why it worked, or why not. Therefore, it is a different kind of pressure.

Their descriptions of the impact of increased accountability were personal and reflected a responsibility to protect the community from these pressures. Deborah explained,

The accountability, is almost like, I guess I can say—you can almost feel it.

Accountability has always been there, I am completely aware of accountability, but here you can feel it when you walk into the door as the School Principal. I don’t know if other people can, but you can feel the… [she paused and sighed deeply] I don’t want to say how rigid it is, because I don’t think we have that type of school.

**Transparency.** Transparency was repeated throughout stories and contributed to the participants’ ability to maintain a learner stance. Deborah, talking about the importance of sharing information, pointed out that it is important to be open and honest. She reiterated that there is no way to conceal the vast amount of information about the school. Making a change means sharing everything, the good, the bad, or indifferent. It is imperative to share all of it. All the information should be used for school improvement. Eloise talked about being transparent about knowledge “and be willing, if you don’t know, to ask questions and learn as much as you can, and I think that has helped me in my role with dealing with my teachers who are very, very capable.” Bonnie added the significance of being transparent:
When you are in a school that has been in school improvement or is presently in school improvement, you have to be able to justify, prove, and show what you are doing to move the students, and you have to be able to do it in a timely manner. You have to be able to document things that you’re doing; and when they work and when they don’t work, you have to talk about why, why it worked, or why not.

**The family.** Family was a theme that appeared throughout the data. The family emerged as the personal families of the principals, the school community as a family, the families of the students, and finally the community in which the school was situated. First, the absence of the father was prevalent with the students they served, then the support two of the principals received from their families was discussed, and finally the need to work with the families and the community to create and sustain a community school was discussed.

Public comments and observations have often described African American fathers as absent, missing, nonresidential, noncustodial, unavailable, non-married, irresponsible, and immature (Conner, 2011). Conner (2011) maintained that father figures are actively present in the lives of Black children as mentors, teachers, preachers, relatives, stepfathers, social fathers, and biological fathers. Nevertheless, the absence of fathers is reported more often than not. This information was prevalent as the principals discussed gender roles in the African American community. Eloise noted that the male was traditionally the head of the household but departed due to various circumstances. Deborah related, “We have a lot of African American boys, especially boys without the
presence of their fathers in their lives—whether they are incarcerated or whether they are just not involved or whether they are deceased.”

Eloise talked about the support she received from her parents during a difficult time as a sixth grader. She was bused from the neighborhood school to a school in a predominately White neighborhood as the result of a district initiative to create diversity. Eloise also discussed that her parents as professionals were able to share similar experiences with her and concluded that the experience had prepared her to work with diverse cultures. Deborah discussed growing up with both parents and always having positive role models as parents. She also stated that she transfers many of the skills she uses with her own children to working with the students at her school. Deborah said it is important to create a school family to support the large number of kids who do not have traditional families at home and can at least experience family at school. Accordingly, Deborah spoke of classrooms that had both a male and a female working with the students. She likened it to an environment that appeared as a traditional family, like Mom and Dad working with the kids. Deborah reflected that many people had commented about the presence of both a man and a woman teaching the students.

The influence of mothers in the Black community has always been profound. Eloise expressed the belief that most households are female led. This belief lends support to the argument of some scholars that the mother-centered family was typical during slavery, after emancipation, and remains generationally to this day (Tolman, 2011). Finally, some scholars have conveyed the belief that the African American family is intact. It may not be traditional in the sense society perceives that it should be, but it is
the way Blacks have had to make it work for them since landing in the United States (Conner, 2011).

**The church.** The role of the church has always been significant in the African American community. Serving primarily as a house of worship, the church has always been a gathering place and the hub of the Black community. Funerals, weddings, baptisms, family reunions, and community celebrations have always happened in the church. The ultimate goal of the church has continuously been to support the community by connecting, reflecting, and refocusing. All participants mentioned the church during the interview. When addressing race in the Black community, Eloise discussed attending Black churches as a child and as an adult. Bonnie mentioned the church when discussing gender roles in the Black culture. She stated that even though the church has begun accepting more women in leadership roles, the church continues to view women in a traditional manner. Finally, Deborah pointed out that working with church was vital to supporting the needs of the school. She talked about attending community functions and speaking about the needs of the school. These meetings resulted in a partnership between the church and school to support the children of the community.

**Unique Themes Within Narratives**

Although Eloise and Deborah did not explicitly state that race and gender mattered to their leadership experiences, their stories and actions presented a different narrative. Each female leader shared deep commitments to Black communities of their schools. Deborah and Bonnie returned to the schools where they started their careers as
teachers. Black feminist standpoint theory resonated throughout each of their narratives; thus race and gender do matter.

The theme that dominated Deborah’s narrative was that God called her to serve the community at East Elementary School. She strongly believed that this placement was her calling to fulfill, and through hard work and perseverance, the school would reap the fruits of her labor. The fact that race and gender mattered in her professional life dominated Bonnie's narrative. She was confident and competent but very aware that her race and gender forefron ted how her colleagues and the community she served initially perceived her. Finally, Eloise believed that experience and skill were the dominant themes in her narrative. Eloise related that she had actually used race advantageously and, to her knowledge, gender had not influenced her professionally.

All three women consistently focused on their professional roles with varying attention to the impact of race and gender. Eloise and Deborah did not attribute their race and gender to part of their success of becoming principals of turnaround schools; however, their stories and behaviors provided differing narratives. On the other hand, Bonnie stated that many times she felt the influence of race and gender professionally and personally. She felt that others made decisions concerning her professional life based on her race and gender. For instance, she voiced that she was reassigned to another position because parents failed to accept her in the principal position. She also talked about being the black face on a committee. Finally, Bonnie added that oft times her White colleagues took credit for work she had completed. Personally, Bonnie spoke of the impact of
gender in the roles assigned in the church. Bonnie believed that the church still assigned traditional roles to men and women.

The dynamics of leadership are complicated. These dynamics become more complicated when the variables of race, gender and failing schools enter into the picture. Unexpected stories emerged upon listening to the voices of three Black female principals leading turnaround schools. Race and gender did matter, even though two of the principals did not believe it did. All of the principals did agree that leading a turnaround school is different than leading a non-turnaround school. They said the work is more challenging because the stakes are higher. Finally, it is essential that the storied lives of underrepresented people are heard and included in what counts as knowledge.
Chapter Five. Discussion and Recommendations

In recent years, improving the lowest-performing schools in the United States has been a concern of policy makers and educational leaders (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Recent studies have found that effective leaders can positively influence student learning and result in school success (Kanter, 2003; Leithwood & Jantz, 2008). According to Fullan (2002), “The more that large scale, sustainable educational reform [standards-based education] becomes the agenda, the more that leadership becomes the key” (p. 1). Theories abound on what leaders should do and how they should do it. Even though this information can be helpful, no one can guarantee that any leader will be successful by embracing a particular approach. Even when leaders do the same things, there is no guarantee that the effects will be the same. Many leadership theories exist to address leadership styles and practices. Situations and circumstances often define actions. There are always outliers that require new ways of thinking and acting (Leithwood et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 2001).

This qualitative research study, grounded in narrative inquiry, foregrounded the voices and experiences of three women participants, while challenging assumptions about whose experiences are respected and whose voices are heard. The following questions guided this study: How do African American female principals of turnaround schools perceive the influence of race and gender on their leadership experience? and, How do
African American female principals believe the leadership experience as a turnaround school principal differed from their leadership experience as the principal of a non-turnaround school? The findings of the study revealed strong consistency across the stories of these Black female principals of turnaround schools. The following themes emerged as dominant forces in the professional lives of these women: instructional leadership expertise, educational and administrative expertise, family, church, transparency, and accountability through data. The themes are not linear; they overlap and cut across the stories of the participants. The perceptions of the impact of race and gender through narrative accounts of their personal and professional lives varied across these women.

The diversity in their explicit and implicit perceptions regarding the role of race and gender in their professional lives prompted interrogation of these findings through the theory of how Black women make meaning of their lives, Black feminist standpoint theory (BFST), and how the research literature describes the characteristics of turnaround school leaders.

Standpoint feminism hypothesizes that because women’s storied lives and their roles in most societies are different from men's, women experience a different type of knowing than do men. BFST integrates race into the conversation and remains important because Black women in the United States constitute a twice-oppressed group (Collins, 2000). The themes that frame BFST are (a) the criterion of lived experience, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal accountability.
The leadership needs of chronically low-performing schools differ from those of effective schools. Documented experiences demonstrate that it is possible for leaders of failing organizations in all sectors, including education, to make quick, dramatic improvements (Public Impact, 2008). However, success within a turnaround context requires specialized competencies, “patterns of thinking, feeling, acting or speaking” (Steiner & Hassel, 2011, p. 4). The four competencies of turnaround leaders identified by Steiner and Hassel (2011) are driving for results, influencing for results, solving problems, and showing confidence to lead. These competencies are consistent across the dominant literature on turnaround school leaders.

**Black Feminist Turnaround Leadership**

The literature on turnaround leaders is not disaggregated by gender or race to reflect the lived experiences of women or people of color. The participants in this study reflected leadership that integrated BFST with the documented competencies of turnaround leaders. Turnaround leadership competencies emerged across the narratives of the three Black women principals, but they were operationalized through the themes of BFST. The themes, educational and administrative expertise and instructional leadership expertise, were described by the participants as lived experiences that allowed them to drive and influence for results. The women described accountability through data that reflected the ethic of caring, and personal accountability that supported their problem solving and resiliency necessary for the confidence to lead turnaround schools. A more thorough examination of the individual narratives of these African American principals revealed possible distinctions regarding the impact of race and gender on these
competencies. The discussion below reveals how these women portrayed turnaround competencies as Black female school leaders.

**Driving for results through personal accountability.** Driving for results involves the following competencies (a) achievement, (b) initiative and persistence, (c) planning ahead, and (d) monitoring and directiveness (Steiner et al., 2008). For example, achievement, monitoring, and directiveness were demonstrated when Eloise commented, “My whole role is...being an instructional leader and a team member...moving forward with what works for kids and looking at instructional strategies as well as data to inform our instruction.” Bonnie demonstrated initiative and persistence when she expressed, “There are many people who expect a man in my role so I try to listen to people, use the resources that I have, and try to meet people halfway.” Deborah focused on achievement, planning ahead, and monitoring when she talked about aligning the additional support that comes with receiving a School Improvement Grant. The school is high priority because historical data show that its performance is among the lowest 5% of schools in the state. Deborah said, “We have additional support staff...a lot of support within the school....My job as the school leader is to align all that support.”

All three principals framed their results orientation through the lens of instructional expertise and a team orientation. The description of competencies by Steiner et al. (2008) is more broadly confined to the leadership dimensions of results-oriented action planning. The focus is on achievement, more so than making specific attribution to the need for educational expertise. It is certainly evident that results of achievement as measured by test scores are the bottom line; however, to sustain
improvement, it is necessary to support the people and implement maintainable, sustainable systems. Finally, driving for results is intentionally and strategically behaving in ways that guarantee measurable results, such as test scores. The increase in test scores under Eloise and Bonnie’s leadership provided strong evidence that they achieved this competency. They both discussed meeting goals. Eloise said that “[although] they were deemed persistently low achieving, they earned high points on the state standardized test.” Bonnie commented that they met their goals the first year she came, and they were hopeful of making their goals again at the end of the current school year.

The ethic of personal accountability is present in driving for results. According to BFST discerning that individual morals affect knowledge, the fourth theme, the ethic of personal accountability, refers to knowledge statements that are not objective (Collins, 2000). People are expected to develop what they claim as knowledge as well as defend it in dialogue and be held accountable for their knowledge claims. The literature revealed that the notion exists that all views and actions are personal because they come from a set of core beliefs (Collins, 2000). Eloise described her standpoint from her set of core beliefs: “I really consider myself an instructional leader…my whole role is to be a participant within the professional learning community…and a team member moving forward with what works for kids.” Bonnie talked about her sense of personal accountability:

When you are in a school that has been in school improvement or is presently in school improvement, you have to be able to justify, prove, and show what you are
doing to move the students, … be able to do it in a timely manner....It is a different kind of pressure.

Deborah asserted,

If you have a teacher that is very incompetent, they expect that you are going to address that person, to help them to grow, put them on an action plan, or maybe help them to select another profession. It is a challenge, but you have to love what you do.

**Influencing for results through the ethic of caring.** Influencing for results involves inspiring stakeholders to line up thoughts and behavior to achieve desired results (Steiner et al., 2008). The competencies in this cluster include (a) *impact and influence:* actions that intentionally shape perceptions, (b) *developing others:* intentionally influencing the short- and long-term efficiency of others, and (c) *team leadership:* accepting the authoritative leadership role of the group for the profit of the organization.

Bonnie shared her perception on the influence of gender; she mentioned using her male assistant principal in positions that are traditionally filled by men. Even though she used the male assistant principal in areas traditionally occupied by men, Bonnie accepted the authoritative leadership role of the group for the profit of the organization. She described all the duties that her job entailed. She said, “We wear many hats. It is very hard to quantify what a principal does but we serve all those facets.” Deborah also identified the levels of influence, but shared the strategy of releasing responsibility to others: “We have additional support staff…My job as the school leader is to align all that support.”
All three principals spoke of the complexity of the role of principal and shared elements of influencing others. Bonnie articulated a more authoritative stance and also expressed conflict between her role and gender expectations. She said people usually expect to see a man as the principal of a middle school. Eloise appeared to be more of a learning leader. She spoke of being a participant in the learning community, always learning, asking questions, and moving forward with what works best for kids. However, Eloise spoke of her track record of being known for getting the job done. Deborah spoke of intentionally influencing others in her role as instructional leader. Finally, the principals seemed to understand the importance of influencing others to make sure that their actions aligned with the vision of the school.

All three of these women influenced for results through acts of caring. The BFST ethic of caring theme combines the use of self-expression, feeling, and empathy as a means for better understanding the Black woman’s unique experiences. Three core components comprise this theme: personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy. Personal expressiveness encourages using the gift within you to complete the assignment from a higher call that is attached to your life. For example, Deborah recalled that she felt a higher call was attached to her assignment to go to West Elementary.

The second component, feeling, entails the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue. The presence of emotion, completely in contradiction with Western thought, indicates the speaker’s belief in the validity of the dialogue. The final component of the ethic of caring theme, empathy, involves an increased understanding of each other’s position. Deborah illustrated this theme of caring in the following comment,
So it’s a journey...you have to look at all the data and get the input from the people that are serving the kids... being very open and honest…because if you are all about making a change, making a positive difference and impacting the entire school, then you just want to share good, bad, or indifference, if you’re going to figure out a way to make it better.

Solving problems through the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Turnaround schools are places where there have been repeated failures. It is imperative that the leader have a problem-solving rather than a blame orientation. Solving problems involves the following clusters: (a) analytical thinking and (b) conceptual thinking. Analytical thinking includes the capability to explain things clearly. Conceptual thinking is the ability to see patterns in things that do not seem to be related (Steiner et al., 2008). For example, problem solvers use data to make instructional decisions, creating clear, rational plans that people can follow and confirming that the learning goals of the school connect realistically to the classroom activities (Steiner et al., 2008).

All of the principals shared details that reflected their problem-solving orientation to leadership. Bonnie was proud of supporting a new record of achievement at the school, “When I came to this school, it was not in very good condition in 2011, but at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, we met all of our goals and now we are hopeful to make our goals for the end of the 2012-2013 school year.” Deborah shared strategies to influence some of the social issues facing her students. She discussed hiring young males and recruiting volunteers as role models for the high number of Black students, especially young boys who did not have fathers in their lives. She said, “I think it is very important
that we create such a school climate and community where they have positive role models....A lot of volunteers actually come into our building and do help our kids.”  
Eloise seemed to speak more to the human factor when she discussed how morale had increased as a result of participating in the turnaround. She said they were labeled “persistently low achieving,” but the substantial increase in the standardized scores tremendously improved teacher morale.

The BFST use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is often used to solve problems. This theme focuses on the importance of creating ties and relationships, because unjust and antagonistic happenings seldom are solved in isolation. Collins (2000) revealed that Black women often use dialogue with other members of the community to explore new knowledge claims. The literature has also asserted that connection, not isolation, is a key part of assessing new knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986). Eloise observed, “Be willing, … to ask questions and learn as much as you can… that has helped me in my role with dealing with my teachers... also dealing with the families and the students.” Bonnie pointed out, “You have to be able to document things that you’re doing; …when they work and when they don’t work, you have to talk about why - why it worked, or why not.” Deborah explained, “I said let’s look at this data and find a way, why are teachers leaving, or what is going on here....So when I say disclosing all the data, you really have to be very open...authentic, transparent...and it may not feel good sometimes.”

This use of dialogue was necessary to explore knowledge and one’s claims of knowledge. This dialogue is a conversation that appears to outsiders as a debate. In
real, it a lively discussion about making knowing and intelligent decisions based on experiences and information. This discourse supports decision making using valid knowledge and is a way of staying connected to one’s peers.

**Showing the confidence to lead through the criterion of the lived experience.**

Showing the confidence to lead involves behaving ethically and courageously while making focused decisions on the front line of change. The competency in this cluster is self-confidence (Steiner et al., 2008), which has also been described as high self-efficacy beliefs. People with high self-efficacy beliefs and high self-confidence are guided by visualizations of successful scenarios that shape their performance. People who doubt their self-efficacy envision failure and dwell on all that can go wrong. It is wise to be aware of what can go wrong; however, it is difficult to achieve much while wallowing in self-doubt (Bandura, 1993). “Self-efficacy is not an assessment of an individual's number of skills but rather represents people's beliefs of what they can do with what they have” (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010, p. 90). Paglis and Green (2002) defined leadership self-efficacy as

> a person’s judgment that he or she can successfully exert leadership by setting a direction for the work group, building relationships with followers in order to gain their commitment to change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacles to change. (p. 217)

All three participants shared high self-efficacy beliefs through their articulation of their commitment to education, diverse roles, and learner stance. Eloise grounded her belief in her selection as principal to the relationship between her experiences and reputation: “They asked me to come based on my background in curriculum and
instruction, and also my reputation of being able to increase motivation, morale, to shape culture, and shape morale....I was selected and placed here.’

Deborah expressed that she responded to the offer that the superintendent sent to the principals, and accepted because of a divine appointment and because of her record of improving a failing school. Divine intervention seemed to clarify for Deborah her belief in herself, her ability, and her skills to turnaround this historically failing school. Bonnie expressed confidence in her skills when she talked about her counterparts' wanting and often taking credit for work she completed. Bonnie appeared frustrated that her race and gender were at the forefront more than her proven track record of turning around a failing school; she wanted equal treatment. She commented on the racial dynamic involved in the selection of leaders: “Professionally speaking, again, people traditionally look for Caucasian people to be in leadership roles….That has been definitely my experience in more than one situation.”

Confidence to lead is supported by prior experience, which is rooted in the criterion of the lived experience. Central to this theme is that people who came to be experts through lived experiences are more credible and believable than those who have only read or thought about these same experiences. Black feminist standpoint theory indicates that Black women place more value on lived experiences than on theory or job titles. The stories of the women in this study support this theory. Each woman shared that she landed in her current position based on her prior work in schools that faced the challenges common to turnaround schools but were not classified as turnaround schools by the federal government. Eloise recalled how she was asked to come because of her
background as an instructional leader and reputation to shape school climates and cultures. Bonnie commented that she had successfully turned around a school that the Board asked her to lead. She said the school continues to do well. She expressed confidence that her current school will be turned around as well. Deborah explained that her reputation and experience in school improvement demonstrated that she is capable of turning around a school. She also mentioned that two national journals featured articles discussing the unorthodox methods she used to improve a failing school.

**Implications**

The lived experiences of these women reveal leadership competencies of successful turnaround principals. In their quest to improve these failing schools, these three principals worked relentlessly and displayed the competencies needed for turnaround school leader success. The depiction of these competencies was tightly aligned with BFST. Jennings (as cited in Mitgang, 2012) said, “Leadership only succeeds if the leader brings other people along into the same vision, and they are able to work together and trust one another” (p. 4). Most turnaround schools are located within minority communities, and the women in this study were able to leverage their race and gender to support their leadership.

The research on turnaround leader competencies does not reveal gender or racial distinctions. However, a study conducted on lived experiences of six female principals aligned with the turnaround competencies (Fennell, 2005). This research revealed ways to break barriers that exist when women move into any leadership positions. Even though the study did not explore gender differences, Fennell (2005) highlighted four
behaviors that these women used to overcome barriers: (a) developing a collaborative environment linked to a common vision, (b) esteeming people and their roles, (c) using authority and distributing it to others, and (d) not engaging in practices that did not support the overall objectives and demonstrating confidence as the leader to deal with issues. Littrell (as referred to in Sanchez & Thornton, 2010) concluded that even though these behaviors are considered stereotypical of women, they were related to the feminine way of knowing, which is embedded in social relationships and BFST. The experiences of these three Black female principals support these findings about female leadership and provide additional context to the lived experiences of people of color.

Finally, it is evident that leading a turnaround school is not an easy task. The findings both challenge and support the literature concerning the impact of race and gender on the professional lives of these women. The complexities of school leadership are exacerbated in turnaround schools. The stakes are higher and there is little room for error. Interviews with three principals revealed competent, dedicated leaders who cared about children. They discussed the challenges that come with working in hard-to-serve schools and dealing with children and families who live in poverty. The interviews revealed that these leaders were committed to turnaround failing schools and instilling hope in children and families that education can make a difference in their lives.

Significance of Study Revisited

The research questions of this study focused on turnaround leadership skills and the impact of race and gender on leadership. These narratives provided a close, personal viewpoint of the lived experiences of the principals who have worked daily to serve at
risk populations while at the same time maintaining balance in their professional and personal lives. Their experiences highlighted the hard work, dedication, knowledge, and skills necessary to make rapid changes in failing schools. The analyses of the narratives led to many questions as I attempted to add meaning and make sense of the lived experiences of the principals. Research studies reveal that leaders’ experiences in many organizational settings, education included, can make “quick dramatic improvement” (Public Impact, 2008).

There was tension between the competencies to obtain turnaround leadership positions and the criteria that these women used to share their qualifications for the job. All three women provided extensive detail on their qualifications and educational expertise; yet in their research, Steiner and Hassel (2011) diminished the importance of these qualifications and promoted processes, such as a behavioral event interview, that rely on the judgment of interviewers to determine competencies. The turnaround principals in this study focused on developing the human capital while being servant leaders as a means to impacting test scores, whereas relentless driving for results is a turnaround leader competency defined by Public Impact (2008). Driving for results seems to put the relentless focus on the scores before the development of the whole child. The turnaround leader competencies are present in the narratives of these participants; however, they are seen through community and relationships rather than through the individual leader’s drive and influence.
Summary

Leading failing schools in high poverty neighborhoods is a daunting task. The people who work in the school with the students and families are on the front lines of change. The principals of these schools are the agents leading the change. A study by Livingston et al. (2012) revealed that dominant Black women leaders did not experience the same backlash as dominant White women leaders. Their findings confirmed that White females and Black males were assigned lower status when they displayed dominance instead of communality, whereas Black women and White men were not. These findings stress the significance and the complexities involved when studying the pros and cons of dominant behavior of women leaders.

How will listening to the voices of African American female principals of turnaround schools significantly contribute to school leadership in the 21st century? Although White men still occupy most of the leadership positions in the United States, the number of women and other people of color in leadership positions has increased notably. In 2009, of the chief executive officers in all U.S. private and public organizations, 23% were women, 4% were Black, 4% are Asian, and 5% were Hispanic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as referred to in Eagly & Chin, 2010). Currently, an estimated 6,000 Black females and 3,630 Black males work as principals in the United States (NCES, 2013). Even though the number of women and leaders of color has increased, the demographic of school leaders often does not align with the communities they serve.
All three participants in this study were experienced leaders who were drawn to the difficult work of turning around chronically low-performing schools. The participants discussed the differences between leading turnaround versus non-turnaround schools. Accountability is prevalent in both turnaround and non-turnaround schools; however, it increases and seems tangible in turnaround schools because the stakes are greater. Money, technology, building human capacity, and doubly reporting are major components in turnaround schools. Meetings double in this role. Public relations are colossal. Everything is transparent—student data, student work, assessments, and discipline data. There is constant observation of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Schools face closure if they do not increase test scores. The School Improvement Grant interventions require extra documentation, evidence of student learning, and deadlines, which add extra pressure. Principals have to manage additional staff members and programs that support school turnaround. The call to serve their community led each of these women to accept the challenge and responsibility of turnaround leadership.

The stories of these women validated Black feminist standpoint theory and indicate the need to consider diversity and context, as researchers and stakeholders define competencies for leaders of the lowest-performing schools. These women were able to use lived experiences, dialogue, caring, and personal accountability to make a difference in their school communities and the lives of their students.
Implications for Further Research

The literature review in this study has included the concepts and ideas of leadership in general, in effective schools, and in turnaround schools. However, there is a need to research sustainability in turnaround schools and to operationalize and experience best practices in failing schools. Fullan (2005) concluded that capacity building and accountability often improve test scores; however, gains may be only short term. He stated that long-term commitment is essential from all stakeholders, from the central office leaders to principals and teachers. Whole system reform and sustainability are difficult because one size usually does not fit all. Change in leadership, whether in central administration or in the school administration, often entails philosophical ideas that inform other systemic changes, which may or may not fit the school or the district and the needs of the students, community, or faculty and staff. District-level support is essential when looking at whole-system reform and sustainability.

Further research might explore the impact of economics and class status on African American women leaders. Class status might impact the standpoint of women in professional positions. This might also impact both race and gender roles in their lives. In a quantitative analysis of data gathered from the 1992 National Survey of Black Americans and the 2004 National Black Feminist Study, Harnois (2010) found that gender is not a significant predictor of the standpoint that Collins (2000) described. This finding should be explored more deeply to possibly uncover the underpinnings connected to gender.
In general, there is also a need to listen to the voices of the underrepresented in school leadership, school improvement, and school reform. Exploring the lived experiences of underrepresented populations in school leadership might improve conditions for their success. For this country to continue as a major world leader and power, it is imperative to engage in research that supports creating and sustaining the strong educational systems that embrace and make it possible for all American citizens to achieve the American dream.

This work has afforded me the opportunity to join the academic conversation; it is a chance for me to tell the stories of three African American women principals while adding to the legacy of the women in my family who have come before me, and those who will come after me. It is a chance to reflect upon who I am, what I am, and why I am. This work has provided a glimpse into the lives of women who worked relentlessly to educate underserved populations and turn around failing schools. They lived to tell, and they were willing to share. They boldly and courageously dared to make a difference. They also inspired me and gave life to a story that otherwise could not have been told. Stewart, the renowned Black political writer, charged Black women to advocate for education (Richardson, 1987). She reminded us, “Turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power” (as cited in Richardson, 1987, p. 41).

Conclusion

Behind every face is a story. Behind every story is a face. Some stories will never be told. Others will be told and retold. Human beings live and tell stories about
their lives. King (2003) noted that “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories that you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (p. 6). It is my hope that I have asked the right questions, provided some answers, and left the door open for others to come through and exercise their right to ask questions, seek answers, and tell stories.

King quoted the Nigerian storyteller, Ben Okri, as saying,

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 153)
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Appendix A. Cover Letter

Date

Dear

You have been selected to participate in a doctoral research study that investigates the lived experiences of African-American female principals of turnaround schools. The study is conducted by Vickie P. Collins, as the culminating project of a Ph.D. degree at the University of Denver. The enclosed Consent Form gives more details on what the study will involve and where you may get additional information if you have questions.

If you are willing to participate in the study, I encourage you to review the enclosed documents and sign the consent form. Once signed, please return the forms to Vickie P. Collins in the enclosed stamped envelope.

If you have questions for me regarding this study, feel free to contact me. I can be reached at 720-232-1888 or email: vcollins2020@yahoo.com

Sincerely,

Vickie P. Collins
Appendix B. Informed Consent Form

DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Title: *Turnaround Leadership: Listening to the Voices of African American Female Principals*

You are invited to participate in a study that explores the leadership experiences of African American female turnaround school principal. In addition, this study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of a class in entitled ADMN 4995: Dissertation Research. The study will be conducted by Vickie Pease Collins. Results will be used to complete a Doctor of Philosophy and to receive a grade in the course. Vickie Pease Collins can be reached at 720-374-1940 or Vickie.Collins@du.edu. This project is supervised by the course instructor, Dr. Kent Seidel, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, 303-871-4456, kent.seidel@du.edu.

Participation in this study will consist of three interviews scheduled at your convenience by phone or Skype during the months of May, June, or July 2013. Each of the interviews is anticipated to be 60 to 90 minutes in length. Participation will involve responding to open ended questions about your experiences as an African American female principal who headed a turnaround school. You will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for accurateness. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.
Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated because of this study will use only group averages and paraphrased wording. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may email du-ibr@du.edu, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or call 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.
I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study entitled *Turnaround Leadership: Listening to the Voices of African American Female Principals.*

I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature _____________________ Date __________________

___ I agree to be recorded.

___ I do not agree to be recorded.

___________ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:
Appendix C. Principal Interview Protocols

Principal Interview Protocol (Interview 1)

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work in school leadership.
2. Please describe your present role as a school leader.
3. Please tell me the story of how you came to be in this role.
4. How would you describe gender roles in the African American culture?
5. What role, if any, has gender played in your professional life?
6. What role, if any, has race played in your professional life?
7. When thinking about your current leadership role, are there differences from your previous leadership roles? If so, what differences stand out for you?

Principal Interview Protocol (Member Checking Interview 2)

Each participant will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts from the first interview. This member checking process will help to clarify the data prior to data analysis. During this interview, themes will be shared with the interviewees so that they have the opportunity to add additional insight or information to the themes that I think are emerging themes.

Principal Interview Protocol (Member Checking Interview 3)

As a final opportunity to clarify or make any revisions the participants deem necessary, each participant will be provided, via email, a written copy of the themes or patterns that emerge and how they are reflected within the framework of the four core themes within
Black feminist theory proposed by Collins (2000) and restorying, based on the three-dimensional narrative approach.

Each interview will be conducted via telephone at the convenience of the participants. All documents will be communicated electronically.
Appendix D. Interview Summary Form

Analysis of Perceptions of Turnaround School Principals

Participant Reference Code:___________

Interview Date:___________ Interview number:___________

Today’s Date:____________

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<th>Significant Statements</th>
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<td>Please describe your present role as a school leader?</td>
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## Appendix E. Data Analysis Organizer

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